

The Matter of Beauty:  
Materialism and the Self in Victorian Aesthetic Theory

by

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## Abstract

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*The Matter of Beauty* proposes that Victorian aesthetic theory is not a branch of philosophy focusing on art; rather, it is best understood as an interdisciplinary investigation of how humans relate affectively to physical things. The central claim of the dissertation is that aesthetic theory in the late-Victorian period enabled a significant reconsideration of what a “human” was, and of how distinctions could be drawn between self and other. I pursue this claim across four authors—Walter Pater, William Morris, Grant Allen, and Vernon Lee—who represent different modes in which a materialist strain of aesthetics led to a recognition that individuals constitutively lack autonomy from one another and from their surroundings.

My analysis of a wide range of late-Victorian writing demonstrates that aesthetic theory responded to a question that was powerfully raised by nineteenth-century science, and that remains with us today: If our most elevated emotions can be localized as electrical activity in the brain, is there a “self” that transcends our material being? The intellectual tradition that I reconstruct reveals that considering aesthetic experience is a productive step toward answering this question. In their discussions of art and literature, Pater, Morris, Allen, and Lee develop a discourse of bodily sensations rather than of moral feelings; for them, aesthetic pleasure is important not because it is uplifting, but because it makes enjoyable the interconnectedness of bodies, minds, and matter. Furthermore, recovering this discourse allows us to revisit critical commonplaces about the political significance of Victorian aesthetics. Over the past two decades, the tendency has been to frame questions about the politics of aesthetics in oppositional terms: e.g., is aestheticism queer or misogynist, progressive or reactionary? I look elsewhere in order to evaluate the politics of aestheticism: representations of the individual as a material thing lacking autonomy reconfigured the relation between self and society. Materialist aesthetics showed individuals to be inherently dependent upon their contingent environments, thereby calling into question context-free ideals of personal freedom and individualism.

Dedicated to Joseph and Wendy Morgan

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### Introduction

Other parts of our body will insist on telling us about the vase, too. In fact, they insist on helping our eye by doing the shapes in some rudimentary fashion inside us to an extent we may feel almost as an actual alteration of the shape of our own body. So the addition of a lifting pattern to the base of the vase comes to us as a very real modification in the shape of the vase, because it suddenly thrusts into our own body a feeling of lifting which we cannot help realizing. And every additional shape is hammered into us so energetically by our body that we have to believe its testimony rather than that of our eye.

Clementina Anstruther-Thomson,  
“What Patterns Can Do to Us,” 139.

Clementina Anstruther-Thomson’s lecture on three Greek vases, written in the late 1890s, is mostly notable for the questions that it does not ask. In her lecture, Anstruther-Thomson does not ask who made the vase, or where it was discovered, or when it was made. She does not ask if it conforms to a particular style, if it can tell us something about the people who used it, or if we know anything about the figures portrayed on the vase. Instead, Anstruther-Thomson is interested in a very different question: what does the vase do to us? Perhaps this is a misunderstanding of the nature of vases—usually, we do things with vases; not the other way around. Or perhaps this is merely metaphorical—what Anstruther-Thomson means to say is that the aesthetic effect of the vase is so dramatic that it can be articulated only through metaphors of dynamism and force. But Anstruther-Thomson means what she says quite literally: the vase is not a historical artifact; it is a technology for manipulating a viewer’s body. The vase compels one to do certain things: to lift up, to alter shape, to submit to a hammering force. In her lecture, Anstruther-Thomson argues that a viewer’s body can tell her more about art than can historians or art critics. To understand beauty, we must primarily attend to our muscles, breathing, and balance. If such a claim seems idiosyncratic, this is only because it is an extreme formulation of



a widespread theory in late-Victorian Britain: “art” is not a metaphysical domain or a transcendent experience; it is a set of physical things with physiological effects.

This dissertation is about the emergence of a materialist aesthetics in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. By “materialist aesthetics” I mean a way of thinking about art and beauty from a standpoint that takes the physical makeup of both the art-object and its viewer as primary.<sup>1</sup> Anstruther-Thomson is among a group of writers who explored the idea that aesthetics is about objects and bodies and the forces that connect them—not about difficult concepts and enigmatic ideas. The articulations of materialist aesthetics are manifold, and cross common boundaries of discipline and genre. In works of fiction such as “The Child in the House” and *Marius the Epicurean*, Walter Pater argues that our sensory experience literally makes us who we are through a process of “brain-building”—an only half-metaphorical incorporation of beautiful objects into our body. William Morris instead turns his attention to the social importance of self-expression: the practice of creating beautiful things, Morris imagines, is a form of production that could replace dull factory work in a socialist state. Yet another version of materialist aesthetics is the physiological approach of Grant Allen, who views aesthetic experience as the response of the body’s nerve-fibers to pleasurable stimuli of sound and color. In each case, the fact of an object’s materiality is of central importance in understanding its aesthetic function. This is an aesthetics of things—but not of simple, static objects. Rather, it is an aesthetics of animated, meaning-endowed, philosophically problematic things: architecture that conveys the consciousness of its builder; a body whose posture is determined by emotional waves flowing from the brain; a statue that powerfully impresses a viewer by literally altering her nervous system. As these examples suggest, one of the distinctive features of Victorian materialist aesthetics is that it takes not only the artwork but also its viewer as a thing. Art is able to make impressions upon us because we inhabit the same world of things as do art-objects. We are made up of brains and nerves and electrical currents, of atoms and molecules and forces. This shared world of materiality, and the often troubling questions it raises, is what this dissertation sets out to explore. The primary claim of this dissertation is that the focus on the physical dimension of aesthetic experience produces new ways of understanding what a person is. These new conceptions of personality, in turn, have direct implications for how we understand social relations between individuals as well as modes of political existence.

These questions about the connections between material objects, persons, and artworks were not new to the nineteenth century. Philosophers have long recognized that the objecthood of artworks is unusual and interesting. Works of art affect us emotionally and intellectually in a way that few other material things do; they are most certainly things, but by inviting us to think and feel, they behave like ideas or even people. In fact, the materiality of art is a source of both anxiety and hope about its potential. Plato’s objection to painting is that it deceives us into taking the false appearance of physical things as a substitute for the real idea: “the same things appear bent and straight when seen in water or out of it, or concave and convex because sight is misled by colors.... It is because it exploits this weakness in our nature that illusionist painting is nothing short of sorcery.... And haven’t measuring, counting, and weighing proved to be most welcome assistants in these cases, ensuring that what appears bigger or smaller... does not rule

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this introduction I use the term “materialism” as it was used by Victorian scientists, to refer to the notion that all phenomena—including thought, feeling, and consciousness itself—are ultimately reducible to moving atoms. This is John Masson’s explanation in 1907: “along with every fact of consciousness in our mind, there goes some disturbance of nerve-matter. When a man is conscious of anything, ‘there is something outside of him which is matter in motion, and that which corresponds inside of him is also matter in motion’” (*Lucretius* 231).

within us, but rather what has calculated or measured...?” (602c–d). To the “illusionist” painter, the stick made to appear bent by the refraction of light through water contains more truth than the rational calculation of the stick’s dimensions. One of the earliest objections to art, then, is that it replaces the ideal with the actual, the concept with the surface; in so doing it allows mere appearance—rather than rationality—to “rule” us. However, it is this same appeal that allows Plato, in the less censorious third book of the *Republic*, to suggest that art might effectively be used to educate a class of guardians that will protect the ideal city. Art is originally philosophically problematic because it is stubbornly enmeshed in a material world that confounds cognition; it is ethically problematic because it makes false appearances seem true by exploiting our senses against our mind.

These issues take on new meaning and force in the nineteenth century. The period that this dissertation covers—roughly 1855 to 1914—saw a conjunction of intellectual trends that drew attention to the problems that material bodies present for philosophy. In the mid-nineteenth century, ancient atomic theories, especially those of Lucretius and Heraclitus, were revived by scientists and philosophers (including Ludwig Büchner, Karl Vogt, John Tyndall, William Kingdon Clifford, and John Masson) who sought to demonstrate empirically that all life truly is reducible to atoms and the forces that bind them. On this view, humans, along with the souls that inhabit them, are nothing more than complex physical systems. At the same time, biologists began to show that human consciousness had evolved into its present state through processes of adaptation and natural selection that govern all living things. A new sense of the vastness of geological time, combined with the powerful explanatory force of evolutionary theory, led to the theory that life had at some point grown out of inanimate elements—a remarkable continuity between animate and inanimate matter. All of these theories suggested that it was impossible to overlook the material aspects of human beings—biological and physical—if one wished fully to understand them. These widely-disseminated theories had a significant effect on the study of art and aesthetics. First, they made room for the idea that art’s sensory qualities supersede its religious or ethical significance: the quasi-physical pleasure art provides is more important than the meaning it conveys. Second, they created the conditions for a radical disciplinary shift in the study of aesthetics: if art is primarily a material thing, then perhaps empirical science—not philosophy—contains the most effective methods for studying it. In pursuing these possibilities, aestheticians were not simply applying scientific theories to aesthetic philosophy; they were also using aesthetic philosophy to interrogate the assumptions and implications of scientific materialism. Most importantly, aestheticians reformulated contemporary understandings of the nature of individuals and the relations between them. In the late-nineteenth century, aesthetic theory was also social and psychological theory.

I use the phrase “aesthetic theory” rather than “aesthetic philosophy” intentionally. It is only possible to understand this intersection between art, science, and society at the end of the nineteenth century if one recognizes that it is a moment when aesthetics is not contained within the realm of professional philosophy. Questions about the nature of art and beauty were pursued largely by those who saw themselves outside or even opposed to philosophy as it was then practiced and institutionalized: scientists, amateur psychologists, literary critics, popular essayists. The question that interests me is how these diverse intellectual methodologies for approaching art contributed to the idea that persons are not autonomous, but rather are mediated by history, evolutionary time, physics, and society. In tracing the contours of Victorian aesthetic theory, I have found that the most important feature uniting approaches to aesthetics at the end of the century is an interest in this relation between materialism and identity—not the desire to

shock the bourgeoisie, or to subvert sexual norms, or to resist the didactic aesthetics of John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold.

In the nineteenth century, beauty was as important to physiology as to philosophy; it was discussed by psychologists as well as by art critics. For this reason, the texts discussed in this dissertation are related less by discipline or genre than by topic: aesthetic experience, and, more specifically, aesthetic pleasure. The authors whose work I analyze represent but do not exhaust the variety of lenses through which Victorians viewed the purpose, nature, and effects of beauty. Walter Pater is an esoteric aesthete who sought, paradoxically, to theorize an antitheoretical, sensuous aestheticism. William Morris, on the other hand, saw aesthetic pleasure as a practical concept that could be used in the struggle against capitalism. Grant Allen eschewed any social dimension of beauty at all, instead preferring to view aesthetic pleasure as a simple response of an organ to a stimulus. And Vernon Lee saw aesthetic pleasure as a means of learning, introspectively, about one's own psychological makeup. What unites these theorists of aesthetic pleasure is that each sees modern materialism as the defining problem for contemporary aesthetics; all, furthermore, are skeptical that traditional philosophy will be adequate to the task of confronting it. By pursuing empirical, antiphilosophical, evolutionary, or physiological approaches to the study of beauty, these authors challenge our own tendency to take for granted the disciplinary formations that have arisen largely from the Victorian era, especially those that allocate the study of beauty to the humanities rather than to the sciences. They make new the questions of what aesthetic pleasure is, and of what aesthetic pleasure is for.

Although I am careful to attend to the historical context of these works, this dissertation does not aspire to be a comprehensive history of Victorian aesthetics or to map a teleological progression from Victorians to moderns. Rather, I relate the authors I discuss to cotemporary intellectual trends in order to illustrate more fully the ways in which they respond to longstanding philosophical questions. For example, if we see Anstruther-Thomson's approach to the vase as an extension of psychological explanations of mind as a bodily phenomenon, it becomes more apparent how her work is not pure idiosyncrasy but rather provides an unusual illustration of the implications of a fully-embodied aesthetic theory. In my understanding, historical specificity does not restrict the terms upon which these texts can be interpreted; rather, it offers us an expanded view of why philosophical questions were, and remain, interesting and relevant. Neither is this dissertation a taxonomy of approaches: even the four-part rubric I take as a structure (the disciplines of philosophy, political science, physiology, and psychology) is provisional, since these fields were in fact intimately connected with one another—indeed, these points of connection constitute one of the central concerns of this dissertation. Instead, my aim is, first, to put forth examples of how interpretations of Victorian aesthetics have been constrained by modern assumptions about what “aesthetics” means; and second, to argue that a broader understanding of the range of aesthetics in the nineteenth century makes possible—indeed, necessary—a reconceptualization of the role of aesthetic theory in Victorian society.

These claims build upon recent work that has demonstrated the importance of scientific materialism in Victorian society more generally, particularly that of Gowan Dawson, Nicholas Dames, and Dennis Denisoff. Dawson, for example, argues that the scandal of aestheticism has to do with its commitment to the materialist belief that the body is more important than the soul: the “fleshliness” of the fleshly school of poetry is disturbing on these grounds, rather than for its challenge to Victorian morality (123). Denisoff, on the other hand, situates aestheticism among fin-de-siècle pagan movements that pursued animistic understandings of the natural world (“Dissipating Nature” 433–442). Their work is representative of an increased awareness of the

importance of scientific thought to Victorian writers and artists. Aestheticism, in its sensuousness—Rossetti’s fleshly figures, Swinburne’s flagellation poems, Dorian Gray’s opium dens—maps onto an antimetaphysical naturalism that counters earlier idealist or religious views of subjectivity and society. If this is the case—and I believe that it is—then it is necessary to ask what is at stake in the rejection of metaphysics; what “metaphysics” is taken to mean such that it is opposed to naturalism; and why Victorian aesthetic theory is capable of rendering so immediate questions that one might expect to be confined to Oxbridge. But in addition to pursuing these questions, which might be described as questions of intellectual history, I also wish to point out that “aestheticism” is more than a literary period or a cultural movement; it continues to name—usually pejoratively—an attitude that privileges style over substance or beauty over relevance. I seek to show that as an attitude, aestheticism does not so much isolate a viewer within a private world as allow him to immediately experience the ways in which he is permeated by it. This aspect of aestheticism is especially apparent in the broader version of Victorian aesthetic theory that I espouse. As formulated by both writers and scientists, Victorian theories of aesthetic pleasure highlight ways in which the experience of beauty intensifies and renders enjoyable our connection to the material world rather than depositing us in a solipsistic well of subjective impressions. Instead of despairing at the possibility of a natural determination more complete than we had previously imagined, Pater asks, might we find in that determinism the source of some of our highest pleasures? Or, instead of dismissing the role of merely subjective inclinations, Grant Allen asks, might we use scientific research about the body in order to understand the simple pleasures we take in fields of color or abstract designs? Thought of in this way, “materialism” is not merely an abstract concept or set of philosophical theorems; it refers to the problems we confront—problems that relate to agency, identity, and will—as soon as we recognize the extent to which thoughts, feelings, and sensations are reducible to their material components. I understand aesthetic theory, for both the Victorians and their predecessors, to be the attempt to make sense of the physicality of our existence.

Such a project has significant implications not only for how we understand persons, but for how we understand the connections between them. A primary claim of this dissertation is that the focus on the material dimension of aesthetic experience requires us to depart from traditional approaches to aestheticist politics that focus on gender and sexuality (Pater’s queerness), or on the avowed political commitments of writers and artists (Morris’s socialism). Instead, I argue that by foregrounding the material basis of individuality, materialist aesthetics forces a deeper reconsideration of the political itself, mainly by raising new questions about how we relate to and distinguish ourselves from others. This means that the political model of aestheticism is not individualist, competitive, and self-promoting, but rather networked, interdependent, and self-reflective. In making such a claim, I contest a common representation of Victorian subjectivity: namely, that Victorians tend to represent the self as a “bourgeois interior,” modeled upon a private space full of objects of consumption that promote domesticity at the expense of social awareness. An aesthetics that highlights the mediatedness of the individual and his or her inseparability from a material environment simultaneously challenges the notion that a self is an interior space into which one can retreat or a discrete unit upon which political theories can be built.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will describe with more detail the questions that structure this project. The individual chapters of the dissertation investigate four related versions of materialist aesthetic theory, developing a sustained line of questioning about its philosophical and political implications. The questions the chapters address proceed as follows: 1) If aesthetic

pleasure is primarily sensuous, does it isolate us in a world of sensation, or does it reveal the permeability of the boundaries between self and other? If the latter, then 2) what are the corresponding social dimensions of aesthetic pleasure, and to what new political models may an emphasis on the materiality of artworks and bodies lead? At a broader level, 3) how does late-Victorian aesthetic theory speak to questions about the proper ways not only of knowing ourselves and others, but of knowing about knowledge itself—in other words, what sort of epistemology is produced or presupposed by Victorian aesthetic theory, and might it be necessary to create a new discipline that would be adequate to the task of analyzing aesthetic pleasure empirically as well as speculatively? Furthermore, 4) if a science of aesthetic pleasure is conceivable, could that science move from an explanation of individual sensations and simple formal components of artworks (e.g., patches of color and curved lines) to become a portable and adaptable theory that can be applied to particular works in order to explain how form produces aesthetic pleasure? If so, then 5) might the Victorian science of aesthetic pleasure, as an early theory of nonrepresentational art, be the unacknowledged predecessor of modernist formalism?

### **Materialist Aesthetics and Subjectivity**

Late-Victorian aesthetic theory is rarely discussed as a field separate from late-Victorian art and literature. This is partly due to the fact that aesthetic theory is usually pursued by authors for whom it is their second or third interest, but it is also due to the persevering belief that late Victorians lacked the intellectual or philosophical sophistication of those who preceded and followed them. In the 1950s and 1960s, late Victorians were seen as transitional figures who produced little of lasting value, aside from the preconditions for modernism; Frank Kermode writes in 1957, “for all their perversity, for all their inferiority to these great predecessors, that generation transmitted the doctrine to the twentieth century and fed the imagination of its major poet” (i.e., Yeats) (22). John Lester (in 1968) suggests that meaning itself is at stake: “the years from 1880 to 1914 severely jarred and shifted the bearings of man’s imaginative life and left him at times bewildered as to how to recover his lost meaning and purpose.... In literature it was a time of confusion and a nervous, often frenzied, search for new terms on which the imagination could live” (xx–xxi). And Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi (in 1965) gives voice to the common belief that the decadent self represents a sort of failure of autonomous individuality: “[A]lthough the Decadents were correct when they believed the Philistine ideals to be false, their own alternative ideal was a destructive one which led them into personal disaster. In the ‘moment’ they had not a proper basis upon which to form a self. The consequence of their attempt to put it to that purpose was the Decadent self, impermanent and insubstantial” (xv–xvi). The late Victorians, it would seem, were confused, unable to formulate a coherent or stable theory of subjectivity, and significant only because they provided fodder for Yeats and early modernism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, studies appeared that took the late Victorians more seriously on intellectual grounds. David DeLaura, Uli C. Knoepfelmacher, Peter Allan Dale, George Landow, and F.C. McGrath argued that late-Victorian writers consciously and seriously engaged with a British intellectual tradition that also drew on German idealist sources. A major revival of interest in the late-Victorians ensued. It became clear that late Victorians’ anxieties about sexuality, gender, transgression, and modernity bore uncanny resemblances to those that stoked the fires of the culture wars. In her 1990 book on the fin-de-siècle, *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter makes the case for this resemblance as she notices the breakdown of “sexual certainties” (17) common to inhabitants of the late-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries.

Showalter's attention to the sexual politics of the late-nineteenth century described the period's "sexual anarchy" as one that not only contained political potential but also bore a unique relationship to the 1980s and 1990s, in which sexual identities were once again being renegotiated. Showalter suggested that the sexual anarchy of both moments indicated "the embryonic stirrings of a new order" (18). Showalter's book was an early entry in a series of refreshingly sophisticated analyses of the sexual politics of the late nineteenth century: James Eli Adams, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Richard Dellamora, and Linda Dowling historicized, theorized, critiqued, and problematized a period that suddenly seemed quite modern. The sexual politics of the fin-de-siècle provided a means of entry into contemporary arguments about decentered, transgressive subjectivities. In other words, the aspects of aestheticism that were long seen as its failure—inferiority to great predecessors, a loss of determinate meaning, a sense of self founded on impermanent moments—were later reinterpreted as the very basis of its worth. For schools of literary criticism based upon deconstruction, queer theory, and ideology critique, characteristics such as uncertainty, destabilization, and impermanence were hallmarks of value. The risk, of course, was that late-Victorians could easily be dehistoricized as convenient exempla of contemporary theory.

By tracing the importance of materialism across late-Victorian understandings of the aesthetic domain, this dissertation historicizes the destabilized subjectivities of aestheticism and decadence. Much of the play with identity, gender, and sexuality, I claim, results from a serious philosophical engagement with questions about whether the self is reducible to atoms and organs. This argument is important because it allows us to maintain an awareness of the political significance of these texts without reducing them to markers in debates over ideology. In other words, these texts are not political because they address questions that are currently politicized, but rather because they reformulate understandings of what an individual is and how individuals are interconnected with one another. Take, for example, one of Marius's many epiphanies in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. Reflecting on his experience, Marius notes that "his bodily frame...in the whole sum of its capacities, so entirely possessed by him—nay! Actually his very self—was yet determined by a far-reaching system of material forces external to it, a thousand combining currents from earth and sky. Its seemingly active powers of apprehension were, in fact, but susceptibilities to influence" (211). Marius highlights an antinomy between autonomy and determination that is fundamental to Pater's thought. In the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, Pater offers an injunction: this world constantly melts away, as do we, so make certain that the few moments allotted to you are distinguished by their intensity. Find "strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours"; always be "testing new opinions and courting new impressions" (211). Decadence is born. But the difficulty arises when one realizes—as does Marius—that this philosophy is based upon the materialist doctrine that the physical world, including human beings, is an ever-changing confluence of atoms and forces. Why is this a problem? Pater's "Conclusion" takes the form of an exhortation; its repeated imperative sentences expect their reader to enjoy a strong agency over his life course. But that very agency is undermined by the notion that selves are material things, momentarily conjoined atoms that sooner or later will pass on their way, which no intentional consciousness can possibly transcend. As a result, the Paterian aesthete is stuck alongside Marius, switching back and forth, almost as if staring at an optical illusion: the self actively apprehends! No—the self is a thousand combining currents! No—the self is a possession! Marius's inability to construct a single "theory of life" becomes increasingly apparent over the course of the novel, and is emblemized in this moment in which the feeling of autonomy seems like a fiction. But this is actually neither epiphany nor

genius: Pater, deeply interested in ancient and modern materialisms, develops his aesthetic theory out of a desire to reconcile the sense of individual autonomy with the reality that the self is a material thing. The tensions within his thought—exemplified by Marius’s hesitant alternations between a sense of autonomy and a feeling of determination, and by the “Conclusion”’s indecision about the degree of its reader’s agency—are the product of his engagement with scientific theory. “Decentered” Paterian subjectivity therefore has traceable historical and intellectual origins.

This passage from *Marius* is not an isolated instance; indeed, it is emblematic of an intersection of sensuous aestheticism, scientific materialism, and philosophical questions about free will and unified selves that characterizes late-Victorian aesthetics. Aesthetic theory at the end of the century addresses, even if it does not resolve, questions raised by scientific theories. Pater writes in a moment when Lucretius’s thought is being reappraised: Tyndall had recently given his famous Belfast address which argued, scandalously, that religion misguided followers into believing that a soul could transcend the purely physical world of atoms and forces. Robert Buchanan, as outraged by Tyndall’s materialism as he had been by Rossetti’s “fleshly” school of poetry, accused Tyndall of promoting atheism. The line separating anxieties about the atheism of materialism from anxieties about the hedonism of aestheticism is tenuously thin. If we understand late-Victorian aesthetics as inseparable from discourses of materialism, we see that Pater’s brush with Lucretius is not an exceptional moment in which aesthetics and science intersect; rather, it is the rule. Grant Allen, a very different student of aesthetics, got his start dissecting brains and enthusiastically pursuing the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer. Allen moved seamlessly into the realm of aesthetic theory with his 1877 *Physiological Aesthetics*, which argues that aesthetic pleasure is the reaction of nerves to stimuli. According to Allen, “Aesthetic Pleasure may be provisionally defined as the subjective concomitant of the normal amount of activity, not directly connected with life-serving function, in the peripheral end-organs of the cerebro-spinal nervous system” (34); in other words, the location of aesthetic pleasure is the nervous system, not the intellect. For Allen and many other late-nineteenth-century psychologists (including James Sully, Henry Rutgers Marshall, and Gustav Fechner), aesthetic pleasure reveals the fragmentation of the body into constituent systems whose unification as a transcendent sense of self is only real as a mental image, and not as an empirical fact. For these theorists, it is not just that (as Pater’s Marius notes) one’s sense of self is *mediated* by material reality; it is that one’s sense of self is entirely *produced* by material reality. With astonishing consistency, late-Victorian aesthetic theorists arrive at the insight that our sense of beauty depends upon the fact that we are creatures made up of the same kind of matter as the aesthetic objects we enjoy.

By resituating our understanding of what counts as late-Victorian aesthetics—not just, that is, the work of famous aesthetes such as Pater, Wilde, and Morris, but also the work of psychologists and scientists who empirically studied the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure—it becomes apparent that the destabilized subjectivities identified by literary critics are traceable to a more widespread interest in the materiality of human experience itself. Aestheticism did not challenge ideals of autonomy and independence in a vacuum; it built upon popular scientific theories about the fundamental origin of all phenomena in physical matter. The idea that one ought to pursue intense, pleasurable sensations partially originates with scientific theories about the primacy of the physical world and the illusory nature of a transcendent realm that supersedes material existence. From this perspective, we begin to see some of the new resonances made apparent by this dissertation: although Pater, Allen, Morris, and Bain are rarely mentioned in the

same sentence, each views aesthetic experience as a crucial tool in understanding how we relate, as physical beings, to a physical world. If this is true, then it is necessary to revisit our understanding of the kind of politics that aestheticism produces.

### The Politics of Materialist Aesthetics

The challenge of materialist aesthetics to the idea of an autonomous, unified subject is not without implications for the social realm. One of the common criticisms of aestheticism is that it produces forms of subjectivity that are inward-looking and solipsistic, or, translated into political terms, bourgeois and capitalist. The protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours* famously retreats from society in order pursue private pleasures in isolation; the Wildean dandy sees himself as the sole origin of his artistically crafted identity; Pater's aesthete enjoys a solipsism so complete that "reality," including that of other people, is nothing more than subjective sensations and impressions. As I discuss in Chapter One, this was one of the primary reasons that contemporaries (including Margaret Oliphant, W.H. Mallock, and Robert Hichens) objected to—or at least parodied—Pater's aesthetic vision, which apparently lacked the expansive political and social awareness of Ruskinian or Arnoldian aesthetics. This criticism of aestheticism was later formulated more rigorously by members of the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: in Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, he articulates the terms of a critique of aestheticism that runs throughout his work. "The aesthete," in that book, names a form of subjectivity defined by its focus on selfhood to the exclusion of any awareness of history or outside origins. Moreover, according to Adorno, aestheticism adopts an essentializing notion of beauty, which takes the beauty of an object as what makes its representation beautiful, rather than form itself (peacock feathers, androgynous men, and Japanese vases are the just a few of talismans that make a late-Victorian poem "aesthetic"). When Adorno discusses aestheticism in *Aesthetic Theory*, the terms of this critique are even more deeply inflected by a Marxist politics: aestheticism is a fetishization of both art and subjectivity. Its essentialized version of beauty erases the historical nature of the work of art; its essentialized version of the self imagines a pure subjectivity outside history. Adorno's concern is that the idea of aesthetic autonomy makes it possible for the aesthete to turn inward, disavowing the mediation of history and society present in the formal qualities of the art object and instead taking up a "culinary" attitude toward art—treating it purely subjectively in terms of individual like or dislike. It is this turn inward—a denial of the social—that Adorno criticizes as the *l'art pour l'art* movement's misinterpretation of aesthetic autonomy.

Not only critical theory but also literary criticism has paid a great deal of attention to the kinds of subjects that are imagined and produced by Victorian literature. Many critics have noted that the rise of Victorian novels devoted to comprehensive accounts of individual consciousness corresponds to an increasingly powerful ideology of subjective interiority and individualism. Recent studies of Victorian material culture, such as Thad Logan's *The Victorian Parlour* and Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods* as well as literary criticism such as Julia Prewitt Brown's *The Bourgeois Interior* and John Plotz's *The Crowd* have served to cement this point. One line of argument is that the "bourgeois interiors" and domestic spaces of novels lead to a domesticated and interiorized Victorian individual. In *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong argues that novel reading plays into and even produces individualist forms of consciousness: providing the examples of Bram Stoker's and H. Rider Haggard's vampires, Armstrong suggests that the violation of the boundaries between individuals, through infection or possession, breaches the



social contract that novels usually seek to affirm. Describing this exception that confirms the rule, Armstrong argues that “although novels that participated in the ‘romance revival’ questioned whether we are in fact individuals for whom interiority is destiny, those novels nevertheless rejoined the mainstream in defending the individual against external assaults, which they portrayed as assaults on humanity itself”; Armstrong hopes that eventually novels will “begin to think of a genuine alternative to the individual, one that does not inspire phobia and yet is grounded in the world we now inhabit” (25). Armstrong’s claim is representative of a more widespread interpretation of the novel as ideologically committed to a model in which individuality is defined by its difference from the world outside it.

Showing how aestheticism involves an attention to the material mediation of subjects is a first step in this dissertation’s extended challenge to the idea that the late-Victorian aesthetic subject is individualist, self-involved, and inherently autonomous. Far from taking the self for granted, or presenting it as a hypostatized entity, Victorian writers on aesthetics engaged in a vigorous and controversial debate about the nature of subjectivity, espousing views that directly countered Millian liberal versions of the self as an independent entity as well as novelistic representations as individuals whose psyches are interior spaces analogous to their homes. Rather than using the autonomy of the work of art as a proxy for individual autonomy, aesthetes often resist the representation of the self as an interior, solipsistic space, isolated from other individuals and from the community at large. This view is as apparent in physiological aesthetics as it is in the work of Walter Pater. For writers such as Allen, Spencer, Bain, and Sully, the idea that the “self” could be imagined as an interior space was anathema (in Chapter Three, I discuss Bain’s attack on the notion that personality is an “inner sanctum”): one of the fundamental principles of a new psychology was that psychological states were effects of physical processes, and that individuality is shot through with material connections to the world. Evolutionarily and materially, we are extensions of our context and our history—not self-contained entities that encompass interior spaces into which it is possible to retreat.<sup>2</sup>

A further dimension of this challenge to narratives of subjective interiority is apparent in the aesthetics of William Morris. Unlike the aesthetic theorists I have discussed thus far, Morris does not focus especially on the physiological makeup of the individual or on the biological components of aesthetic impressions. Morris focuses on the materiality of aesthetic experience in a different way: by treating art itself as a uniquely physical medium of personal expression. This is a crucial component of Morris’s socialist agenda, especially as he sees the relation between aesthetics and politics. Morris understands beauty as essentially linked to production: he writes

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<sup>2</sup> The implications of this claim extend to issues that are beyond the scope of this dissertation but that deserve mention. First, attending to this reinterpretation of subjectivity within aesthetic discourse provides the grounds for a reinterpretation of the subjectivities promoted by Victorian novels: if novelists were just as interested in scientific materialism as were aesthetes, then analyzing the relation between scientific materialism and aesthetic theory may be the first step in proposing an alternate view of the effects of novel-reading on subjectivity—indeed, this is the thrust of Nicholas Dames’s recent work on physiological theories of the novel. Second, this claim challenges the tendency to neatly separate “persons” and “things” in work on Victorian material culture or the project of “thing studies” that Elaine Freedgood has proposed in *The Ideas in Things*—the aesthetic theories I discuss highlight the extent to which Victorians did not stand back from objects in order to analyze them (even if such analysis involves, as Freedgood suggests, personification), but rather engaged the possibility that their own processes of analysis and interpretation were reducible to neural matter and electrical forces. Thing-narratives would thus be extraordinary precisely because of their ordinariness: if persons are nothing more than a special sort of thing, then all narratives are “thing-narratives.”

in “The Lesser Arts” that “everything made by man’s hand has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly” (23:165). I argue that this theory of beauty results in a materialist formalism whose aim is to reconcile competing political claims about the value of the individual and the value of the social collective. To put it simply, the expression of self in material form makes room for an aesthetic individualism that avoids the pitfalls of competitive economic individualism. Material objects created by individuals who make them purely for the sake of aesthetic pleasure thereby express interior subjectivity in physical form—or, more precisely, elide the distinction between interior and exterior subjectivity. This is important because of the new form of political organization it allows: once factory production becomes aesthetic, human needs can be satisfied through pleasurable work rather than forced labor. Beautiful objects exert a noncoercive force that holds society together.

Morris’s work thus illustrates how a materialist aesthetics—in his case, a materialist formalism—directly implies broader forms of social and political organization. The finite world of objects, rather than the infinite universe of ideas, becomes the space in which individuals experience and enjoy their interconnectedness. Aesthetic form is no longer an abstract category or metaphysical idea; instead it is a practical political concept. This may seem obvious in the case of Morris, who, after all, is known as the most political of aesthetes. But my claim is that Morris’s work represents only one way in which a shift to a material understanding of aesthetics revises political categories, and even the concept of “the political” itself. This means that materialist aesthetics are by no means intrinsically connected to political progressivism. If in Morris’s case they serve to cement a socialist utopia, alternate versions of materialist aesthetics lead in rather different directions. The reading of beauty as a physiological response to a physical stimulus leads, in a moment when almost all science is deeply inflected by Darwinian thought, to arguments that racial superiority is manifested by cultural refinement: British connoisseurship becomes evidence of a naturally superior nervous organization. So, for example, when Herbert Spencer argues that our capacity to experience beauty depends upon surplus energy that is left over once we do not have to expend precious resources in search of food and shelter, this logic undergirds the claim that cultural constructs such as western music can be interpreted as phenomena demonstrating the superior evolutionary state of Europeans.

Needless to say, I espouse neither of these political views of art directly: Morris’s faith in the power of aesthetic pleasure to render all labor pleasurable is as jejune as Spencer’s racial interpretation of aesthetic evolution is eugenic. Instead, my goal is to show that these political aspects of late-Victorian aesthetics are lost when we assume that gender, sexuality, and subversiveness are the location of aestheticism’s politics. What becomes clear over the course of this dissertation is that “the aesthetic” as a philosophical concept and “formalism” as an interpretive rubric are both highly flexible and resist being assigned any specific political content, subversive or otherwise. Indeed, instead of asking what given aesthetic practices mean politically (Are they radical or retrograde? Are they protofascist or bourgeois?), we ought to ask how they immanently reconceptualize the forms of interpersonal organization that constitute “the political.” The question becomes less whether we can appropriate, adopt, or valorize subversive formal practices, and more how they open new ways of understanding the political implications of aesthetic experience.

## The Science of Beauty

In Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, Marius illustrates the more radical intellectual implications of a materialist aesthetics when he flirts with the possibility that the kind of aesthetic existence he pursues is inherently antiphilosophical, and even might destroy philosophy by turning thinking against thought itself. Pater refers to this as "a sort of suicide...by which a great metaphysical *acumen* was devoted to the function of proving metaphysical speculation impossible" (114). This impulse to destroy metaphysical speculation is an indication of the extent to which materialist aesthetics demands new epistemologies. For Pater, this takes the form of a knowing that proceeds directly from things rather than from concepts; Pater praises Johann Winckelmann as one who understood the world "not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch" (154). This desire to hear things speak for themselves, without the intervention of intellect, is not only a common thread of materialist aesthetics; it is what lies behind an attempt at the end of the century to reorganize radically the methodologies through which we understand the aesthetic. Although it at first seems unlikely, Pater's aesthete who understands the world sensuously and directly has much in common with the empirical scientist who wishes to discuss aesthetic experience by talking about bodies rather than concepts. Just as Marius wishes to destroy metaphysical speculation, psychologists such as Grant Allen, Herbert Spencer, James Sully, and Vernon Lee seek to establish a new kind of aesthetics that would be based upon experience, observation, and introspection, rather than abstraction, speculation, and reasoning. Aesthetics, as a discourse of bodies, affect, pleasure, and pain, takes a remarkable but not altogether unpredictable turn at the end of the century from philosophy to neuroscience.

The final two chapters of the dissertation explore the extent to which aestheticians' challenge to a metaphysical notion of the self leads to a broader challenge to the project of humanist inquiry. As I discuss in Chapter Three, it became less clear over the course of the nineteenth century that questions about pleasure, sensation, and experience were "philosophical" questions, as new developments in the science of mind opened the possibility that consciousness was an observable phenomenon. Gustav Fechner, the author of an experimental approach to aesthetics, was also responsible for discovering that the intensity of a sensation and the strength of its stimulus could be related via a logarithmic equation. This quantification of subjective experience was only one among many developments that highlighted the possibility that scientific experiment, not humanist philosophy, might be best able to resolve persistent enigmas of subjectivity. But because empirical science, unlike the aesthetics of Matthew Arnold or John Ruskin, did not always take "the human" to be a privileged category or even to be unproblematically distinct from animals and inanimate matter, the aesthetics that proceeded from this scientific point of view challenged not only particular issues relating to aesthetic experience but also more general presuppositions about the validity of humanism. Empirical aesthetic theory was antihumanist not only in the broad sense that it privileged scientific over humanistic disciplines, but in the more specific sense that it turned to other categories than "the human" as primary in understanding aesthetic experience. Herbert Spencer, for example, views aesthetic pleasure as important primarily because it tells us something about the evolution of our species (namely, we make art because we have leftover energy that is no longer needed for predatory activities) rather than about the tastes of any given individual. Or, according to Grant Allen, aesthetic pleasure teaches us about how optical nerves and muscles work (the pleasure of looking at curved forms is a result of the decreased muscular activity necessary for tracing a curve).

Victorian aesthetic theory reinterprets subjectivity not only from within philosophy, but also by challenging the humanist project of philosophy itself.

In pursuing questions about the intersection of Victorian science and aesthetics, I build upon the work of those who have argued for the importance of the relation between Victorian science and literature: Gillian Beer, George Levine, Sally Shuttleworth, and Jenny Bourne Taylor; more recently Shafquat Towheed, Laura Otis, and Rick Rylance. I discuss the work of these scholars in detail in chapters three and four of this dissertation; here I will simply describe two common ways in which literature and science are brought into relation with one another that are particularly relevant to my project. One is to highlight the literary nature of scientific discourse. In contrast to the math-based lingua franca of modern science, Victorian scientists relied upon a rich language laden with metaphors and rhetorical flourishes to communicate their findings. As a result, Victorian science is interestingly responsive to the techniques of literary analysis, as Beer's influential reading of *The Origin of Species* has shown. Another way of relating science and literature focuses on the lines of influence between the two, often in order to highlight the extent to which non-specialists were capable of making meaningful contributions to scientific research, contributions that were often informed by their literary training. Towheed argues that Vernon Lee makes meaningful arguments about Haeckel and recapitulation; Michael Davis claims that R.L. Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* can be read as a contribution to psychological debates about the materiality of the soul. In both cases the interdisciplinarity of science in particular or of Victorian intellectual life in general is proposed as a contrast to current trends of academic specialization.

Both sets of questions about the intersection of scientific and aesthetic practices have tended to overlook aesthetic theory itself as a site of intersection between the humanities and the sciences in the nineteenth century. Although there are many studies of writers who were influenced by or whose work influenced scientific theories, and even more studies of the language of scientific discourse, there has been little discussion of scientific approaches to the aesthetic domain. This is surprising, since the tools of empirical science were brought to bear in an extended and meaningful way on the phenomena associated with aesthetic experience. My contention is that this work demands that we think not in terms of science and aesthetics as separate pursuits, but rather in terms of a science of aesthetics, in which the two are indistinguishable. Although psychological aesthetics may seem reductive to us (Grant Allen at one point counts up the number of references to redness in Swinburne's poetry), simply to dismiss it is an error. This is because it highlights the origins of our own assumptions about the difference between scientific and humanistic knowledge. I argue that the fact that it became possible to ask the disciplinary question of what field could best account for the experience of beauty—a question that threatened to dislodge humanism from its cultural ascendancy—is best understood as a symptom of a crisis in thinking about “the human” itself. According to both materialist physiology (which reduced the individual to her constituent nerves, organs, and muscles) and evolutionary biology (which portrayed the individual as an evolutionary expression of the species), the boundaries that define the human were not self-evident. The result is that humanism itself is threatened by scientific methods, as is illustrated by the contentious late-Victorian debates about the proper approach to aesthetic theory. As humans became objects among many others that could be scientifically studied, some of the most distinctively human pursuits, such as the creation and appreciation of art, ran the risk of being explained away as no more transcendent than the spider's construction of intricate webs. More is at stake in Marius's acknowledgment that subjectivity is mediated by materiality than the reflections of a Paterian

aesthete would suggest. Materialist aesthetics, taken to its extreme formulation, asks the question of whether one can meaningfully speak about “subjectivity” at all.

Whether it is possible to rescue some sort of humanism out of this vision is the question that is at stake in Vernon Lee’s later work, which celebrates the discoveries of psychological aesthetics, even as it pursues a recognizably Paterian impressionism. Although Spencer and Allen often hew to a racially problematic line about the evolutionary superiority of more cultivated individuals, Lee’s work suggests another result of the epistemological shift effected by the Victorian science of aesthetic pleasure. For Lee, aesthetic feelings, as psychological responses, are inherently self-validating and do not need ratification by cultural authorities. As a result, psychological aesthetics allows for the development of an “everyday” aesthetic of personal responses to artworks rather than a classical aesthetic that depends upon canons and often oppressive systems of cultural value. This is the reason for which Anstruther-Thomson, in her “reading” of the vase, takes her lived experience of it as absolute, capable of conveying all necessary knowledge about the aesthetic artifact. Aesthetic philosophy and art history are equally irrelevant in the face of immediate impressions of abstract forms. If this is the case, then scientific materialism ultimately delivers authority over questions of taste to the individuals who respond to things they find pleasurable: all that matters is the interaction between simple forms and psychological structures. The reason that this is not just a misguided, willfully ignorant aesthetic theory, I argue, has partly to do with its heritage in twentieth-century formalist aesthetics. Psychologists who studied aesthetics, despite the fact that they dismissed important questions about history and meaning—or rather, *because* they dismissed these questions—were able to develop a theory of art that attended exclusively to formal qualities such as color, shape, tone, volume, and line. Ironically, a theory such as this is not particularly good at dealing with Victorian artworks—novels that are dependent upon intricate plots or paintings that draw upon a shared historical knowledge—but it is quite good at dealing with the nonrepresentational aesthetic that gained currency not more than a decade after Lee wrote her books on psychological aesthetics. It is not a coincidence that the literary criticism of I.A. Richards sought to discover a physiological basis for our response to literary works. This oft-derided aspect of his work links twentieth-century formalism and nineteenth-century science.

What I mean to suggest is that the legacy of the Victorians’ materialist aesthetics remains with us. It laid the groundwork for a modernist aesthetics that focused less on beauty and more on perception; less on refined taste, and more on processes of defamiliarization and attacks on aesthetic autonomy. Although modernists such as Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound articulated their aesthetic project as a radical break from the Victorians, the groundwork for this break was laid by the writers I discuss in this dissertation. New Critics who continued the modernist project by striving for a dispassionate, objective, sometimes scientific approach to the literary object similarly followed upon the project of empirical aesthetics that had been enabled originally by the Victorian shift toward a material aesthetics that treats art and its viewers as things in the world rather than as a metaphysical domain. We may, in fact, be witnessing a return to the Victorians. As cognitive scientists scan the brains of readers with fMRI machines and evolutionary biologists like Steven Pinker characterize the adaptive purpose of beauty as “cheesecake for the mind,” empirical accounts of the aesthetic are clearly once again becoming attractive. Although the attraction of these approaches inheres in their promise of objectivity and self-proclaimed modernity, their “newness” has been around for at least a hundred years, since Vernon Lee used cutting-edge tools of psychology in her surveys of museum viewers and Grant

Allen discussed the sorts of simple aesthetic forms that are best able to discharge the energy leftover from evolutionary adaptations.

### Overview of Chapters

The dissertation is divided into four sections, which bear the headings “The Self,” “The Individual,” “The Body,” and “The Ego.” Each of these terms is meant to express a way of imagining a person within a particular realm of Victorian intellectual life: philosophy, politics, physiology, and psychology. The neatness of these divisions belies the messiness with which these domains are interrelated, and each chapter highlights the connections as much as the boundaries between these realms.

In the first chapter, “Walter Pater and the Politics of Autonomy” I argue that Walter Pater’s sensuous aestheticism derives from his interest in ancient materialists such as Lucretius and Heraclitus. Pater turns materialism against the aesthetic idealism of Hegel in his essays and fictional works, repeatedly staging a confrontation between a pure, isolated individual, and a networked consciousness determined by material forces. For Pater, aesthetic experience is the experience of this confrontation between a sense of freedom and a submission to the force of beauty. Rather than sanctioning the idea of a fully-autonomous, self-fashioning aesthete, Pater thus mounts a complex interrogation of the notion of aesthetic freedom—an interrogation that has direct political implications for Victorian liberalism.

The second chapter pursues these political implications of a materialist aesthetics by examining William Morris’s late romances. Though they are often viewed as an unusually, even embarrassingly, apolitical end to Morris’s career, they in fact represent the culmination of a materialist theory of aesthetic form. Morris’s claim that aesthetic form must be understood as the active transformation of raw material into beautiful objects and shapes counters the political views of Herbert Spencer and other self-proclaimed “individualists”: according to Morris, the creation of physical beauty manifests individuality in a way that fosters a communicative interdependence rather than a competition for domination and personal ownership.

The third chapter, “The Science of Aesthetic Pleasure,” examines mid-nineteenth-century accounts of aesthetic pleasure that treated it as an embodied, physiological response that could be studied empirically. Locating the origins of this project in Alexander Bain’s wave-theory of pleasure and Herbert Spencer’s account of beauty as the discharge of surplus energy, the chapter argues that empirical accounts of beauty departed from conventional notions of the human by reducing individuals to interconnected systems of organs or elements in a biological system that necessarily exceeds any particular experience. Upon this basis, proponents of an independent field of psychological aesthetics such as Grant Allen, James Sully, and Henry Rutgers Marshall pursued a surprisingly decadent aesthetics that divorced morality from aesthetic pleasure and saw art as existing purely for its own sake—but backed up these claims with purportedly objective scientific data rather than with ironic essays or polemical manifestos.

The final chapter, “Vernon Lee and the Language of Empathy,” discusses the concept of *Einfühlung*: the psychological theory that when one views an artwork, one unconsciously but literally mimics its form with one’s body. By pursuing the idea that empathy is an affective relation to objects rather than to persons, the chapter argues that the value of the concept has been obscured by a tradition of literary criticism that dismisses empathy as simplistic and emotional. Instead, object-oriented empathy can be the basis of a productive and critical

formalism that introspectively attends to perceptive processes and interprets artworks on the basis of form rather than meaning.

## I. The Self: Walter Pater and the Politics of Aesthetic Autonomy

The least controversial claim one could make about British aestheticism is that its promoters were committed to the notion that art is autonomous from ethical judgments and social norms. Aesthetes incessantly described works of art that were useless, individuals who disregarded ethical norms, and crimes justified by their beauty. It is not surprising, then, that Peter Bürger uses the aesthetic autonomy promoted in the late nineteenth century as a starting point in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: drawing on Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, Bürger describes a historical process whereby the work of art acquires an increasing level of autonomy from society. Art originates as something “wholly integrated into the social institution ‘religion’” (47) but at the end of the nineteenth century is converted by the *l’art pour l’art* movement into a realm whose “apartness from the praxis of life...[is] its content” (48). For Bürger, the “separation of art from the praxis of life becomes the decisive characteristic of the autonomy of bourgeois art” (49). Bürger’s argument is important because it shows how aestheticism legitimates two forms of autonomy simultaneously: that of the artwork and that of the individual. Bürger’s claim accounts, for example, for Théophile Gautier, who attacks the impulse to subsume all activity under a rubric of social usefulness, arguing that the work of art is useless as is the pleasure it produces. His assertion in the preface to the second edition of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* that “the only things that are really beautiful are those which have no use; everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and the needs of men are ignoble and disgusting” (23) alludes to an aesthetic realm in which the work of art is liberated from use value and the viewer is liberated from the demands of society.

Equally polemical, Oscar Wilde adopts Gautier’s argument in a way that renders the connection between the autonomy of the subject and the autonomy of the work of art even clearer: in “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” Wilde argues that individuality itself approaches the status of a work of art. Ironically recasting Gautier’s argument in socialist terms, Wilde argues that capitalism structurally creates an unpleasant need to work for others, which hinders “the full expression of a personality, except on the imaginative plane of art” (1178). Wilde theorizes that the liberated, beautiful self would be both autonomous from social norms and aesthetically pleasing: “the true personality of man...will help us all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is.... Nor will it admit any laws but its own laws; nor any authority but its own authority” (1179). It is a small step for Wilde from beauty’s existence for its own sake to the subject’s capacity for self-legislation: both depend upon an absolute distinction between object and context, between inward existence and external utility.

The most thorough statement of aestheticist disengagement comes from neither Gautier nor Wilde, but Walter Pater. His “Diaphaneité,” a brief essay delivered to Oxford’s Old Mortality club in 1864, describes a beautiful individual completely divorced from his environment.<sup>3</sup> Like “The Soul of Man,” it fondly describes a personality that is beautiful, self-grounding, and independent—a “basement type” (221) whose proliferation would lead to the “regeneration of the world” (222). This suggestion, which ends the essay, is as vague as it sounds; in actuality, Pater’s essay carefully steers clear of assigning to this “diaphanous”

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<sup>3</sup> The strangely-placed grave accent in the word “diaphaneité” is intentional. Denis Donoghue writes, “Pater did not invent the word *diaphaneité*, he merely interfered with it by displacing the grave accent.... The word came into French in the fourteenth century and English in the seventeenth; in both languages it means the state of being pervious to light” (6).



personality any sort of political mission. Pater's adjectives emphasize its refusal of utility and praxis; the diaphanous character is "withdrawn," "disengaged," "unworldly." By "diaphaneitè," Pater means an almost-complete invisibility to those who view the world in utilitarian, functional terms; the latter have "no sense fine enough" (216) to perceive it. Pater argues that the diaphanous character resists integration even more than philosophers, artists, and saints—the world, after all, makes room for those who "theorise about its unsoundness" (154). Although the essay sometimes suggests that the diaphanous character might also be capable of such theorizing—it "crosses rather than follows the main current of the world's life" (216) and "cut[s] obliquely the spontaneous order of things" (217)—Pater forecloses this possibility, softening the potential violence of "crossing" and "cutting." Like Wilde's ideal personality, which "will never argue or dispute" (1179), the diaphanous character will not leverage its uselessness against utilitarianism itself. It is "not disquieted by the desire for change, or the preference of one part in life rather than another, or passion, or opinion" (216). Pater repeatedly emphasizes that this apolitical distance is the condition of its beauty: the type's "revolutionism is softened, harmonized, subdued as by distance" (219–220) and for it "the idea appears softened, harmonized as by distance... without the noise of axe or hammer" (221). "Diaphaneitè" is not only transparency but also harmonious detachment from any harsh, discordant idealism that would demand social change. Through a logic that could not be more characteristically "aestheticist," the essay equates revolution with distasteful praxis, and retreat with harmonious pleasure.

The diaphanous character is autonomous in another sense as well: even as Pater asserts its distance from "the world," he also argues that the diaphanous character is self-grounding, divorced from any origin outside itself. Pater writes that it arrives "in the order of grace, not of nature, by some happy gift, or accident of birth or constitution" (217). The passage reiterates that "Diaphaneitè" is removed from the natural order of the world, emphasizing that its existence is unexplainable by reference to its context. "Diaphaneitè" does not derive from a contemporary source; rather, like genius, it is an anomaly. It is anomalous historically as well; the origin Pater does ascribe to "diaphaneitè" is archaic and forgotten. "Diaphaneitè" is like "a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere" (219). The diaphanous character is not a product of its age, but alien to it; not the result of a certain environment, but a surprising appearance within it. In both its origins and its existence, "Diaphaneitè" asserts its independence from what is outside itself.

There is little question that this independence is valuable, even idealized. Pater valorizes the character he describes not only by comparing it to a relic, but also by figuring the forces that compromise its autonomy as dangerous and contaminating. He constructs an opposition between the pure, self-contained individual and a polluted, bland collective: "our collective life, pressing equally on every part of every one of us, reduces nearly all of us to the level of a colourless, uninteresting character" (220). "Nearly all," because the diaphanous character is thankfully immune to the social influence that destroys individual uniqueness. As Pater sees it, the social collective threatens not only to make us "uninteresting," but also to compromise the "sweet aroma" of originality that "faints away" as "the adulterated atmosphere of the world assimilates us to itself" (221). To resist this contamination it is necessary to retreat into the self—Pater offers Raphael as an example of one who successfully escapes social and aesthetic influence: "in the midst of the Reformation and the Renaissance, himself lighted up by them, [Raphael] yielded himself to neither, but stood still to live upon himself" (220). To diaphanous disengagement and

distance from the world corresponds a mode of existence immune to influence and detached from origins. When Pater describes the diaphanous character as “isolated and perfected” (219), we are meant to understand a stronger connection between these adjectives than the “and” implies—its isolation *is* its perfection; its perfection *depends* upon its isolation.

Pater’s essay thus describes an individual who is autonomous in two senses: on the one hand reluctant, or even unable, to interfere with society, and on the other, immune to society’s influence. This autonomy, Pater suggests, is what makes the individual beautiful. Pater’s argument elegantly crystallizes a set of conceptual relations between beauty, autonomy, and utility suggested by Gautier, and recapitulated by Wilde’s dictum in the preface to *Dorian Gray* that “all art is quite useless” (xxiv). Pater, however, institutes a separation of art and life even more complete than Wilde’s. Regenia Gagnier argues that aestheticism “was not the divorce between art and life that Gautier’s phrase *l’art pour l’art* may suggest” because Wilde’s public and politicized commentary on bourgeois society is “his major form of participation in that society” (*Idylls* 7). Like Wilde’s plays, Gautier’s preface betrays a tight engagement with utilitarian and moralist critics, whom he knows well enough to parody convincingly. Furthermore, Gautier’s claim that the literary is a domain outside utility is belied by the figural richness of the “Preface,” which does not hesitate to draw on literary strategies to make its polemic points. But Pater’s essay, unpublished during his life, and included only “with some hesitation” (v) by Charles Shadwell in *Miscellaneous Studies*, refuses such participation on many levels.<sup>4</sup> “Diaphaneitè” is neither polemical nor polarizing, and the young Pater would probably have included Gautier and Wilde under the rubric of “unworldly types of character which the world is able to estimate” (215).<sup>5</sup>

Later describing the role of the aesthetic critic, Pater again connects the autonomy of character with the autonomy of the work of art. In the “Preface” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the intense inwardness that characterizes Raphael’s refusal to yield to his social and cultural environment—his ability to stand “still to live upon himself”—migrates from critic to artwork, from subject to object. Just as the diaphanous individual appears historically and socially disengaged from society, the aesthetic critic’s task is to disengage the work of art from its context. Pater writes that “the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyze, and to separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure. . . . His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others” (xx–xxi). This mode of critical practice—focused on “distinguishing,” “separating,” and “disengaging”—implies that the critic is simply discovering something that is already there, an aesthetic pleasure which exists among “adjunct” qualities. But it is also an argument that the work’s aesthetic pleasure is *separable* from and, indeed, superior to those qualities; as such, critical activity is not just the discovery, but also the production, of aesthetic autonomy.

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<sup>4</sup> Shadwell’s hesitation might be modesty—“Diaphaneitè” is probably Pater’s description of Shadwell himself. See Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition*, 210.

<sup>5</sup> The many levels of disengagement in “Diaphaneitè,” I would argue, complicate James Eli Adams’ view, which takes the “revolutionism” of the diaphanous character at face value: “Throughout his early writings, Pater urges a form of revolution by tradition: authority is figured as a return to origins, the recovery of the forgotten past. . . . The ‘revolutionism’ of the diaphanous character, Pater explains, is that of one . . . [who] has inexplicably reawakened to bring the past into startlingly direct, even coercive influence over the present” (161). Adams suggests that this has “shattering effects” (161); I would argue, however, that the essay is at pains to avoid any sort of direct coercion or shattering, conservative or otherwise.

Even while this strong concept of autonomy creates boundaries between work and context, it eliminates boundaries between subject and work, encompassing both in a realm separate from historical and social concerns. In his review of *The Renaissance*, John Symonds observed that autonomy jumps from the work of art to the critic himself. Symonds describes critics of Pater's "school" thus: "comparatively isolated, indifferent to common tastes and sympathies, careless of maintaining at any cost a vital connection with the universal instincts of humanity, they select what gives them the acutest pleasure" ("Art and Archaeology" 104). Symonds argues not only that the ability to judge the aesthetic quality of a work demands an independence from the influence of "common tastes and sympathies," but also that this practice has the much more significant effect of isolating the critic from humanity at large. Indeed, for Pater, the aesthetic critic must cultivate an individuality of taste that depends less upon intellectual discernment and more upon the kind of person the critic is: "what is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, *but a certain kind of temperament*, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" ("Preface" xxi, emphasis mine). It is for this reason that Pater's discussion of the work is as much a discussion of himself; flights of fancy such as the famously weird speculation about *La Gioconda's* dark past express performatively an independence from critical norms.<sup>6</sup> The critic's isolation from society is thus of a very particular kind: an originality that is not intellectual creativity, but an entire "temperament" that is affected differently from those whose instincts are more, well, "universal." Harold Bloom has described this uniqueness as characteristic of Pater's "aesthetic man, . . . [who] accepts the truths of solipsism and isolation, of mortality and the flux of sensations, and glories in the singularity of his own peculiar kind of contemplative temperament" (9).

The fact that this critical autonomy is affective rather than cognitive—the "power of being deeply moved"—accounts for the ease with which Pater's critical independence edges toward solipsism. This is most apparent in Pater's reading of Matthew Arnold's maxim that criticism must strive for untrammelled access to the object of criticism. Pater erects "one's own impression" as a barrier between subject and object: "'To see the object as in itself it really is,' has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly." Pater's pronouns effect a sly transition from an "it" which refers to an object to an "it" which refers to an impression. Though Pater suggests that this attention to one's impression is an intermediary moment—a "first step" toward becoming a good Arnoldian critic—he continues readily to turn objects into sensations. The aesthetic critic, he writes, "regards all the objects with which he has to do . . . as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations"; in the "Conclusion" we discover the possibility that "experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world"

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<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that Iain Fletcher need not make this apology: "The very word 'Pater' has come to be associated with an undisciplined impressionistic criticism, and one or two rather uncharacteristic passages, such as the prose-poem on the Mona Lisa, are assumed to be broadly representative" (41). It may not be generally representative, but nor is it an unfortunate anomaly—it is precisely the "undisciplined" nature of such criticism that Pater was trying to validate.

(186). Pater figures the world beyond our impression of it as an unreal dream and the “first step” of the “Preface” reappears as a final truth. Impressions are cultivated at the expense of the “reality” of other people, and, most importantly, the practice of aesthetic criticism turns out to have implications for the individual that extend far beyond the isolated moment of aesthetic experience.<sup>7</sup> Through aesthetic experience, we discover a more profound isolation from the world.

Another way of thinking about this “solipsism” is as the fetishization (in a Marxist sense) of selfhood: Pater describes an individual who treats his sensation and experience with a finality which tacitly refuses the possibility of historical or cultural mediation. In this light it is not difficult to see why Pater’s essays would appear to provide an aesthetic basis for bourgeois individualism. Pater defines the “aesthetic” as a pleasurable quality independent of and privileged over others. He argues that the appreciation of this quality is most available to a person who does not inquire into “antiquarian” historical conditions, because aesthetic experience is self-authorizing and irrefutable. As a result, there is an emphasis on the self that would sound almost hysterical were Pater a less reserved writer generally: “What is this song or picture... to *me*? What effect does it produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?... How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?” (xix–xx, emphasis Pater’s).

If it is not exactly news that Pater privileges individual and aesthetic autonomy, then perhaps what is more interesting is that the isolated, solipsistic individual almost inevitably reverses into its opposite. This is clear even when Pater seems to be pushing most emphatically for the subject’s isolation; although the passage that confines us within our walled personalities appears to offer the strongest possible evidence of the solipsism that Bloom describes (other people, after all, have been reduced to unreal “voices”), the notion of the “impression” introduces a contradiction into this absolute autonomy. At the same time that the impression acts as a barrier to knowledge about the world, it also figures a subject shaped—literally “impressed”—by the world. As Tamar Katz argues, Pater’s impressionist theory is internally contradictory: while it imagines a subject who is enclosed within a solitary world of sensory experience, “impressionism equally posits a subject who is thoroughly permeated by sensation and is thus so formed by its specific setting that it lacks any autonomy; rather it is wholly constructed without” (9).

Indeed, this contradiction lies at the root of an ongoing debate about whether Pater is adopting or merely quoting the solipsism this passage describes. In the “Conclusion”’s previous paragraph, Pater wonders if this intense inwardness is simply a misperception, when actually we are all just part of a network of natural elements and forces: “what is the whole physical life...but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names?” (186). If so, then “that clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours...a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it” (187). Such an individual is neither isolated from the world nor in control of his or her actions, which are merely the manifestations of natural

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps another way of thinking about this strand of Pater’s thought is through James Eli Adams’ identification of a rhetoric of self-discipline or “authority in reserve” in Pater: “Pater’s aesthete unites the figures of gentleman, dandy, and priest as he attempts to construct new forms of charisma through an active solicitation of hostile surveillance” (186). Adams’ language—as well as his connection of this construction to Wildean self-fashioning a moment earlier—reflects the extent to which he thinks of Pater’s model of individuality as one of a self-grounded, active construction of identity.

forces.<sup>8</sup> The juxtaposition of these viewpoints has variously been taken as straightforward evidence of Pater's solipsism, as a problematic contradiction, and as a productive paradox.<sup>9</sup> It has also been suggested that all of these interpretations are wrong: neither view is actually Pater's. Billie Inman challenges Perry Meisel's discovery of "'blindness' and 'deception' in Pater's mind" ("Intellectual Context" 132) by suggesting that "what Meisel does not see is that Pater is representing 'modern thought' in the first half of the 'Conclusion,' as he says in the first sentence" and not really owning either point of view. This becomes particularly clear if one looks at the "Conclusion" in its original form, as "Poems by William Morris": there Pater precedes it with the statement, "let us see what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it" (309). It appears that Pater is observing modern philosophy's conclusions, rather than drawing his own, as Carolyn Williams argues (agreeing with Inman): "in the 'Conclusion' Pater briefly but painstakingly outlines the material and epistemological conclusions drawn by 'modern thought' and then he devotes the full force of his...energies to proposing an alternative stance" (12). Pater is thus rescued from the charge of solipsism; he is not stating a truth, but reciting a position.

This seems to put the matter to rest, but it does not answer the question of why Pater himself would have confused things by excising from "Poems by William Morris" the two passages that would most clearly have distanced the introductory paragraphs from his own point of view. In fact, these were the most major revisions made to the "Conclusion" before it was republished in *The Renaissance*. In a paragraph that followed the summary of the conclusions of "modern science," Pater transitioned away from those possibilities: "Such thoughts seem desolate at first; at times all the bitterness of life seems concentrated in them. They bring the image of one washed out beyond the bar in a sea at an ebb, losing even his personality, as the elements of which he is composed pass into new combinations. Struggling, as he must, to save himself, it is himself that he loses at every moment" (311). Philosophy, Pater then writes, should do something else entirely: it ought to—as Novalis says—"dephlegmatisiren, vivificiren," to "startle" us into "sharp and eager observation" (311). Pater's image of an individual simultaneously isolated ("washed out beyond the bar") and disintegrated ("as the elements of which he is composed pass into new combinations") combines the solipsism and materialism of the previous paragraphs in the figure of an individual who just possibly might be saved by a certain kind of philosophical thought—the kind Pater actually espouses in the final paragraphs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah Cole suggests that this sort of self-dissolution is enacted in Pater's "Two French Stories": "The Amis and Amile tale constructs a vision of identity that clashes not only with arbitrary institutional loyalty, but with individualism itself, as the histories and bodies of the two men intermingle right up to their deaths, when their decaying bodies refuse to separate into distinct entities for burial and commemoration. For Amis and Amile, identity is a matter of mimesis, and their interiority, like their exterior persons, is an indistinguishable amalgamation...masculinity here refutes both competition and the ascendancy of the self" (39–40).

<sup>9</sup> See Harold Bloom, "Introduction"; Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father*; and Tamar Katz *Impressionist Subjects*, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the individual drowned by the flux of nature is an image to which Yeats turns to characterize the modernist break, citing Turner: "Change has come suddenly, the despair of my friends in the 'nineties part of its preparation. Nature, steel-bound or stone-built in the nineteenth century, became a flux where man drowned or swam; the moment had come for some poet to cry 'the flux is in my own mind'" (*The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* xxviii). Indeed, on the next page, Yeats asks, "did Pater foreshadow a poetry, a philosophy, where the individual is nothing, the flux of *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound...?" (xxx).

Pater's elimination of these passages suggests that he is not moving away from the possibilities of solipsism and materialism, but rather attempting to make both the foundation of a paradoxical form of individuality. Although it is certainly a misreading to take them unproblematically as Pater's own opinions, it is also a misreading to assume that they are standpoints completely divorced from his own. Within the "Conclusion" itself, these two possibilities symptomatically reappear. Pater sometimes imagines his reader as someone with the capacity to intentionally pursue intense experiences. But in a footnote added later, which worries that the "Conclusion" might "mislead some of those young men into whose hands it may fall" (186), Pater imagines a reader whose actions might be determined by contingent influence.

In this chapter, I argue that by exploring the tension between these ways of thinking about individuality—as self-grounding and as highly mediated—Pater develops an aesthetic theory much more complicated than the mere celebration of autonomy. Some readers have thought of Pater's wavering between these possibilities as evidence of his lack of philosophical sophistication: T.S. Eliot, for example, believed that "incapable of sustained reasoning, [Pater] could not take philosophy or theology seriously" (402); Helen Young writes that Pater "had few positive theories of his own. He was incapable of strict logical, even verbal consistency. He makes no statement which he does not somewhere contradict" (7).<sup>11</sup> I will argue instead that Pater's inconsistency is the site of his philosophical sophistication. With Jonathan Freedman, James Eli Adams, and Carolyn Williams, who have suggested that Pater's habit of self-contradiction is a strength rather than a weakness, I believe that Pater's "inconsistency" should not be hastily explained away—but not because it allows us to praise Pater as deconstructive or historically engaged.<sup>12</sup> Rather, I would argue that the apparent flaws in his philosophical reasoning are actually symptomatic of a much deeper engagement with aesthetic philosophy than is generally recognized. In almost all of his writing, Pater arrives at a point where, as he puts it in the Coleridge essay, "it seems as if the most opposite statements were alike true" (*Appreciations* 155). These "statements" can include not only "we are autonomous" and "we are constructed," but also extend to issues involving the ideal and the material, the normative and the descriptive, asceticism and sensuousness, cognition and experience. And as often as he arrives at these opposing positions he fails—or refuses—to resolve them into one another, instead articulating a philosophical stance that is resolutely, perhaps strategically, contradictory. Inconsistency is not an unfortunate habit of Pater's; it is the very mode in which he writes.

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<sup>11</sup> Pater is often seen more as a transitional or synthesizing figure than as an original thinker; Iser writes that Pater "marks the transition from a nostalgic espousal of the past to its active appropriation at a moment when Late Romanticism was about to give way to modernism" (169); McGrath argues, "Pater's importance to twentieth-century aesthetics lies in his role as one of the chief conduits between the philosophical origins of a new epistemology and its Modernist articulations" (5).

<sup>12</sup> Freedman writes that "it is the ability, inclination, or even the desire to hold onto contradictory assertions without giving up either their contradictoriness or the wish somehow to unify them that I find most characteristic not only of Pater's work, but of aestheticism's imaginative labor as well" and privileges this as a quasi-postmodern "desire to embrace contradictions, indeed the desire to seek them out the better to play with the possibilities they afford" (6). Carolyn Williams writes that Paterian "inconsistency" is productive of a dialectical relation between aesthetics and history. See "Afterword," *Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*. James Eli Adams refers to the "shaping ambivalence in [Pater's] writings" (166) and cites "the incessant dualisms of his writings—pagan and medieval, classical and romantic, Dorian and Ionian, centrifugal and centripetal" (167). I return to the political implications of these arguments in the conclusion to this chapter.

This is important because Pater's attempt to find some point of connection between opposing statements, without conveniently simplifying either, involves a process of reflective judgment based upon an encounter with a particular object (or character: almost all of Pater's fiction and essays move from the analysis of an individual person to general philosophical claims). It is this reflective attempt at mediation as much as, for example, the exaltation of formal perfection or heightened perceptive experience that makes Pater's aestheticism "aesthetic." My argument counters the tendency to view Pater's aesthetics in purely "bodily" terms; Harold Bloom for example, argues that "Pater meant us always to remember what mostly we have forgotten, that 'aesthete' is from the Greek *aisthetes*, 'one who perceives'" (2). But for Pater, the term "aesthetics" was not just Greek, but German as well. Library records of Pater's borrowings indicate that through his 20's, he was almost exclusively reading German philosophers (in German) who would have introduced him to the rich variety of significations that had accreted around aesthetic experience in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Goethe.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Pater cites Hegel's *Aesthetics* more than a dozen times in his essay on Winckelmann alone—mostly in footnotes eliminated when the essay was included in *The Renaissance*. Even further, Pater engages with a discourse of aesthetics beyond his direct references to German aesthetic philosophy, drawing upon resonances of aesthetics that do not have to do exclusively with art or beauty. If we attend to the ways that Paterian aestheticism negotiates the discourse of aesthetic philosophy, it becomes clear that Pater's understanding of the "aesthetic" is not absolute withdrawal; instead Pater strategically deploys the tensions between autonomy and determination animated by Kant and Hegel.

This means that what is "aesthetic" about aestheticism is an interest in the ways in which an aesthetic experience shapes identity—either as an educative force that fashions subjects, or, conversely, as an unsettling experience that renders contingent one's feeling of autonomous self-determination. This interest in the self is often thought of in terms of its effects on the generation that followed Pater: one reason that it is so tempting to view Pater as the grandfather of literary modernism is that he devotes so much of his writing to issues of subjectivity that were central for modernists: is it possible to break through the boundaries around personality, "temperament," and the self? Or, as Pater asks in "Style," can the communication of subjective experience happen through a text's formal strategies rather its content? As J. Hillis Miller notes, "Subjectivity—the self—is, it seems, the beginning, the end, and the persisting basis in all Pater's writings" (100). I will argue that not only is Pater's interest in subjectivity tightly interwoven with his interest in aesthetics, but also that it is impossible to fully understand the meaning of "aestheticism" without recognizing that its "aesthetics" are not limited to domains of

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<sup>13</sup> Inman points out that "in 1860 Pater's reading entered a new phase. Perhaps following the example of Carlyle, he learned to read German; and he undertook what appears, with the record of library borrowings open before one, to be a determined course in the reading of the greatest of the German and the English philosophers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, supplemented by readings in Goethe and a few classical philosophers, primarily Plato." Although Inman says that Pater at this point was not reading in aesthetic philosophy specifically (he appears not to have read Hegel's lectures on aesthetics until 1863), "by the time he wrote 'Winckelmann,' in 1866, he had not only assimilated Hegel's and Schiller's ideas on aesthetics, Quinet's and Michelet's orientation in history, and Renan's eclectic mode of thought, but was in command of a general range of reference—classical, German, French, and English—quite astounding to one who realizes that it was primarily the fruit of only six years" (Inman, *Walter Pater and his Reading: A Bibliography of his Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858–1873* xi–xii). A.C. Benson corroborates: "in these years, Pater's chief interest, apart from his prescribed work, was in philosophy, which naturally led him to the study of German authors" (11).

art, beauty or sensation. With surprising regularity, the “beautiful” is an intermediary step toward Pater’s more profound interrogation of subjective autonomy.

### Close Misreading: Pater’s Hegel

Pater’s use of the term “aesthetic” usually emphasizes, as Bloom points out, the Greek sense of *aisthetes* as sensory experience: in a review of William Morris’s poems, Pater views as aesthetic “the great romantic loves of rebellious flesh” as well as the “dangerously sensuous side” of medieval Christianity, which “made way among a people whose loss was in the life of the senses, partly by its aesthetic beauty” (“Aesthetic Poetry” 215).<sup>14</sup> “Aesthetic poetry” is poetry that elevates the intensity of sensory experience almost to a Sybaritic level: “the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears. Hence a wild, convulsed sensuousness in the poetry of the middle ages” (218). These passages, which Swinburne or Rossetti could easily have written, reflect Pater’s appreciation for a specifically pre-Raphaelite kind of beauty.

And yet, Pater’s definition of the term “aesthetic” is actually quite contradictory. The first paragraph of his review defines “aesthetic poetry” as poetry that transfigures this world into a more ideal one, a world “still fainter and more spectral” even than the idealized world often described in conventional poetry: “it is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal” (213). This claim suggests that the aesthetic liberates us from physical embodiment rather than celebrates it. But although the “transfigured world” (213) is an attractive figure for disengaged aestheticism, this claim that aesthetic poetry is a purified ideal, doubly removed from the actual world, is in fact an anomaly—the rest of the essay describes the “aesthetic” as passionate, embodied, sensory experience that affords a “return...to the earlier, more ancient life of the senses” (224).<sup>15</sup> This tension between sensualism and idealism is illustrated succinctly through Pater’s use of the term “escape” to mean two quite different things: where Pater writes in the first paragraph that our enjoyment of aesthetic poetry comes from the fact that it satisfies “that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies” (213–214), it turns out later that the sensory aesthetic of medieval poetry is actually a trap: “reverie, illusion, delirium: they are the three stages of a fatal descent.... Of the things of nature the mediaeval mind had a deep sense; but its sense of them was not objective, *no real escape* to the world without us. The aspects and motions of nature...were in conspiracy with one’s own brain against one” (218–219, emphasis mine). Pater promises at the beginning of his essay that aesthetic poetry offers an escape from modern life into a higher, transfigured realm, but by the end of the essay aesthetic poetry really leaves one situated firmly within the earthly realm of sensation. So much so, in fact, that Pater retracted the essay from later editions of

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<sup>14</sup> Ruth Child argues, like Bloom, that Pater is using “aesthetic” in its Greek or Baumgartenian sense: “When Pater called himself by the title ‘aesthetic critic,’ he was borrowing a common philosophic word and using it in its technical sense ‘Aesthetic’ comes from a Greek word, of or pertaining to *aisthetes*, things perceptible by the senses.’ The term was first applied by the German philosopher Baumgarten about 1750 to the science or philosophy of the criticism of taste.... Pater keeps close to the original derivation of the word” (122).

<sup>15</sup> *Transfigured World* is the title of Carolyn Williams’ book on Pater, which describes Pater’s aesthetics as “redoubling the distance from the ‘realities of the time’” (4–5). Wolfgang Iser similarly characterizes Paterian aestheticism as disengagement; Pater’s work, he writes, is characterized by its search for an autonomous domain that is separate from “reality” as well as “moral continuity”<sup>15</sup> (145); Marius “becomes the embodiment of a difference that animates the aesthetic existence. He seeks the fullness of life by never committing himself” (143).



*Appreciations*; Lionel Johnson wrote that Pater “suppressed his Aesthetic Poetry essay, because ‘there were things in it; which some people, pious souls! thought profane, yes! profane’” (Evans xxiii).

This contradiction between aesthetically escaping from and escaping into the “real world”—which certainly is not isolated to “Aesthetic Poetry”—illustrates some of the problems that arise when one begins to ask what it is that makes Pater’s aestheticism “aesthetic.” On the one hand, essays such as “Diaphaneité,” Pater’s discussion of the “aesthetic critic,” and the beginning of “Aesthetic Poetry” suggest that Pater is referring to an ideal, formal world; the one in which the youthful Marius tries to live as he refines “the art, namely, of so relieving the ideal or poetic traits...in our everyday life—of so exclusively living in them—that the unadorned remainder of it, the mere drift or *débris* of our days, comes to be as though it were not” (*Marius the Epicurean* 65). And yet this “ideal” aestheticism works in tension with a more “material” aestheticism that focuses upon physical sensation, sensuousness, and the profane; for this Pater, “pictorial qualities must first of all delight the sense, delight it as directly and sensuously as a fragment of Venetian glass; and through this delight alone become the vehicle of whatever poetry or science may lie beyond them” (*Renaissance* 104). Pater is not, of course, the first to think about aesthetics through this duality of ideal form and sensory pleasure, and his references to Hegel and Plato in the early essay on Winckelmann suggest that it is not casual or sloppy theorizing, but rather a direct engagement with aesthetic philosophy that leads to contradictions such as these. Although it might appear that Pater’s contradictory “escapes” reflect his lack of pretension to philosophical rigor, in fact they manifest a central tension within aesthetic philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Any doubt that Paterian aestheticism has a Hegelian basis is cleared up by one of Pater’s first essays, “Winckelmann.” The essay, which has been read as an anti-Arnoldian validation of aesthetic Paganism as well as a coded validation of homoerotic pedagogy (and there is no more perfect demonstration of Paterian allusiveness than the fact that it is undeniably both at once) is, on yet another level, a *précis* of Hegel’s introduction to his *Aesthetics*.<sup>17</sup> This, despite the fact that Hegel often seems beside the point: Pater’s main argument is that the German critic Johann Winckelmann has a unique sympathetic capacity that allows him to connect directly with antiquity. In a characteristically anti-metaphysical passage, Pater writes that “the impression which Winckelmann’s literary life conveyed to those about him, was that of excitement, intuition, inspiration, rather than the contemplative evolution of general principles.... [Winckelmann] apprehended the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner, not through the

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<sup>16</sup> Pater’s philosophical heritage has been a topic of much discussion. Critics such as Wendell V. Harris, Peter Allan Dale, and F.C. McGrath argue that Pater either synthesizes or disavows the two dominant trends in British thought in the 1860s and 70s: transcendental idealism on the one hand (inherited from the Germans through Coleridge and the Oxford scholars of Hegel) and empiricism on the other (represented by Hartley, Bentham, and Mill). (See Dale, 173–185.) McGrath tends to group Pater with the German idealists; Dale instead argues that “Pater must, in his commitment to the doctrine of relativity and in his denial of Absolutism, fall with Mill into the camp of the Benthamites” (179). For discussions of Pater’s relation to empiricism, see *Pater’s Portraits* 4–7. Dale and d’Hangest suggest that Pater is also using Kant (see Dale, 221 and d’Hangest, 350). Kenneth Daley and David DeLaura place Pater’s work in a tradition of Victorian essayists in *The Rescue of Romanticism* and *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England*, respectively.

<sup>17</sup> See DeLaura and Dowling, respectively.

understanding, but by instinct or touch” (“Winckelmann” 154).<sup>18</sup> But Pater is not looking to Hegel for the metaphysics; instead, Hegel’s aesthetics serves to justify philosophically Pater’s attempt to connect “apprehension” and “touch” directly through “excitement, intuition, inspiration” rather than logical, *a priori* cognition. The artwork, according to Hegel, does something quite similar to what Winckelmann experiences: it mediates between a physical realm of sensation and an inward realm of thought without abstracting to philosophy or reducing to matter. Though Pater excised the explicit references to Hegel’s *Aesthetics* in revisions, Pater’s earliest statement on aesthetics is in many ways a reading of Hegel.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one way of thinking about “Winckelmann” is as a Hegelian rereading of “Diaphaneité”; Pater directly transcribes many of his descriptions of the diaphanous character, but uses them to define the Greek sensibility which is able, through sculpture, to synthesize substance and idea.

My project is not to compile an exhaustive compendium of similarities between “Winckelmann” and Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (which has already been done) or even to argue that Hegel’s influence on Pater has not been acknowledged (it has).<sup>20</sup> Rather, I would like to suggest a relationship between Hegel and Pater other than “influence”—a term which is difficult to use unproblematically here since it is a concept that Pater’s essay works to redefine. It is easy to explain away historically or biographically the relation between Pater and Hegel; Anthony Ward writes, for example, that “Hegel’s thought was disseminated in Oxford by [Benjamin] Jowett (whose lectures Pater attended). It was Jowett’s pupils who subsequently led the Hegelian movement” (44). Under this view, Pater is more or less passively submitting to his intellectual atmosphere by channeling philosophical trends. And unsuccessfully at that: Gerald Monsman writes that “Pater’s re-creative mistranscriptions were among the first features of his style to receive extended comment” (14), mostly from reviewers who were horrified at his reckless use of sources. But I believe that a more interesting possibility is that Pater is deploying Hegel strategically within the essay, and that his departures from Hegel are revealing symptoms rather than unfortunate mistakes. Pater retells in his own way two stories from Hegel’s aesthetics—the artwork’s mediation of the material and the ideal, and the subject’s development in relation to the artwork—which condition and explain Pater’s own “aestheticism.” Analyzing Pater’s use of these Hegelian narratives makes possible a more nuanced characterization of aestheticism itself than as a love for pure, exalted form, or as a pre-Raphaelite obsession with the body, pleasure, and pain. It makes clear that Pater was not working only within the British tradition of Ruskin, Arnold, and Newman, and even that his contribution to Victorian prose was more than the infusion of a decadent French sensibility.<sup>21</sup> Finally, it suggests that Pater’s aestheticism is not so much thematic as it is modal: even though it has nothing to do with the work of art per se, his theory of a paradoxically mediated and autonomous subject is an “aesthetic theory” because of its confrontation with one of the central problems of philosophical aesthetics.

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<sup>18</sup> Note that Pater’s claim puts in contact the two poles of “Aesthetic Poetry,” describing a direct connection between an ideal world of “apprehension” and a sensory world of “touch.”

<sup>19</sup> David DeLaura writes, “The Hegelian origins of many of the ideas in ‘Winckelmann,’ and thus of the Hegelian basis of Pater’s view of life and art, is obscured as Hegel’s name is progressively eliminated from revisions of the essay between 1867 and the third edition of the *Renaissance* in 1888” (210–211). See also Kenneth Daley, *The Rescue of Romanticism*, 79–81.

<sup>20</sup> F.C. McGrath’s study of Pater is the best demonstration of Hegel’s influence.

<sup>21</sup> David DeLaura’s *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* argues that “Winckelmann” is a response and challenge to Matthew Arnold’s “Pagan and Religious Sentiment”; the persuasiveness of his argument has perhaps obscured other resonances of the essay.

For Pater, Hegel's understanding of the work of art is important because the artwork participates in the realms of both sensuousness and abstraction. Hegel writes in the *Aesthetics* that "the work of art is not only for the *sensuous* apprehension as sensuous object, but its position is of such a kind that as sensuous it is at the same time essentially addressed to the *mind*, that the mind is meant to be affected by it, and to find some sort of satisfaction in it" (40). In other words, the artwork is unlike either an apple, which appeals exclusively to our sensuous appreciation, or a philosophical treatise, which appeals exclusively to the mind—instead, it is a thing whose very sensuousness is somehow satisfying to the mind as well as the senses. Pater recapitulates Hegel: in ancient art, "motive is not lightly and loosely attached to the sensuous form, as its meaning to an allegory, but saturates and is identical with it" (*Renaissance* 164). And, just as for Hegel, this simultaneous appeal to the senses and to the mind was most effectively achieved in Greek art, Pater argues that "the thoughts of the Greeks about themselves, and their relation to the world generally, were ever in the happiest readiness to be transformed into objects for the senses" (163).<sup>22</sup> This is in contrast to Romantic art, which has become unable to reflect directly the complexity of modern human consciousness. For the Greeks, the work of art thus makes available a form of truth not derived from abstract principles, but rather presented sensibly in the material world—the "apprehension" of Greek culture which Pater attributes to Winckelmann is, according to Pater's reading of Hegel, also the mode in which the subject in antiquity related to the work of art. Pater's references to Hegel thus subtly validate his assertion that Winckelmann had a unique sympathetic connection to the ancient past.

Pater's insertion of Hegel's history of art into the "Winckelmann" essay does more, however, than justify his argument that Winckelmann had a non-intellectual but true connection to Greek culture; it also inserts into Pater's own aesthetic theory the antithesis through which Hegel explained the work of art: abstract, subjective cognition on the one hand; physical, sensuous materiality on the other. Hegel writes that "fine art [is] the first middle term of reconciliation between pure thought and what is external, sensuous and transitory, between nature with its finite actuality and the infinite freedom of the reason that comprehends" (10). Pater uses this Hegelian model of "fine art" both when he writes theoretically about the work of art and when he simply describes aesthetic experience. In "The School of Giorgione," Pater writes that "art addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the 'imaginative reason' through the senses. . . . Each art, therefore having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination" (*Renaissance* 102).<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that works of art are untranslatable into other genres—they are not simply the beautifully sensuous communication of an idea, but rather the very welding of idea and sensuous communication. Or, looking forward to the "Aesthetic Poetry" essay, one can see this duality as

<sup>22</sup> For discussions of the similarities and differences between Pater and Hegel's connection of aesthetics to a historical narrative see Iser, 71–83 and Ward 43–77; for a catalogue of textual references and similarities between "Winckelmann" and Hegel's *Aesthetics*, see Fehr, 300–308 and Inman, *Walter Pater and his Reading*, 110–147.

<sup>23</sup> Germain d'Hangest points out that "L'expression 'raison imaginative' fut sans doute suggérée à Pater par Arnold," but "en fait, pour expliquer le *concept* de 'raison imaginative' tel que l'entend Pater, ce n'est pas à Arnold, mais, croyons-nous, à Kant qu'il faut remonter" (d'Hangest 350). As Hill points out in his notes to *The Renaissance*, d'Hangest gives no specific passage in Kant to justify the argument that Pater derives the concept of "imaginative reason" from Kant (386); I agree that the language (of "imagination" and "reason") is more Kantian than Hegelian, but the concept itself could equally be derived from Hegel's combination of sense and idea, as Pater is not using it here with a great degree of philosophical specificity.

the source of the tension between Pater's definition of the "aesthetic" as fleshy and passionate, but also as ideal and removed. Or again, at the end of the "Conclusion", Pater transitions between intellectual "wisdom" and bodily "passion" as the product of "art and song"; it is not just the "quickened sense of life, ecstasy" but also the "quickened, multiplied consciousness" and "wisdom" which constitute the quality that "art" is able to give to those who seek to intensify their experience (190). Such oscillations come into play virtually any time Pater writes about aesthetic experience.

It is not only the antithesis of thought and matter that interests Pater in his reading of Hegel; Pater is equally interested in the story of humanity's alienation from itself and from nature. That is to say, "Winckelmann" draws from Hegel not only a theory of the work of art itself, but also a theory of the subject who encounters it. Some of Pater's most direct linguistic borrowing occurs in this regard, as he uses Hegelian terms to describe a narrative of progressive self-alienation: "the Greek mind had advanced to a particular stage of self-reflection, but was careful not to pass beyond it" (164); by the end of "Winckelmann," Pater concludes that "we have seen that the development of the various forms of art has corresponded to the development of the thoughts of man concerning humanity, to the growing revelation of the mind to itself" (184). Pater continues to transcribe Hegel: Greek thought "has not yet become too inward; the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh; the spirit has not yet absorbed everything with its emotions, nor reflected its own colour everywhere" (164). Although the passage clearly refers to Hegel both in its content and in the temporality of its language—the repeated "not yet"s implying a progressively increasing reflection of mind in the world—Pater is simultaneously calling into play his own opposition between a solipsistic inwardness that facilitates a retreat into an idealized, formal existence (as exemplified by the diaphanous character and Marius's religious youth), and a oneness with the natural world, in which "humanity is still confused with the fantastic, indeterminate life of the animal and vegetable world" (164). It is for the latter that the self is not autonomous from, but rather permeated, by nature—the "impressionist" subject whose senses are not a barrier, but a passageway.

This historical theory is also an explanation of the process by which "inward" consciousness develops: Pater uses Hegel in order to discuss how the artwork manifests the historical mediation of consciousness. Pater contrasts the Greeks, whose self-reflection is "ever in the happiest readiness to be transformed into objects for the senses" (163) with medieval Europeans, whose "mystical art...is always struggling to express thoughts beyond itself" (163). Pater describes a "native affinity" (167) between art and consciousness; if sculpture is appropriate to Greeks and mystical art to medieval Europeans, then "painting, music, and poetry, with their endless power of complexity, are the special arts of the romantic and modern ages. Into these...may be translated every delicacy of thought and feeling, incidental to a consciousness brooding with delight over itself.... They project in an external form that which is most inward in passion or sentiment" (168). For Pater, this is not just a formal mimesis, where genre "mirrors" a historical stage of subjective inwardness (or the lack thereof); rather art serves the function of instructively demonstrating this inwardness to the viewer.

Pater is hesitant, however, to fully adopt a philosophical stance, and his resistance to Hegel manifests itself through an anti-metaphysical narrative of "influence" and "enthusiasm."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Alan Dale writes, "Though Pater, as I have said, had little use for Hegel's metaphysical absolutism, he clearly found in the *Aesthetik* an indispensable guide to the interpretation of art... Indeed, it may be argued that one of Pater's most important claims to serious consideration as a critic resides in the fact that he was the first English

While Pater broadly describes a historical process whereby the work of art reflects the “human spirit” (141), he is also interested in the individual “temperament” that makes interpretation possible. This is the case for Winckelmann, whose understanding of antiquity Pater refers to variously as “divination,” “enthusiasm,” and “susceptibility,” as well as for Goethe, upon whom “the influence of Winckelmann is always discernible.... ‘One learns nothing from him,’ he says of Eckermann, ‘but one becomes something’” (147). This narrative is often taken as Pater’s coded validation of a homoerotic model of pedagogy; Linda Dowling argues that the words “inspiration” and “enthusiasm” would have been read as referring to a model of learning where it is the love between teacher and student that actually enables learning.<sup>25</sup> I would argue that in the context of the essay, this narrative also signals Pater’s desire to revise the purely Hegelian theory of the work of art with which he is working; near the end of the essay, he places the two in tension with one another: “it is easy to indulge the commonplace metaphysical instinct. But a taste for metaphysics may be one of those things which we must renounce, if we mean to mould our lives to artistic perfection. Philosophy serves culture, not by the gift of absolute or transcendental knowledge, but by suggesting questions which help one to detect the passion, and strangeness, and dramatic contrasts of life” (184). Pater articulates a desire to engage in metaphysics selectively, almost selfishly: metaphysical speculations are useful insofar as they create the possibility for new experience.<sup>26</sup>

This anti-metaphysical impulse manifests itself in the essay through Pater’s interest in forms of understanding that proceed from affective experience. Although Pater draws from Hegel a model wherein the work of art is able to mediate between sensuousness and thought, he resists Hegel’s method for discovering this mediation. And, surprisingly, it is Plato to whom Pater turns in order to validate his anti-metaphysical stance. In order to explain Winckelmann’s unique ability to understand the ancient world, Pater makes reference to the former’s “enthusiasm,—that, in the broad Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*, was the secret of his divinatory power over the Hellenic world” (152). Pater’s conjunction of “enthusiasm” and “divination” is perhaps not surprising—both refer to divine possession, and the suggestion is that Winckelmann’s knowledge comes not from thought, but from a secret, quasi-religious process. But to use Plato to make this argument is odd. To an extent, Plato recognizes divine possession as a conduit for meaning; in the *Ion*, for example, Socrates says, “A poet... is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him.... God takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners, so that we who hear should know that *they* are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us” (534b-534d). In the dialogue, Socrates

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critic to make understanding use of Hegel” (226). James Eli Adams writes, “Although he relies on the descriptive categories of Hegel’s history of art, Pater ultimately repudiates those ‘theoretical reasons’ that Winckelmann likewise disdains. He will not accept the crucial axiom that consciousness possesses a transcendent dimension that finds its ultimate realization in a realm independent of the finite, material present” (167).

<sup>25</sup> Linda Dowling writes that in the essay, Winckelmann’s “enthusiasm” ought to be “understood in its fully etymological force as *en-theos*, possession by a god. In the Platonic context of the *Phaedrus* it is specifically possession by the god of love, the pederastic Eros” (*Hellenism and Homosexuality* 96). See also Adams 168–181 for a discussion of the homoerotic implications of Platonic enthusiasm.

<sup>26</sup> Wendell V. Harris takes Pater as evidence of a moment in which Victorian prose turned against “the mighty metaphysical opposites which contended for men’s allegiance through the nineteenth century” (347), suggesting that the “Conclusion” shows Pater leaving behind both transcendentalism and empiricism.

argues that is not the poet's own skill, but rather his submission to divine possession that allows him to interpret Homeric verse. But Pater turns to Plato not in order to *replace* interpretive skill by divine possession, but rather to *reconcile* the two. Pater writes that "this enthusiasm, dependent as it is to a great degree on bodily temperament, has a power of reinforcing the purer emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement" (152).

Plato, even in the *Ion*, is careful to distinguish between formal truth, which can be arrived at only through reasoning, and material appearance, which is constitutively unable to present formal truth faithfully. The very passage of the *Phaedrus* to which Pater refers is one that makes this distinction. Socrates says, "A soul that never saw the truth cannot take a human shape, since a human being must understand speech in terms of general forms, proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity. That process is the recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god, when it *disregarded the things we now call real* and lifted up its head to what is truly real instead" (249B, my emphasis). According to Socrates, disregard for what is only apparently real—that is, for the information provided by our senses—characterizes enthusiastic possession: "He stands *outside human concerns* and draws close to the divine; ordinary people think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, unaware that he is possessed by a god [*enthousiazōn*]" (249C my emphasis). The *Phaedrus*'s and *Ion*'s discussions of enthusiasm have to do with a withdrawal from this world of "human concerns" and "the things we now call real" and with access to a divine formal realm beyond the world of mere appearances. Even a cursory reading of the *Phaedrus* makes one wonder in what "broad Platonic" sense enthusiasm is "dependent...on bodily temperament" and productive of "physical excitement" (152); in the *Phaedrus*, "enthusiasm" refers to the disjunction—not the connection—between the body and "divinatory power."<sup>27</sup>

Pater's misreading is interesting for at least two reasons. First of all, it illustrates a selectiveness in his own treatment of philosophy—Pater is not trying for a rigorous, responsible interpretation of Plato, but rather using Plato to "suggest questions" (184), thus performing formally the anti-metaphysical stance that he advocates. In a sense, reading Plato idiosyncratically guarantees that even if Pater is wrong, he will not end up subscribing to the philosophical orthodoxies against which the "Conclusion" strenuously warns. This selectiveness, in turn, generates a tension between metaphysical truth, and "temperament" or "nature": Pater suggests that it is not by abstract reasoning that we arrive at truth, but rather through a cultivation of our sensibilities. Suggesting that the "new sense" that Winckelmann made available was a form of Platonic *anamnesis*, Pater writes that Hellenic culture "seems to call out in Winckelmann new senses fitted to deal with it. He is in touch with it; it penetrates him, and becomes part of his temperament.... He seems to realize that fancy of the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself" (155). It is the very reversal of the direction of *anamnesis* that epitomizes Pater's reappropriation of Platonic philosophy: "recollection" occurs not when one is possessed by a god and forgets this world in favor of another, but rather when one immerses oneself in this world: Pater grounds Winckelmann's *anamnesis* in the natural world, comparing him to Columbus, who "had a way of estimating at once the slightest indication of land...he seemed actually to come nearer to nature than other men" (154). The sensory world is

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<sup>27</sup> This is coincident with Pater's use of Plato throughout his work. Even in *Plato and Platonism*, where Pater dwells on such questions at length, Pater manages to read Plato for his theory of the pleasing nature of the sensible world; discussing Plato's theories about art and poetry, Pater refers exclusively to the soft censorship of Book 3 of *The Republic* rather than the outright ban in Book 10.

not, as Plato describes it, misleading; rather, the “senses” themselves become the source of knowledge.

This emphasis upon sensory experience in the natural world prevents Pater from fully adopting a Hegelian notion of aesthetic autonomy, and ultimately commits him to a materially deterministic view of the world. Hegel narrates a process by which the self-sufficiency of the work of art grounds the self-sufficiency of the individual: the subject allows the work of art “to subsist as an object, free and independent, and enters into a relation with it apart from desire” (41). This kind of relation is crucial because it enables the escape from a world which is simply a mass of sensuous particulars, in which one has an only “appetitive relation” (41) to physical things. Prior to aesthetic experience, that is, the subject is “entangled in the particular limited and valueless interests of his desires, is neither free in himself... nor free in his relation to the outer world” (41). But where Hegel imagines art as the way to subjective freedom, this is precisely the path that Pater blocks. In the final paragraph of the Winckelmann essay, Pater likewise relates art to our experience of modernity, imagining that it serves a similarly reflexive function: “what modern art has to do... is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom” (184).<sup>28</sup> But Pater is not optimistic that art can successfully ground subjective freedom in the way that Hegel imagines; at best, it seems, art offers the possibility of an ironic distance from unfreedom. Pater writes that “natural laws we shall never modify, embarrass us as they may; but there is still something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch their fatal combinations... who, if he saw through all, would fret against the chain of circumstance which endows one at the end with those great experiences?” (185). This is decidedly less optimistic: our natural determination is so complete that the best we can do is recognize that it is pointless to worry about it.

Surprisingly, then, in the very moment when Hegel’s aesthetics would seem to offer Pater the justification for claiming autonomy for art—and this Hegelian understanding of the “sphere of art” (60) as a separate domain is often thought of as one of the philosophical touchstones of aestheticism<sup>29</sup>—Pater actually shuts down the possibility that the autonomy of the work of art extends to the individual who encounters it.<sup>30</sup> Pater’s arrival at this conclusion, which reinscribes the subject in a “magic web woven through and through us... penetrating us with a network” (185), has partly to do with his interpretation of the Hegelian concept of “sensuousness” as literal materiality. In the *Aesthetics* Hegel is careful to point out the difference between literal sensuousness and its semblance, writing, “though the sensuous must be present in a work of art, yet it must only appear as surface and *semblance* of the sensuousness” (43). Hegel argues that “sensuousness” falls somewhere between the “concrete framework of matter” and “the universal

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<sup>28</sup> In a review elsewhere, Pater suggests whence this need arises, noting that, “like a creature of the nineteenth century, [Serenus] finds the world absolutely subject to the reign of physical law” (“M. Lemaitre’s ‘Serenus, and Other Tales,’ *Sketches and Reviews* 41).

<sup>29</sup> This is the premise of Iser’s book on Pater, whose German subtitle is “die Autonomie des Ästhetischen.”

<sup>30</sup> Dale argues that Pater’s departure from Hegel comes in his disavowal of “Hegel’s idealist and progressivist preoccupation with the Mind’s irreversible march toward some spiritual Absolute.... [Pater] treats the Hellenic ideal as, *mutatis mutandis*, a recurring tradition in the history of art” (243). Child suggests that Pater does, in fact, hold that contemporary art (rather than, as Hegel argues, philosophy) offers a sense of freedom: “Hegel holds that modern life is turning to philosophy rather than art.... Pater on the contrary, believes that the nineteenth-century arts of music and poetry, particularly the latter, are achieving a union of classicism and romanticism which makes them triumphant expressions of modern life” (62).

and merely ideal thought” (43). The role of art’s sensuousness is to allow the mind to interact both physically and abstractly with a material thing while neither consuming it nor replacing it with “universal thought and notion” (43). Although this might at first sound quite similar to Pater’s own view that the natural world can be an unmediated source of thought—as the means by which one thinks without relying on *a priori* philosophizing, Pater fails to recognize the semblance-quality of “sensuousness” in Hegel’s argument and makes no distinction between the term and the mere “concrete framework of matter” (43). Hence, in the final sentences of the “Winckelmann” essay, Pater returns to a model of subjectivity whereby our consciousness is fully mediated by nature; our subjection to necessity is a result of the “magic web... like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world” (185).<sup>31</sup> For Hegel (as well as for Kant) what is significant about the work of art is the way it is different from things that offer mere physical gratification, and yet is nonetheless somehow satisfying. Eliding this difference leaves Pater’s subject in the exact world of pure materiality from which the Hegelian work of art promises to free him.

One could call this a misreading, but it is in fact a telling illustration of how Pater is using German aesthetic philosophy. In the “Winckelmann” essay, Pater is committed to giving prominence to the sensory aspect of aesthetic experience because it allows for a bridge between sensation and thought that does not depend upon *a priori* analysis, or scientific generalization. And yet, this prominence leads also to an understanding of subjectivity as highly influenced and mediated—even controlled—by the material world; so much so that we are invisibly, magnetically, subject to “the central forces of the world” (185). The problem that Pater thus sets up for himself draws from aesthetic philosophy two related questions about the subject: how do we move from material particulars to abstraction, and how is consciousness reflected in or produced by material things? Pater’s “interpretation” of Hegel leads him not so much to a theory of the work of art as to a theory of the subject who experiences it; the essay is not so much about the art of antiquity as about nature of the individual able to understand it. What is at stake for Pater is not purely the delineation of an aesthetic realm separate from and higher than “actual life” but rather the very tension between aesthetic autonomy and the sense that subjects are fully, materially determined.

### The Tyranny of the Senses

What is surprising about the work of art in “Winckelmann” is precisely how *little* “freedom” it offers. If Hegel implicitly promises that aesthetic autonomy provides the key for verifying our autonomy as individuals, Pater leaves us at several removes from both. “Character” as Pater defines it, is not something we fashion but rather the mode in which outside forces fashion us: Winckelmann, Pater writes, “is characterless, so far as *character* involves subjection to the accidental influences of life” (175, emphasis Pater’s). Two things are interesting here: of course Pater’s prescient link between subjection and subjectivity is striking, but even more so is

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<sup>31</sup> Dale treats this as Pater’s version of the Victorian belief that “art must have a moral function.... The way it satisfies the spirit is to give it a ‘sense of Freedom’.... When Pater speaks thus of art’s giving us a sense of freedom....he is talking about the same moral effect that Marius experiences in the face of Cornelius’ Christianity”—that is, the experience of transcending the mechanical world of natural law through a “great spiritual construct” of any sort (239).



the idea of “characterlessness.” Pater suggests that full freedom from influence would generate lack rather than a positively self-contained individual; freedom from subjection is actually self-loss. That this might be a subtle repurposing of Hegel’s narrative of aesthetic experience—which concludes differently, with the fully independent individual—is corroborated by Pater’s suggestion that the artwork promises only to allow us to see the ways in which our identities are formed rather than to escape that process of formation. After noting that our awareness of “the universality of natural law” (184) leads to the recognition that we are fatally bound by a “chain of circumstance” which it is useless and, in fact, impossible, to resist, Pater describes forms of art that might serve as “at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom” (185). This is a redefinition of Hegel’s terms as clever as Pater’s famous redefinition of Arnold’s in the “Conclusion”—art does not offer “freedom” itself, or, for that matter, even a “sense of freedom,” but, doubly removed, an “equivalent” for that sense.

If this seems like a significant lowering of expectations from a late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth discourse of aesthetic freedom, it’s worth exploring what Pater might actually mean by being “penetrated...with a network,” submitting to “fatal combinations,” and being caught in a “chain of circumstance” (185). In his later essays and fiction, Pater not only softens this determinism; he also explores the possibility that the awareness of heteronomous determination might not lead exclusively to pessimistic defeatism. In “The Child in the House,” Pater describes aesthetic experience as the submission to outside influence, rather than as the escape from it, and thereby imagines aesthetic experience as the very “subjection” that forms character. The story is actually quite openly a reflection upon the process of subject-formation—a fact which explains why the “portrait” eschews narrative conventions for a more static description of an individual. The narrator tells us that after dreaming of his childhood home, Florian Deleal begins “a certain design he then had in view, the noting, namely, of some things in the story of his spirit—in that process of brain-building by which we are, each one of us, what we are” (*Miscellaneous Studies* 148). At the core of Pater’s most characteristic genre (it is hard to name a single fictional work by Pater whose governing principle is not the careful description of an individual rather than storytelling) is the explanation of “character” itself as material mediatedness.

As Florian Deleal thinks about his childhood, he notes how certain physical objects have determined qualities of his character that one generally thinks of as “inward” or psychological: upon reflection, Florian discovers that what seemed to be a personal characteristic is actually nothing more than the aftereffect of an impression. So, for example, the narrator accounts for Florian’s “apprehensions of the tenderness and of the colour in things” (156) by telling a story of his sister’s eagerly-awaited return from the forest with a basket of acorns. These experiences can also be—in fact more often are—painful; Florian’s formative experiences also include an encounter with a child’s grave (which gives him “the certainty that even children do sometimes die, the physical horror of death” (164)) and the brief return to his empty childhood home (which creates a nostalgic “clinging back towards it...so intense that he knew it would last long, and spoil[] all his pleasure” (168) in his anticipation of the future).

Although this may sound like a purely associational psychology—Pater notes of Florian’s childhood neighborhood that “like aspects and incidents never failed to throw him into a well-recognized imaginative mood” (151)—Pater is actually trying to make a stronger argument for the interpenetration of material and psychological. The phrase “brain-building” itself suggests that Florian is not just associating objects and sensations or events and feelings, but that there is no “Florian” that exists prior to the association itself. Hence, Pater describes the relation between

subject and object as an ambiguous intermingling, “inward and outward being woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture” (148). Pater suggests that this “texture” becomes consciousness itself; when Florian “trac[es] back the threads of his complex spiritual habit” (150), he finds that the objects of his childhood “seem actually to have become a part of the texture of his mind” (151). Pater pushes the distinction between inward and outward to its breaking point; if it’s hard to imagine Winckelmann as somehow “characterless,” it’s equally difficult to know what it would mean for outward objects to “actually” become part of one’s mind.<sup>32</sup>

The effect of giving the “influence” of material objects so great a role in subject formation is that Pater arrives at a determinism quite similar to that which concludes the Winckelmann essay. In fact, “The Child in the House” repeats the image of “the great chain wherewith we are bound” (152) in order to explain the effects that the objects encountered in childhood have upon us. Pater’s language implies an irreversible inevitability in the way that material objects shape our identity: “the realities...of the greater world without, steal in upon us, each by its own special little passage...and never afterwards quite detach themselves from this or that little accident...in the mode of their first entrance to us” (152). This process is as contingent as it is inevitable; Pater writes that Florian’s childhood had “determined” in him a “peculiarly strong sense of home” (153), and in general that “so powerful is this instinct, and yet accidents like those I have been speaking of so mechanically determine it...Out of so many possible conditions, just this for you and that for me” happens to decide what physical objects—a white curtain, a shaded lamp, a folding tent—will trip our feeling of nostalgia.<sup>33</sup> This determinism is produced by objects whose force is irresistible, and acts upon subjects whom Pater characterizes by their “susceptibility” and “resistlessness” (156). Pater coins the latter term to refer to both Marie Antoinette and corpses in a morgue; and, in an interesting doubling, we discover that Florian is susceptible to the susceptibility of his family: “Impressible, susceptible persons, indeed...lived about him, and this sensibility [i.e., Florian’s capacity for self-sacrifice] was due in part to the tacit influence of their presence” (157). The story describes a world where forces act “irresistibly” (152) upon “resistless” individuals; in describing Florian’s development, Pater imagines character itself as something inscribed “on the white paper, the smooth wax of our ingenious souls” (152).

And yet, countering the fatal resignation that such a situation might inspire, the story draws a connection between this extreme subjection to material influence and the capacity for

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<sup>32</sup> The most extended discussion of the mediatedness of Paterian subjectivity is “A Difference for the Sense” in Perry Meisel’s *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater*; Meisel writes that in the “Conclusion” “What Pater has in mind here is by no means a nonexistent self..., but rather a virtual and tentative self composed of the same stuff as the world from which it is apparently so completely separated” (113). Ultimately, however, Meisel returns the material aspect of personality’s mediation to a purely textual level: “For Pater, self and world alike are present only as a matrix of differential and commonly held languages...—into which the subject emerges at his birth, and within which he constellates his peculiar temperament or identity by means of the choices he makes (or that make him)... From this point of view, language actually produces the world” (122). While Meisel’s chapter is interesting for its acknowledgment that Paterian subjectivity is not purely solipsistic, dissolving his solipsism by equating Pater’s work with postmodern textual play overlooks the extent of his engagement with scientific materialism, which I discuss later in the chapter.

<sup>33</sup> In his essay on Rossetti, written five years later, Pater tries to strike a balance between the deterministic nature of objects and one’s ability to craft or change them: Pater describes “the dwelling-place in which one finds oneself by chance or destiny, yet can partly fashion for oneself; never properly one’s own at all, if it be changed too lightly; in which every object has its associations” (*Appreciations* 214).

aesthetic experience. Where “Winckelmann” asks whether art might offer an “equivalent” for the feeling of freedom, “The Child in the House,” appears to do precisely the opposite: beauty does not loose the “chain of circumstance” but ratchets it even tighter. In “The Child in the House,” Pater reiterates a comment he makes in the Winckelmann essay; there, Pater acknowledges that “it is sometimes said that art is a means for escape from the ‘tyranny of the senses’” (176)<sup>34</sup> but argues that actually the artist “becomes more and more immersed in sense, until nothing which lacks an appeal to sense has interest for him. How could such a one ever again endure the greyness of the ideal or spiritual world?” (176). Returning to this idea in “The Child in the House,” Pater describes beautiful objects as exerting a sort of pleasurable tyranny over Florian. Pater notes that Florian recognizes a sensitivity developing during his childhood to “the visible, tangible, audible loveliness in things, as a very real and somewhat tyrannous element in them” (*Studies* 155), and later finds that he experiences an “at times seemingly exclusive, predominance in his interests, of beautiful physical things, a kind of tyranny of the senses over him” (160). For Florian, beauty demands a submission to the control of his sensory experience rather than allowing an escape from it.

Indeed, this is one of Pater’s favorite phrases: in *Gaston de Latour*, he refers to “the emphatic determination, the tyranny, of changing external and material circumstance” (101); in *Marius the Epicurean* to “the reality, the tyrannous reality, of things visible” (62); and in *Plato and Platonism*, Pater explains that Plato is concerned with “the sensible world, the apprehensions of the sensuous faculty” because “through the medium of the senses, lay the forces, which, in that inexplicable tyranny of one person over another, shaped the soul” (122–23). More than in these later works, however, the “tyranny” over Florian is specifically connected to beauty itself: upon encountering a beautiful red hawthorn, the “beauty of the thing struck home to him feverishly” and becomes an aesthetic reference point to which he compares “old Venetian masters or old Flemish tapestries” (159). Even when Florian “yield[s] himself easily to religious impressions” (165), it is not the doctrine of the church but the appearance of sacred objects that influences him: he “began to love, for their own sakes, church lights, holy days, all that belonged to the comely order of the sanctuary, the secrets of its white linen, and holy vessels...its hieratic purity and simplicity became the type of something he desired always to have about him in actual life” (166).<sup>35</sup> Pater’s understanding of the aesthetic thus appears to occupy two spaces at once. Even while he does not fully contradict the Hegelian possibility that art holds the possibility of freeing the subject from determination by the natural world, and even praises Goethe and Hugo for creating art that allows us to feel the (equivalent of the) semblance of freedom,<sup>36</sup> he describes aesthetic experience as the enjoyable subjection to the natural world.

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<sup>34</sup> Hill does not find the source of Pater’s quotation, but suggests its derivation from both Hegel and Schiller.

<sup>35</sup> T.S. Eliot quotes A.C. Benson’s criticism of similar passages in *Marius*: “instead of emphasizing the power of sympathy, the Christian conception of love...Marius is after all converted...more by its sensuous appeal, its liturgical solemnities; the element, that is to say, which Christianity has in common with all religions” (“Arnold and Pater” 403).

<sup>36</sup> Pater’s revisions to “Winckelmann” and his later essays suggest that he was actively looking for works that reflected this sort of freedom; after publishing “Winckelmann” in *The Westminster Review*, he replaced “Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften* is a high example of modern art dealing thus with modern life” with “in Goethe’s romances, and even more in the romances of Victor Hugo, we have high examples...” (*Renaissance* 185, 271, my emphasis); Shakespeare, on the other hand, inspires instead “a strong sense of the tyranny of nature and circumstance over human action” (“Measure for Measure,” *Appreciations* 179–180).

This is not the only tension within the story that is created by Pater's contradictory understanding of aesthetic experience, which extends beyond these particularly overpowering moments to an interrogation of the concept of "autonomy" more broadly. By analyzing the way in which "inwardness" relates to "outwardness," Pater engages a problem in aesthetic philosophy that has to do with more than pleasurable sensation or formal perfection; it has to do even before that with the relation between affect and subjectivity, between the encounter with a physical object and one's sense of self. Hegel's discussion of the "freedom" that we discover by interacting with the work of art is only one example of this problematic: a central question in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics is how the work of art creates the possibility for a connection between subjectivity and objectivity, between the inwardness of thought and materiality of things. If we think about Pater's emphasis on sensory experience in "The Child in the House in this regard—and Pater's own borrowing from Hegel suggests that it is not unreasonable to do so—then we can think of the "aesthetic" aspect of the story not only as Florian's direct encounters with beautiful objects, or even as his heightened attention to all of his senses (the Greek or Baumgartenian understanding of *aesthesis*), but also as its very interrogation of those moments in which Florian's autonomy comes into contact with or is compromised by material influences.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, even though critics such as Diana Maltz analyze Florian purely in terms of his susceptibility—he is nothing more than "blank wax" upon which impressions are made—the narrative actually repeatedly stages tensions between Florian's susceptibility and his sense of an autonomous self.<sup>38</sup> Pater describes Florian's soul as "being one with the quiet of its home, a place 'inclosed' and 'sealed.' But upon this assured place, upon the child's assured soul which resembled it, there came floating in from the larger world without, as at windows left ajar unknowingly...two streams of impressions" (155). Where the story earlier suggests that subjectivity is produced purely through the submission to influence, Pater here implies that there is an isolated self prior to experience, whose autonomy is compromised by "impressions." Later in the story, Pater again suggests a distinct division between "self" and "world" that is in danger of being eroded when Florian "[feels] this pressure upon him of the sensible world" (162). Pater even suggests that Florian's susceptibility may not be purely the result of his similarly susceptible family, but rather something inborn: "such impressions...had been suggested spontaneously in the natural course of his mental growth by a strong innate sense for the soberer tones in things" (165).<sup>39</sup> Although the story seems to be the illustration par excellence of Paterian

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Freedman has recognized this contradictory tension as broadly characteristic of aestheticism: "British aestheticism...is the desire to embrace contradictions, indeed the desire to seek them out the better to play with the possibilities they afford" (6). And yet, Freedman does not see this contradictoriness as characteristic of aestheticism's aesthetics, arguing later that "The word ['aesthetic'] was originally used by Alexander Baumgarten...to designate the perfection of the act of perception...and it is in this sense, I think, that Pater, Rossetti, Swinburne, Wilde, et al. may be understood as fundamentally aesthetic in orientation" (6)

<sup>38</sup> In *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes*, Diana Maltz writes that Florian is Pater's "model of aesthetic absorption...by nature withdrawn and introspective"; Maltz suggests that in "The Child in the House" Pater "emphasized that one could live an aesthetic life apart from social engagement of any kind, let alone social activism" (10).

<sup>39</sup> Pater's description of childhood is yet another moment in which he implies a preexistent self: while adults appreciate beauty through the lens of "choiceness" or rarity, children have originally their own "inward" (150) sense of taste uninfluenced by cultural norms: "the child finds for itself, and with unstinted delight, a difference for the sense, in those whites and reds through the smoke on very homely buildings...in the lack of better ministries to its

impressionism, Florian is not as “resistless” as Marie Antoinette: after being overcome by the beauty of the hawthorn bush, Florian does not revel in his aesthetic sensitivity; instead, the excitement is something that “disturbed him, and from which he half longed to be free” (159). He even wants to reverse the direction of the impression, experiencing “the longing for some undivided, entire possession of them” (159). The story is less about Florian’s tendency to “yield” to aesthetic impressions and more about the tension *between* “brain-building” and “yielding”; almost every time Florian notes his susceptibility to some impression, he also implies or describes the desire to be free from or to control it. “The Child in the House” is not only about the ways in which aesthetic experience shape character; it is about the way aesthetic experience produces a confrontation with the boundaries of subjective autonomy.

Characterizing the “aesthetics” of Pater’s aestheticism as the negotiation of autonomy in both its artistic and subjective senses is an approach that is at once more broad and more specific. On the one hand, it allows us to find an “aestheticism” in many aspects of Pater’s writing that do not directly treat art or sensation—any time that Pater is investigating the process of subject formation is potentially a moment we could label “aestheticist.” But it also makes possible a description of “aestheticism” more rigorous than vague references to “form” or “beauty” or “sensation”; we can say rather precisely what it *is* about form and beauty and sensation that are, for Pater “aesthetic.” This opens up possibilities for interpretation even within “The Child in the House” itself: we can locate Pater’s aestheticism not only in the story’s impressionist narrative, but also in its formal problematics.

The fact that nothing really happens in “The Child in the House”—that it seems so obviously to be a static, painterly portrait—masks the fact that the story is formally quite complicated. It is surprisingly difficult to figure out who, exactly, is telling the story. Eroding boundaries between author, narrator, and character, the story resists the ease with which we generally separate author and narrator. On the one hand, this distinction seems relatively stable: Pater writes a narrator who describes Florian’s experience. And yet, from the moment it was published, the story has been read as autobiographical—“Florian” is really nothing more than code for “Pater.”<sup>40</sup> This formal difficulty multiplies itself: if it’s hard to tell the difference between Florian and Pater, it’s even harder to tell the difference between the narrator and Florian. The story is not just narrated from Florian’s “point of view”; its content is nothing more than how that point of view came to exist in the first place. When one goes a step further and asks how Florian can step outside his highly mediated and susceptible self to see what mediates and influences it, the somewhat dull story begins to seem dizzyingly postmodern.<sup>41</sup>

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desire of beauty” (150). Pater thus suggests that prior to outside influence there already exists in children a sort of “innate” sensibility.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald Monsman’s three books on Pater all argue that Pater’s work is essentially autobiographical and attempt to reconstruct Pater’s experience and psychology (despite his claim in *Pater’s Portraits* that “neither do I wish to analyze Pater’s psychological makeup”—directly after which he writes that “there is little evidence to indicate abnormality. Pater’s...noted celibacy was of the monastic kind, for he was in Joyce’s words, ‘priest of eternal imagination’ and would take for his mistresses none but the Ausonian sisters” (xv)). In *Walter Pater’s Art of Autobiography*, Monsman writes that “The Child in the House” “seems inescapably a retrospective account in which Pater and his hero Florian share a common identity”; in *Walter Pater*, he writes that “the portrait idealizes Pater’s childhood” and refers to the protagonist as “Pater-Florian” (75).

<sup>41</sup> Williams calls this the “specular structure” of the narration: the transference between the third-person narrator and Florian “suggests that the boundaries between ‘Florian’ and the narrator are obscure. The titular ‘child in the house’ seems to refer simultaneously to the young Florian and to an earlier state of the narrator” (190).

What does this have to do with the definition of aestheticism that I have been constructing? Through this narrative voice, Pater negotiates complicated problems of self-representation, experimenting with ways of drawing boundaries between himself and a narrator (the “I” who is Pater and the “I” who is not) as well as between himself and a character (the “Florian” who is Pater and the “Florian” who is not). This interplay of narrating voices addresses the problem that Pater inherits from Hegel in the closing paragraph of “Winckelmann”: what kind of literature is able to reflect back to us the modes of mediation that condition modern subjectivity? Although this negotiation between character and author and subject is not on the surface something we might think of as “aestheticist”—especially compared to the colorful narrative of Florian’s sensualism—its attempt to interrogate the author’s separation from his own work, to understand the difference between person and character, addresses problems central to the tradition of aesthetic theory which grounds Pater’s aestheticism. What is important about the text is not only its content—Florian’s behavior and experience—but also the layered representation of selfhood that the text formally exhibits. It is in this sense, I would argue, that we might look for an aestheticism of form: form that has to do not with, say, Florian’s appreciation of religious ritual for its own sake, but rather with the ways in which the formal aspects of texts confront issues—in particular, the attempt to delimit the boundaries of subjectivity—crucial within philosophical aesthetics. “The Child in the House” is emblematic. The central texts of aestheticism confront this problem both through direct, thematic investigations of selfhood and subject formation, and through implicit, formal challenges to the idea of a unified narrating voice.

### *Marius the Epicurean*

The formal investigation of the self in “The Child in the House” becomes the central problem of Pater’s 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*. If Florian spends only an afternoon ruminating about the origins of his identity, Marius devotes his entire life to the question; for a good four hundred pages he does little more than think about himself. Although the novel is generally seen as an open defense against the charge of aestheticist hedonism, this self-contemplation is actually a significant reworking of Pater’s early aestheticism; not just a simple defense that Pater never really meant for his readers to act like French decadents. Pater himself is responsible for the fact that the novel is generally read as a defense against the charges of hedonism. In the third edition of *The Renaissance*, Pater’s footnote to the “Conclusion” directed readers to the novel: “I have dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested by [the ‘Conclusion’]” (186). To “deal more fully,” however, is not necessarily to deal more finally, and the mode of Pater’s dealings with the “thoughts suggested by” the “Conclusion”—as well as what those “thoughts” even might be—is a question that has remained open to debate. The most obvious similarities between *Marius* and *The Renaissance* are in two early chapters—“Animula Vagula” and “New Cyrenaicism”—which directly recapitulate the language of the “Conclusion.” Pater’s reference in *Marius* to our capacity to “imag[e] forth... a world of firmly outlined objects,” to the “swift passage of things” as “the burning of the divine fire... like a devouring flame” (109), and to “the closely shut cell of one’s own personality” (117) borrow directly from the most memorable—and the reviewers’ favorite—passages of the “Conclusion.” There, Pater writes that the “outline of face and limb is but an image of ours” (187), that to “pass swiftly from point to point” is “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame” (189), and that perhaps we are each surrounded by a “thick wall of personality” (187).

Virtually every metaphor of significance in the “Conclusion” resurfaces in these two chapters of *Marius*. One new word is particularly noteworthy; the narrator defends Marius’s philosophy of life from the critique that it is merely a “hedonism,” arguing that it is “not pleasure, but fullness of life, and ‘insight’” (120) toward which Marius strives.<sup>42</sup> Pater, it seems, uses *Marius* to communicate that he never really meant that his readers ought to abandon themselves to whatever activities they find most gratifying.

And yet, the rest of the novel offers a host of other possible conclusions about the “Conclusion.” If we take Pater’s reference to “thoughts suggested by” the “Conclusion” to include later fiction such as “The Child in the House,” and even earlier essays such as “Winckelmann,” we can see a much wider range of ways in which the novel is attempting to reconfigure the terms of Pater’s early aestheticism (insofar as it is conceived in the way I have been arguing). The novel is much more than a defense against the charge of hedonism. It engages the problem of whether it is possible (as Pater says in “Winckelmann”) to “mould our lives to artistic perfection” or whether our lives are passively “moulded” by forces entirely external (as Pater suggests in “The Child in the House”). It confronts formally, as does the narrative voice in “Child,” the question of how character and narration are distinguishable; as well as generically, the question of whether the novel itself can avoid mediation by other forms. And—in passages that have mostly escaped critical attention—it suggests that the exploration of how individual autonomy is shaped by aesthetic experience bears a relation to how the Roman city and empire defend against the infiltration of “barbarian” and “Germanic” forces.

I would like to return briefly to the description of the drowning swimmer that Pater excluded from “Poems by William Morris” when republishing it as the “Conclusion”: Pater’s description of a drowning individual—“struggling, as he must, to save himself, it is himself that he loses at every moment”—is an apt metaphor for Marius, whose trajectory through the novel oscillates between the attempt to shore up his own philosophy—or “theory of practice”—against external influence and the suspicion that his theory is nothing more than the manifestation of intellectual currents that extend far beyond him. Much of *Marius the Epicurean* has to do with the conflict between a language of self-possession and a wide range of other languages that seem to overtake or inhabit Marius: even as Marius struggles to affirm his autonomous individuality, the novel reveals that Marius is often nothing more than a conduit. This becomes particularly clear in Marius’s linguistic endeavors: although Marius aspires to be a rhetorician or poet—a producer of language—he in fact only becomes Marcus Aurelius’s amanuensis. In “New Cyrenaicism,” the narrator notes the correspondence between the ancient rhetorician and the modern “public lecturer or essayist; in some case adding to his other gifts that of the Christian preacher, who knows how to touch people’s sensibilities” (121). Marius imagines for himself a role in which he would be the agent of influence upon his audience, hoping to “arrest, for others also, certain clauses of experience, as the imaginative memory presented them to himself!” (121). Earlier, Pater describes Marius’s “poetic apprehension” as a “singularly virile consciousness” that “united already with something of personal ambition and the instinct of self-assertion” and

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<sup>42</sup> Diana Maltz overlooks this fact when she states in her discussion of *Marius* that “Despite Pater’s intentions to use *Marius* as an apologia for the alleged hedonism of the “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean* reads as an essay in the aesthetic precepts Pater had introduced there” (161). To treat the novel simply as a documentation of “the particular personality which Pater had previously assigned to the Renaissance” (161) overlooks a body of scholarship investigating the precise nature of the connection between the two books.

“propos[ed] to him unlimited self-expansion in a world of various sunshine” (60). The spiritual “touching” of the rhetorician is here instead figured as a “virility” that does not so much sympathize with an audience as overpower it through “assertion.”

This language of self-possession and self-expansion permeates the rest of the novel, if less explicitly (and less colorfully).<sup>43</sup> Most significantly, Marius uses the language of will and possession to describe his philosophy, which he intentionally crafts for himself. Early in the novel, Marius pursues an understanding of “that strange, enigmatic, personal essence” (107) which characterizes individuality in a way that isolates him from his peers: “His former gay companions...noting the graver lines coming into the face of the...student of intellectual structure, who could hold his own so well in the society of accomplished older men, were half afraid of him... Why this reserve? —they asked, concerning the orderly, self-possessed youth” (107). Marius simultaneously tries to understand the “self” as something essential, and isolates himself from his former companions through “fear” and his older companions through his ability to “hold his own.” What Marius “holds” is his “carefully considered...theory of practice” (119). Disturbed by Marcus Aurelius’s Stoic ability to watch bloody sport unperturbed, Marius strives for an “adjustment between his own elaborately thought-out intellectual scheme and the ‘old morality’” (176). Indeed, the major shifts in the novel can be mapped onto Marius’s intentional reconsiderations and readjustments: from pagan religion to Cyrenaicism in Part I; from Cyrenaicism to Stoicism in Part II; from Stoicism to mysticism in Part III; and from mysticism to Christianity in Part IV. The shifts are not wholesale disavowals, but rather modifications to a “scheme” that becomes ever more elaborate as the novel continues. Marius articulates the agency behind this process most explicitly when he remembers Aurelius’s lesson: “‘tis in thy power to think as thou wilt:’ he repeated to himself: it was the most serviceable of all the lessons enforced on him by those imperial *conversations*.—‘Tis in thy power to think as thou wilt’” (208, emphasis Pater’s). The intellectual model of *Marius* is one in the originality of thought manifests control over the self.

And yet, a strange contradiction is built into Marius’s memory of Aurelius’s mantra. If it is actually in Marius’s power to “think as he wilt,” then how is it that this is a “lesson enforced on him” by Aurelius? The phrase suggests that Marius is not thinking as he “wilt,” but rather as Aurelius does: even in his contemplative isolation, Marius is not alone. If on the one hand, Marius seems to be crafting for himself intentionally a “theory of practice,” on the other hand, he is just as much being spoken *through* by conversations and forms of writing. This reflective moment is emblematic of other events in the novel: despite Marius’s aspirations to poetic genius, he ultimately becomes Aurelius’s scribe, copying the language of another rather than producing his own. And even before coming to Rome, Marius transcribes the “poetic consciousness” of his childhood friend Flavian as the latter dies of the plague: “Flavian lay there...and would, at intervals, return to labour at his verses, with a great eagerness to complete and transcribe the work, while Marius sat and wrote at his dictation” (98). Flavian’s originality, not Marius’s own, spurs Marius’s pursuit of beauty; as Marius takes dictation, “the impression thus *forced upon Marius* connected itself with a feeling...prescient of the future.... It was as if he detected there the process of actual change to a wholly undreamed-of and renewed condition of human body and soul...Could it have been actually on a new musical instrument that Flavian had first heard

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of this language of self-possession in *Marius*, see Adams, 210–216. Adams connects Marius’s “self regulation” to a masculine “consciousness and executive will,” which is complicated by the “traditionally feminine position, in which textuality is inscribed in the body” (216).



the novel accents of his verse?” (99, emphasis mine). Marius passively transcribes poetry and receives impressions, while Flavian’s “novel” verse, inspired perhaps by a “new” musical instrument, heralds a “renewed” future. Marius does not originate the “new”; Pater repeatedly figures language as a “force” external to and powerful over Marius, not as a tool that Marius intentionally controls.<sup>44</sup>

Pater, least ironic of aesthetes, thus creates in the novel a disjuncture between what Marius thinks he has thought for himself and what has been thought in advance for him: as readers, we recognize that his “carefully considered...theory of practice” is not his at all. What prevents this dissonance from becoming fully ironic, however, is Marius’s eventual realization that his personal theories and even his identity are actually highly mediated. Much like “The Child in the House,” *Marius the Epicurean* interrogates the extent to which one is produced by the influx of sensations and ideas, and the extent to which one comes to experience already with an innate self, or personal “essence,” that intentionally directs the course of experience. Hence, even while Marius believes he is crafting his own theories, outside forces obviously exert their influences. These forces come not only from Flavian, whose “intellectual power...began its sway over him” until “his dominion was entire” (64); but also from the “golden book,” which both Marius and Flavian read, “feeling its fascination” as well as its sense of “the *macabre*—that species of almost insane preoccupation with the materialities of our mouldering flesh” (70). Later in the novel, Marius’s companion Cornelius exerts a similar influence: “again, as in his early days with Flavian, a vivid personal presence broke through the dreamy idealism...yet not without some sense of a constraining tyranny over him from without” (130). By the end of the novel, Marius’s passivity toward new philosophies is literalized as he lies on his deathbed: “In the moments of his extreme helplessness [the Christians’] mystic bread had been placed, had descended like a snow-flake from the sky, between his lips” (296). This passage, incidentally, remains a source of controversy between those who believe it reflects Marius’s (and perhaps Pater’s) conversion, and those who do not.<sup>45</sup> Such a question is significant only because its unanswerability speaks to the novel’s unwillingness to say definitively whether Marius is thinking or being thought for.<sup>46</sup>

The chapter “Animula Vagula” confronts this tension head-on as Marius begins to transition from hieratic paganism to scientific materialism. At the opening of the chapter, Marius denies that there is a “wandering spirit” that separates from the soul at death (the title comes from a poem by Hadrian that suggests that it does<sup>47</sup>), and concludes that the death of his friend

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<sup>44</sup> Williams discusses Marius’s position as a scribe as a manifestation of his more general passivity; see Williams, 180.

<sup>45</sup> Gerald Monsman is particularly invested in this question, arguing in one paragraph that Marius’s “sight of Christian worship is itself a religious awakening of the soul” (*Walter Pater* 101)—even though “Pater’s readers often deny that Marius ever reaches a state of grace” (101)—and in the next that “Everyone who knew Pater well has testified to the evident *rapprochement* with Christianity that took place in his thought” (102).

<sup>46</sup> The most extensive discussion of this tension between Marius as a mediated and autonomous subject is in Freedman, 38–41: Freedman writes that “*Marius* extends the aestheticist concern with the experience of otherness... it understands that this experience is essentially a dialectical one—that the self itself is molded through its experiences of significant others.... In the final analysis, [Pater] suggests, the self formed through its experience of others is essentially unstable” (38).

<sup>47</sup> “Animula, vagula, blandula / Hospes comesque corporis, / Quae nunc abibis in loca? / Pallidula, rigida, nudula” (105) (Translated in Levey’s notes to the novel as: “‘Little soul, wandering, charming, the body’s guest and companion, where will you now go, pale, stiff and naked.’ Aelius Spartianus, *Hadrian*, XXV” (304).

Flavian is final. As Marius begins to read Roman natural philosophers, he meditates on the way in which Aristippus of Cyrene is able to convert the apparently pessimistic doctrines of materialism into an optimistic philosophy: “the influence of the philosopher of pleasure depended on this, that in him an abstract doctrine, originally somewhat acrid, had fallen upon a rich and genial nature, well fitted to transform it into a theory of practice.... What Marius saw in him was the spectacle of one of the happiest temperaments coming...to an understanding with the most depressing of theories” (112). This description—which suggests that Aristippus’s “rich and genial nature” rather than a conscious decision determines his interpretation of ancient materialism—places in tension an intentionally formulated “theory of practice” on the one hand and the submission to “influence” on the other. The moment is characteristic of Pater’s attempt to balance the two possibilities; Pater continues by suggesting that what appears to be susceptibility to intellectual influence can actually be a form of intentionality: “in the reception of metaphysical *formulae*, all depends, as regards their...result, on the pre-existent qualities of that soil of human nature into which they fall...the reception of this or that speculative conclusion is really a matter of will” (112). On the one hand, our capacity for interpretation depends upon personal qualities not under our control; on the other, we are able to intentionally “transform...into a theory of practice” the metaphysical ideas we encounter.

Pater’s reconciliation of these incompatible possibilities is anything but stable, and these pages of Marius undoubtedly represent a moment in which “it seems as if the most opposite statements...were alike true” (*Studies* 155). Pater mediates this opposition by suggesting that the susceptibility to shaping influences is something that we must intentionally cultivate. We are not naturally the “smooth wax” upon which impressions are made, but rather must attempt to become “absolutely virgin towards...experience, by ridding ourselves of...abstractions...to neutralize the distorting influence of metaphysical system” (114). Pater thus folds into one another two narratives of individuality. On the one hand, he describes a person whose ethical project is the shaping of his own identity: the crafting of the self into a virgin entity, or as Pater also puts it, into “one complex medium of reception” (115). On the other hand, this receptivity itself is supposedly what is shaping the subject into who he or she is, and so ought to be beyond control. The effect of this combination of self-formation and receptivity is to circumscribe the realm in which material influence operates: one may very well be overcome, say, by the stunning blueness of a fjord, but that is only because of a prior, conscious decision to allow oneself such an experience. This uneasy balance allows Pater to describe subjectivity as materially mediated without adopting a fully determinist view of will.<sup>48</sup>

“Metaphysics” serves a double purpose in these reflections: philosophy is not only the force whose power over individuals Pater attempts to mitigate; it is also the very means of this mitigation. Metaphysics, by turning against itself, can dissolve these problems that it creates: Marius observes, “abstract theory was to be valued only just so far as it might serve to clear the tablet of the mind from suppositions no more than half realizable, or wholly visionary, leaving it in flawless evenness of surface to the impressions of an experience, concrete and direct” (114). What Pater figures in his earlier work as a contaminating influence—external systems of thought which “adulterate” the diaphanous character or “infiltrate” the child’s autonomy—are here refigured. Theory, it turns out, can eliminate flaws as well as produce them, clear tablets as well

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<sup>48</sup> This also explains a paradox that Adams discovers: “The paradox of a self-effacing portrait is precisely the reward to which Pater’s aesthetic critic aspires. That self-effacement is the culmination of Pater’s various narratives of education” (224–225).

as inscribe wax. This is because of a sort of “suicide...by which a great metaphysical *acumen* was devoted to the function of proving metaphysical speculation impossible” (114); one can “neutralize the distorting influence of metaphysical system by an all-accomplished metaphysic skill” (115).<sup>49</sup> This is a neat solution to some of the novel’s tensions, but it leaves open the question of why “flawless evenness,” “neutrality,” and the independence from influence are now privileged over their counterparts. In contrast to “The Child in the House,” which links the fatal “chain” to the pleasurable aesthetic experience, in *Marius* “liberty of soul, freedom from all partial and misrepresentative doctrine...freedom from all embarrassment alike of regret for the past and calculation on the future” (115) are an attractive doctrine.

The complications for Marius’s sense of individuality are manifold. The novel asks whether thought is private, or whether its apparent privacy simply masks the “distorting influence” of philosophy. Deciding that the latter is probably the case, it attempts to recontain that influence by arguing that susceptibility is itself a capacity over which we exert some control. But even this conclusion turns out to be only provisional; Marius later feels that “his bodily frame...in the whole sum of its capacities, so entirely possessed by him—nay! Actually his very self—was yet determined by a far-reaching system of material forces external to it, a thousand combining currents from earth and sky. Its seemingly active powers of apprehension were, in fact, but susceptibilities to influence” (211). As the novel churns through its attempts to construct an isolated individual and its recognitions that individuality is inevitably mediated, it enacts formally the very instability that Marius himself experiences. The apparently conclusive statements it makes about Marius’s character ultimately turn out to be nothing more than examples of this or that philosophical way of describing the self; we experience the dynamic that produces Marius’s individuality not only through the narrative, but also through the novel’s rhythmic construction and erosion of its own means for representing Marius. Its narrative voice is unstable because, like the narrator of “The Child in the House,” it fails to offer reliable distinctions between the narrator, Pater, and Marius; this instability is further complicated by the fact that, unlike “The Child in the House,” *Marius*’s conclusions about individuality are themselves always only provisional.

This question about Marius—is his intellectual vision free and self-possessed, or is “Marius” simply the name for the concurrence of an extraordinary range of intellectual trends (paganism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Christianity, materialism)?—is therefore a question about *Marius* as well. The novel’s form is memorably characterized by T.S. Eliot as “incoherent; its method is a number of fresh starts; its content is a hodge-podge of the learning of the classical don, the impressions of the sensitive holiday visitor to Italy, and a prolonged flirtation with the liturgy” (402–403). (Eliot does give Pater credit for—unlike Matthew Arnold—at least owning up to his stoicism and Cyrenaicism.) Eliot’s statement is dismissive, but not necessarily incorrect—Marius drops out of some chapters almost entirely: “The Minor Peace of the Church” is a description of early Christianity; “A Conversation not Imaginary” is a dialogue between Lucian and a young friend; “The Golden Book” is a translation of “The Story of Cupid and Psyche.” In other chapters, such as “Animula Vagula” and “New Cyrenaicism,” we never escape Marius’s own thoughts, but this, in turn, is different from “Sunt Lacrimae Rerum,” which transcribes Marius’s diary—a mode of first-person narration we have not seen before and never

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<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, one might argue that this is precisely what the “Conclusion” performs, proposing two opposing models of subjectivity—mechanical and solipsistic—and, because the contradiction between the two seems irresolvable, throws the reader back into experience “independent” of philosophy.

see again.<sup>50</sup> These discrepancies are formal, but even on the level of the story itself, knowing what has occurred in a previous chapter, or even previously in the novel, is rarely necessary or even helpful. This phenomenon quite nearly forces one to take the stance of a Paterian aesthetic critic, focusing tightly upon particulars rather than substituting broad, general abstractions: the form of the novel makes it easier to narrow one's vision to the chapter, the sentence, the word rather than try to make sense of the whole.<sup>51</sup>

What if, however, the novel's very lack of consistency with itself is what makes it consistent with itself? The highly idiosyncratic form—Williams calls it “a veritable encyclopedia of genres” (225)—on the one hand combines a range of existing genres but on the other hand produces its own. At the same time the novel is a formal “amanuensis,” a transcription of literary forms, it also realizes Pater's attempts to construct his own, personal form. In 1883, Pater wrote to Violet Paget (who published as Vernon Lee) of his “hopes of completing one half of my present chief work—an Imaginary Portrait of a peculiar type of mind in the time of Marcus Aurelius” (Evans 79). Categorizing the novel as an “imaginary portrait” makes a claim for its originality; of the first such portrait, Pater wrote: “Child in the House: voilà, the germinating, original, source, specimen, of all my imaginative work” (xxix). On yet another level, the “imaginary portrait” is constitutively incomplete; in a letter to *Macmillan's* editor George Grove, Pater writes, “it is not, as you may perhaps fancy, the first part of a work of fiction, but is meant to be complete in itself; though the first of a series, as I hope, with some real kind of sequence in them, and which I should be glad to send to *you*. I call the M.S. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating—what came of him?” (30). Even though Pater imagines the portrait as a unique genre, it is not self-sufficient; the reader, after all, is left inconclusively wondering what happens next after reading what appears to be only a beginning. *Marius* is a particularly complicated version of this effect; much more than Pater's other literary experiments, it calls upon a wide range of existing genres rather than presenting itself as unique. Pater's aesthetic form thus manifests an aestheticist interest in negotiating questions about autonomy—not from a safe philosophical distance, but with a closeness that calls into question the novel's own self-sufficiency.

### ***Marius* as Political History**

When Marius repeats to himself Aurelius's injunction, “It is in thy power to think as thou wilt,” he claims for himself an intellectual autonomy that is absolute: Marius imagines that just as he can attend to a particular color or sound within a “whole tumultuous concourse of colour and sound” (209), his properly-tuned mind might similarly be able to intentionally disentangle itself from a tumult of competing philosophies. What follows Marius's “willing” is one of the strangest and most difficult moments in the novel. Marius has a vision of himself progressing through his journey—a proto-Christian sense of a “companionable spirit” (210)—and he thereby resolves, momentarily, the novel's structuring tension between “passive surrender” (211) to intellectual and physical influence, and active pursuit of sensations. Marius's imagined “divine

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<sup>50</sup> A.C. Benson suggests in 1907 that the strangeness of *Marius's* form might be avant-garde after a manner: “The style of it is absolutely distinctive and entirely new: the thing had never been done before; it is a revelation of the possibilities of poetical prose which the English language contains” (115); in a way, Benson may deserve credit as the first critic to note that there is something postmodern about Pater (see the final section of this chapter).

<sup>51</sup> Williams notes that “critics have sometimes missed its organization entirely because of the deeply textured surface of the narrative” (219).

companion” remembers all experiences; in his “more vigorous consciousness they might subsist forever, beyond that mere quickening of capacity which was all that remained of them in himself [i.e., Marius]” (212). As a result, even though Marius may simply be the site through which thought and material pass, that mediation is contained within the “*Great Ideal*” consciousness of a divine companion who stands outside the flux.

The “power to think as thou wilt” is thus given a privileged status in the novel, as the source of Marius’s most successful resolution of the problems with which he is confronted. The chapter title, “The Will as Vision,” suggests that this power is not only the source, but also the content of what Marius “sees.” Earlier in the novel this power is described as a form of political retreat rather than an all-encompassing solution. Tracing the political heritage of this privileged concept begins to reveal some of the connections that the novel is quietly constructing between Marius’s own sense of autonomy and Roman political sovereignty. Reading the manuscripts of Aurelius’s “conversations with himself,” Marius encounters the phrase for the first time, and its political, rather than religious, resonances are emphasized. The power to will thought constitutes at once an individual’s absolute sovereignty as well as a complete retreat from ethical and political demands. It is a radical form of interiority that, unlike virtually every other articulation of autonomy in the novel, is not susceptible to infiltration. Cornelius writes, “‘Men seek retirement in country houses. . . on the sea coast, on the mountains. . . . But there is little proof of culture therein; since the privilege is yours of retiring into yourself whensoever you please,—into that little farm of one’s own mind, where a silence so profound may be enjoyed.’ That it could make these retreats, was a plain consequence of the kingly prerogative of the mind, its dominion over circumstance, its inherent liberty.—‘It is in thy power to think as thou wilt’” (193). Pater imagines intellectual autonomy in “*Animula Vagula*” through the figure of a “flawless evenness of surface” and a “clear. . . tablet” (114) that open themselves to the “impressions of an experience”; here, however, the metaphor for intellectual autonomy is political “dominion” and “kingly prerogative.”

This self-sovereignty seems to be the only stable boundary constructed within the novel: Aurelius goes on to describe the way in which willing his own thought is the only way he can escape ethical, political, and religious obligations: as sovereign, he is beholden to his people; the sovereignty of his mind, by contrast, is beholden to nobody. And yet, at the very moment that the novel makes a claim for an absolute independence of the mind, divisions between the voices of the narrator, Marius, and Aurelius break down entirely. Pater writes: “How continually had public claims, the claims of other persons, with their rough angularities of character, broken in upon him, the shepherd of the flock. But after all he had at least this privilege he could not part with, of thinking as he would; and it was well, now and then, by a conscious effort of will to indulge it, for a while, under systematic direction” (194). The passage, which describes Aurelius’s private reflections, is spoken by the narrator as a description of what Marius is transcribing. While it might make sense as a moment of free indirect discourse, that interpretation is unsatisfying since Aurelius’s reflections are generally quoted directly—to say nothing of the fact that Aurelius is not, at this moment, present. This formal collapse of boundaries is all the more striking given the content of Aurelius’s reflections, which claim for thought the capacity to intentionally “retire into yourself,” to “make these retreats,” and to avoid the “breaking in” upon one of others’ claims. This “breaking,” however, is precisely what is occurring textually at this very moment: Aurelius’s “conversations with himself” are infiltrated by both Marius’s and the narrator’s voice.

The novel proposes a form of subjective interiority, or “retreat,” that turns out to be quite untenable, a problem that reappears in its reflections on intellectual and political sovereignty. *Marius* articulates anxieties about imperial self-government and independence that are as intense, if not as widespread, as its anxieties about Marius’s own capacity to maintain intellectual independence and self-possession. Two figures are crucial here: the “*City on high*” (193) and the embattled Roman empire. The novel describes the Roman empire not only, as is often noted, in the moment when Christianity is taking hold internally, but also when external military threats are becoming more serious. In fact, war is a subtext for Marius’s relation to virtually all of the characters who exert a significant influence upon him: Flavian dies from a plague that Lucius Verus has brought back from a campaign; Cornelius’s beauty is closely connected to the military attire he wears while heading to the provinces to defend imperial boundaries; Marcus Aurelius’s denial of worldly goods takes the form of selling the royal possessions to raise funds for war. The novel connects the impending threat of the barbarians with the dangerous susceptibilities of its leaders: “in fifty years of peace...war had come to seem a merely romantic, superannuated incident of bygone history. And now it was almost upon Italian soil. Terrible were the reports of the numbers and audacity of the assailants” (135). The populace worries that both Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus are insufficiently autonomous themselves: on the one hand, Aurelius’s “fragile person might be foreseen speedily giving way under the trials of military life” (135); on the other, the public has some “un-sentimental misgiving” (145) about Verus, who is an aesthete with “that more than womanly fondness for fond things which had made the atmosphere of the old city of Antioch...a poison to him” (144).

In contrast to these concerns about imperial integrity, the novel articulates a Stoic theory of the “ideal commonwealth”: here, political community is not bound by the walls of Rome or even the reaches of the empire. In a speech about the “New Rome,” Fronto argues that “the world is as it were a commonwealth, a city: and there are observances, customs, usages, actually current in it, things our friends and companions will expect of us, as the condition of our living there with them at all, as really their peers or fellow-citizens” (178). Here, political community takes the form not of an empire determined to maintain its boundaries, but quite the opposite, of a commonwealth that is boundless. And just as the Roman empire speaks the language of individual autonomy, the “supreme city” (179) or “*City on high*” (193) speaks the language of material mediation. Marius imagines this city: “it would be the fabric, the outward fabric, of a system reaching, certainly, far beyond the great city around him, even if conceived in all the machinery of its visible and invisible influences at their grandest” (179). The novel thus articulates on a political level two conceptions of community that have much to do with its theories of individuality: the empire whose boundaries must be defended against forces that (more and more successfully) might infiltrate it, and the “commonwealth” whose universality extends beyond any actual manifestation of community to include all individuals. Where the former resonates with the solipsistic consciousness of *The Renaissance*, the latter resonates with Marius’s reflections that he may be nothing more than the concurrence of forces within a system.

### **Ethical Materialism**

Just as the novel’s literal political theories depend upon its strategies for reconciling solipsism and determinism, its political implications within Victorian culture turn on Marius’s assertion that his “seemingly active powers of apprehension were, in fact, but susceptibilities to influence” (211). Indeed, the contentious aspect of Pater’s work has as much to do with his

proposal that individual agency is nothing more than the mask for wide-ranging susceptibilities as with his apparent hedonism. We tend to think of the latter part of the “Conclusion,” for example, as what made it controversial, as did Pater. When he thanked John Morley, editor at the time of the *Fortnightly Review*, for his “explanation of my ethical point of view, to which I fancy some readers have given a prominence I did not mean it to have” (Evans 14), he is not referring to the early expository paragraphs; Morley had defended the injunction to enjoy art for its own sake and to pursue enthusiastic activity as part of a broader creed that protested theological and political commonplaces. And yet, Morley’s defense, which Pater applauded, does not actually address what some reviewers found disturbing, which was not the “Conclusion”’s decadent aroma of anti-utilitarianism (which was bad enough); even worse was its materialist suggestion that human life is nothing more than the concurrence of elements and forces. Margaret Oliphant rebuked the “Conclusion” for what she called its “elegant materialism” (12), and a colleague wrote to Pater that he was disappointed by the suggestion that “probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite” (*Letters*, 20). These reviewers do not object to Pater’s hedonism in itself, but rather to his denial that there exists a higher, metaphysical realm. Pater becomes problematic for late Victorians in the very moment that he suggests that ethical behavior and scientific materialism are compatible with one another.

Less than a year after the publication of *The Renaissance*, John Tyndall delivered the controversial Belfast Address, whose similarities with Pater’s book are surprising. Tyndall is much more polemical. He splits intellectuals into two camps: irrational theologians who believe in a mysterious beyond, and rational scientists, who are proving the theorems of ancient materialist philosophers. Tyndall reminds his audience of the necessity of taking sides: “it is perfectly possible for you and me to purchase intellectual peace at the price of intellectual death. . . . But I would exhort you to refuse the offered shelter and to scorn the base repose” (xcvii). In other words, Christianity might be comforting, but it is a false comfort. The address validates the arguments of Lucretius, Heraclitus, and Epicurus, who had written that everything in the natural world is made up of tiny, indivisible atoms, and that it was not divine intervention (or even the atoms’ willpower), but rather pure “mechanical shock” (lxx) that caused their combination and separation into an infinite variety of forms: trees, rocks, animals—and people. Although Tyndall’s rhetoric serves the opposite purpose of Pater’s—emphasizing controversy rather than sneaking it in rhetorically—his lecture articulates the very argument with which Pater’s “Conclusion” begins. Pater notes that the elements that make up our physical life “are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it” and, furthermore that “like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces” (forces that pump blood, heal the body, and even form the brain) “extends beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn” (186).

Pater’s theories and his language would have been recognized as a materialist stance rather than disinterested observations: it was not only Tyndall’s address that resuscitated the Roman philosopher Lucretius, who became very fashionable in the 1870s for his uncanny anticipation of contemporary scientific trends as well as for his atheism. In an April 1876 article, “Lucretius and Modern Materialism,” Robert Buchanan makes reference to an entire “literature of Atomic theory newly set before us. . . all, doubtless, fresh in the minds of our readers”—so fresh, in fact, that “it would be supererogatory to describe the atoms in further detail.” (8). Buchanan’s comment suggests that his listeners are not only familiar with Greek atomism, but that the intellectual environment has been thoroughly saturated by it. Resisting this trend,

Buchanan claims to object to Tyndall primarily for presenting ideology in the guise of science—i.e., ridiculing religious mystery while espousing a mysterious “atomic” force. But there is clearly more at stake in his polemic than a desire to correct the improper logic of the Belfast Address. Early in his essay, Buchanan worries that Epicurean materialism, in its eschewal of creationism, makes it unnecessary to fear divine retribution, and hence dissolves religious morality (9). Later, his objections against the “superficial” Tyndall, who “cries” and “declaims” in the lecture hall, become more impassioned. Tyndall is not just wrong, but “childish” (20) for believing, with Epicurus, that death is merely the end of sensation.

Perhaps what is really at stake in this charged rhetoric is Tyndall’s assertion that Epicureanism and ethical behavior are compatible: in his lecture, Tyndall praises Epicurus for neither seeking nor expecting, “here or hereafter, any personal profit from his relation to the gods. And it is assuredly a fact that loftiness and serenity of thought may be promoted by conceptions which involve no idea of profit of this kind” (7). Such a comment implies at least two things: first, that Christian morality is more or less reducible to a selfish desire for a future reward; second, that an alternative form of morality might be available to those who deny the existence of an afterlife. It is against this point that Buchanan exercises his strongest opposition. Materialist “insinuations” against Christianity are “simply absurd and self-refuting,” since “religion, rightly understood, is the love of holy service” (Buchanan 22). It is actually in order to validate Christian ethics, based upon an unknowable beyond—and not over a purely scientific disagreement—that Buchanan attacks Tyndall’s unacknowledged reliance upon the unknown. John Masson, writing later about Epicurean materialism, identified a second ethical problem: “if the whole world of nature and man is a mechanism in which cause follows cause and motion follows motion in a fixed order from everlasting, we could not possibly have Free-will” (*Lucretius* 225–26). Masson suggests that Epicurus was only able to solve this problem by contradicting himself: he assigns to atoms a power of “declination,” which is a form of “spontaneous movement in the atoms of the soul which alone originates and renders possible the Free-will of man” (65). Such a power, however, contradicted the theorem that mechanical force alone is responsible for atomic movement.

Refracting this debate through the lens of subjective experience, the “Conclusion” attempts—as Tyndall does—to derive an ethics from these hypotheses about the natural world. Pater asks, if the Roman philosophers were right that the world is nothing more transcendent than a whole bunch of matter, then is there such thing as an ethics of matter rather than of ideals? On the surface, the “Conclusion” seems to answer this question by telling us to spend our short “interval” in whatever pursuits we find gratifying. But if we take seriously the “Conclusion”’s suggestion that intentionality itself might be a myth, this hedonistic imperative is an unsatisfactory response to the problems suggested by materialism. Pater’s reflections upon subjectivity in “The Child in the House” and *Marius the Epicurean* are not abstractly philosophical, or even abstractly political, but instead are direct attempts to develop a more thorough materialist ethics. Throughout his writing, Pater avows his commitment to a mediated, materialist model of subjectivity and searches for a form of ethical responsibility that would not be conceptual, *a priori*, Kantian; instead it would be as closely connected to the physical world as is the impressionist subject of the “Conclusion” and “The Child in the House.”

Pater articulates his allegiance to materialism early in his career. One of his first library borrowings on record is Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* in 1863 (Inman, *Walter Pater* 37), and his essay on Coleridge, written in 1865, turns away from the pure autonomy of “Diaphaneité” to a



form of individuality that is the product of influence. In “Coleridge,” Pater turns from aestheticist withdrawal to something he calls “the relative spirit.” The latter is not just the idea that knowledge and truth are conditional, but also a distinctly modern awareness that absolute formulas necessarily fail to apply universally, and that individuals themselves are relationally produced. Instead of imagining a subject walled off from contaminating forces, this Pater notes of the modern individual that “the mind of the race, the character of the age, sway him this way or that through the medium of language and current ideas.... He is so receptive, all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing on him, so that every hour in his life is unique, changed altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch” (*Appreciations* 67). Here it is not *resistance* to the “collective” (“Diaphaneité” 157) or the “adulterated atmosphere of the world” (158), but rather *receptivity* to them that constitutes the “uniqueness” of the individual. Pater expresses surprise at this contradiction, but asserts nonetheless that receptivity to influence itself produces uniqueness. Individuality does not result from an anomalous “accident of birth or constitution” (155), but rather in the particular combination of forces that produce individuals at any given moment. Pater, who had been reading Darwin as well,<sup>52</sup> suggests that evolution applies not only to the natural world, but also to consciousness: “Nature... evolves ideas, hypotheses, modes of inward life” (*Appreciations* 65).<sup>53</sup> Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that Florian’s submission to aesthetic and sensory experience is a further articulation of the materialism that Pater had been developing since his early writing. Florian’s reminiscence about “things in the story of his spirit—in that process of brain-building by which we are, each one of us, what we are” (*Miscellaneous Studies* 148) is the transcribed memory of a materially-produced subject. The “tyranny of the senses” (160) that controls Florian speaks not only to his aesthetic impressionism, but also to the primacy of his physical experience.

This model of subjectivity cuts directly to the controversy stoked by Tyndall and Buchanan. Like Tyndall, Pater sees the primacy of the material world as excluding any possibility of a higher religious realm. Florian—like Lucretius—is unable to imagine “any world but that wherein are water or trees.” But Pater offers an ethical justification for his materialism that departs from Tyndall’s. Even though Florian comes “more and more to be unable to care for, or think of soul but as in an actual body,” he discovers a “trick” for getting past the wall of sensation that would otherwise enclose him. Florian uses his “sensible attachments” to the world to motivate sympathy for those unable to enjoy sensory pleasure: “it was the trick even his pity learned, fastening those who suffered in anywise to his affections by a kind of sensible attachments. He would think... of Cecil, early dead, as cut off from the lilies, from golden summer days, from women’s voices; and then what comforted him a little was the thought of the turning of the child’s flesh to violets in the turf above him” (161). The pleasurable sensations of the material world—morning light, beautiful flowers, summer days, women’s voices—create the

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Wright writes that in 1859, “Pater, Hoole, Wood, and Moorhouse... being the only men left in college, they dined in each others [sic] rooms, and had much animated discussion over Darwin and other rising writers” (Wright 174). Peter Allan Dale writes, “Pater was entirely aware of what contemporary science had done to the Romanticist vision of empirical experience. The Conclusion, to *Renaissance* ... envisages the reduction of life to matter and force and reflects the same materialistic principle of the conservation of force” (212). For further discussion of Pater’s relation to materialism see Dale, 210–214.

<sup>53</sup> Monsman writes, “Pater’s skepticism as to a centrality or continuity or fixed origin of identity within quotidian experience reflected not only the Gallic tradition... but also recent British scientific thought: T.H. Huxley, Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, J.F.W. Herschel, and Robert Chambers, whose covert or direct materialism... represented a disturbing challenge to Oxford notions of fixed principles” (*Walter Pater* 19).

possibility for Florian's feeling of compassion; furthermore, his friend's afterlife takes place not in an abstract higher realm, but here, in the strictly natural conversion of the decaying body into beautiful flowers. This is expressly *not* an ethics based on what the story calls "mere grey, unreal abstractions"; instead it combines a capacity for sympathy with the pursuit of sensation that the "Conclusion" enjoins. In doing so, it attempts to reconcile a subjectivity formed through influence with the possibility of ethical sentiment, grounding ethics in affect rather than "free will." Florian, Pater writes, is affected by "the sorrow of the world, of grown people and children and animals.... He could trace...the growth of an almost diseased sensibility to the spectacle of suffering" (155). Florian's submission to the shaping force of sensible objects corresponds to a heightened ethical sensitivity to the pain of others. Pater suggests that it is *only* in the moment that Florian's autonomy is compromised—infiltrated by "disease"—that he is able to access authentic ethical feelings.

*Marius the Epicurean* continues this effort to reconcile philosophically responsibility and materialism. When Flavian dies, Marius (much like Florian) is unable to imagine a higher realm into which the soul of Flavian has departed, and so feels that "it was to the sentiment of the body, and the affections it defined—the flesh...—he must cling. The ... perished body of Flavian...had made him a materialist" (106). Like a good nineteenth-century materialist, Marius begins reading Roman natural philosophers—Epicurus, Lucretius, Heraclitus—a syllabus that causes Marius to question his own sense of agency. Marius's sensation that "his bodily frame... was yet determined by a far-reaching system of material forces external to it" (211) directly adopts the theorems of these philosophers. In this light, the contradictory form of intellectual freedom that Pater gives Marius through his reading of Aurelius directly addresses contemporary Victorian discussions of Lucretius and Darwin: it aims to resolve the problems created by a purely determined model of individuality by asserting for philosophy the power to create a space of intellectual liberty independent of physical determination. Although it has on the surface little to do with "art" or "beauty," this response to scientific materialism in fact turns to aesthetic experience in order to resolve ethical debates. The reconciliation of determined and autonomous subjectivity is made possible in the first place by Pater's theorization of aesthetic experience as a moment in which we are able to contemplate and reflect upon the ways that identity is formed through impressions as well as upon the extent to which we are able to control or direct that process of self-formation. Aestheticism is thus not simply a strategy of social disengagement: quite the opposite, it translates the nuances of aesthetic experience as it is imagined by Hegel and Kant into direct forms of experience that have the potential to address and resolve pressing cultural dilemmas. These possibilities inhere not in its own polemical stances about the difference between (or identity of) art and life, but rather in its subtle, strategic rearticulations of philosophical aesthetics on a textual level.

### **The "Bourgeois Consciousness of Freedom": Pater and Adorno**

And yet, to suggest that Pater "resolves" the ethical problems created by scientific materialism is to go too far. Pater's construction of an autonomous intellectual domain leaves open many questions. If on the one hand, Florian Deleal's "sensitivity" is the source of his sympathy, on the other, Marius's "freedom" is the condition for the pursuit of sensation. Both models are also internally inconsistent: Florian's susceptibility ultimately produces a relatively independent "house of thought," and Marius is never quite sure that his independence is not a delusion. These conflicts are not evidence of Pater's logical shortcomings so much as

symptomatic of his engagement with aesthetic philosophy that begins in “Winckelmann” with Pater’s dialogue with Hegel: an engagement whose symptoms extend to Pater’s interpretation of scientific materialism, as well as his attempts in *Marius* to imagine forms of political community consonant with the forms of individuality that Marius explores. Pater’s various explorations of the idea of autonomy—of the individual, of the state, of the city—grow out of a problem presented to him originally in the form of the contradictory nature of aesthetic experience itself: can art or beauty offer an experience of “freedom” (from material determination, a “chain of circumstance,” or the “tyranny of the senses”) upon which we can rely? Pater answers this question by attempting to renegotiate the idea of “freedom” itself.

I am not the first to suggest that this contradictoriness might be politically interesting; others have argued that Pater’s multivocality makes him politically promising. Deconstructive critics such as J. Hillis Miller have suggested in various ways that Pater can be read as a pre-modernist postmodern: Miller writes that “Pater’s work, then, is heterogeneous, dialogical, or antilogical.... Pater’s work can be defined as an exploration and deconstruction of the problematic trope of personification” (112); Carolyn Williams sees *Marius* as a “wonderful example of what Paul de Man calls ‘specular structure’” (187). Jonathan Freedman goes even further, claiming for aestheticism “the ability...to destabilize all stable structures of thought and priorities of value” (77) and suggesting, therefore, that Wilde and Pater “anticipated, with unerring prescience directions that leftist thought itself was to take” (76). In doing so, Freedman uncannily fulfills Harold Bloom’s 1985 prediction: “I venture the prophecy that [Pater] will prove also to be the valued precursor of a Post-Modernism still fated to be another Last Romanticism” (21).<sup>54</sup> Bloom’s prescient statement also repeats a critical commonplace: that the *fin*s of the nineteenth and twentieth *siècles* had a full range of theoretical and cultural sympathies with one another. Statements such as these are not disinterested critical statements, but ethical judgments as well: Pater’s destabilizing, specular, dialogism shows that he is more than a bourgeois Oxonian aesthete. The emphasis here is on “destabilization”: aestheticism immanently or overtly resignifies received terms and reorganizes received hierarchies. It seems to do so particularly well when it comes to sexuality and gender: James Eli Adams writes, for example, that “Pater constructed one of the founding rhetorics of British modernism by subverting from within a Kingsleyan discourse of masculine identity” (185); Linda Dowling argues that Pater’s challenge to an Oxonian educational model allows “the counterdiscourse of a legitimated male love—for ‘homosexuality’ in its emergently twentieth-century sense—[to] find its scope to grow” (103). Pater’s formal or institutional sexual “subversiveness” thus becomes a site for privileging aestheticism’s politics. As a queer, deconstructive, historicizing iconoclast, how could Pater *not* have become popular in the 1990s?

As careful and insightful as these readings often are, I worry that their varying degrees of enthusiasm about the leftist political possibilities of aestheticism allow them to jump too quickly

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<sup>54</sup> Other efforts to postmodernize Pater include Gerald Monsman’s *Walter Pater’s Art of Autobiography* (Monsman writes, “Pater inevitably seems something of an anomaly as a Victorian.... But against whom, then, should he be scaled if not his contemporaries? ... it would be more exciting to see Pater as a figure impressively bridging the gap ... between nineteenth-century fictional models and those ultrareflexive writers whose fictional worlds invariably lead back to the generative activity of art itself: Borges, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Leiris, Nabokov, Fowles, Barth” (5)) and Jay Fellows’ *Tombs, Despoiled and Haunted*. More broadly, in *Language and Decadence at the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle*, Linda Dowling connects Derridean and Decadent theories of language: “what has emerged in our time as Foucault’s theory of discourse or Derridean deconstruction is none other than that dark spectre of autonomous language that haunted literary Decadence” (xiii).

between centuries, assuming an essential similarity between decadent and postmodern modes of destabilization and subversion. One product of this willingness to privilege aestheticist subversiveness has been highlighted by the recent interest in female aesthetes: Talia Schaffer and others have argued that it has been necessary to overlook aestheticism's misogyny in order to appropriate its subversiveness.<sup>55</sup> While these feminist readings provide a corrective expansion of the canon, I would suggest that a more significant side effect of looking for a politically sympathetic *fin de siècle* is an unreflective definition of "politics" in the first place. In an effort to do scholarship that is politically engaged and socially relevant, critics have highlighted the ways in which aestheticism allows its practitioners to perform identity, speak from the margins, and challenge gender norms: in all of these moves, it seems that what is political about aestheticism is what is political to us.<sup>56</sup> And so, as our model of committed scholarship moves beyond identity critique (or as scholarship itself moves beyond commitment), this mode of analysis begins to have the unusual effect of making the end of the nineteenth century seem dated.

If the motivation behind such engaged scholarship is at least partially to recuperate aestheticism from critiques such as Adorno's, then it might be worth returning to that critique to see exactly what it is that needs to be recuperated. Adorno offers more than an indictment of aestheticism as bourgeois and capitalist; he also offers the terms for resituating what we take to be "political" about any literary text. For Adorno, the relation between art and society inheres precisely in the dialectic I have been describing in this chapter: on the one hand art is autonomous and self-grounding, but at the same time it is heteronomous and fully-determined. Adorno often describes what I have been calling a "tension" or "contradictoriness" as art's "double character": "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful,' it criticizes society by merely existing" (226). The "doubleness" here is that art's autonomy makes it simultaneously absolutely separate from and critically engaged with society. Throughout the final chapter of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno repeats and rephrases this paradox that art's autonomy is also its protest through his own paradoxical statements: "as the negation of practical life, [art] it is itself praxis" (241); "the moment art is prohibited...[it] wins back the right to exist" (251); "the necessity of art...is its nonnecessity" (251). These paradoxes strangely echo an earlier polemic aesthetician who remarked that "nothing beautiful is indispensable to life" and continued to avow, "I am among those to whom the superfluous is necessary" (758). The difference, however, between Adorno's and Gautier's antiutilitarianism is the point of the final chapter of *Aesthetic Theory*, whose incisive attack of *l'art pour l'art*, one could say, is premised upon the belief that aestheticism did not go far enough. Adorno argues that the aestheticist notion of aesthetic

<sup>55</sup> See Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* and Schaffer and Psiomades, *Women and British Aestheticism*.

<sup>56</sup> In its most problematic form, this mode of analysis can turn into value judgments about aestheticism whose basis lies in a contemporary notion of progressivism. For example, Maltz writes of *Marius*: "The emphatic phrase about 'solitary self-pity' diminishes the rest, leaving the reader aware of and alienated by Marius' exploitative, reclusive consciousness. We recall a similar solitude in Marius' reactions to the Mass, for there he only gleans raw materials for the extended subjective associations by which he pleases himself" (166) Besides implying that Marius is an solipsistic, aestheticizing hedonist from first to last, Maltz's speculation about readerly experience—that we are "alienated" by Marius's "exploitative" consciousness—suggests a mode of reading oriented toward judging the ethical value of characters' thoughts and actions. And, in fact, Maltz's conclusion aims to answer whether "missionary aesthetes" were "parochial" or "generous" (212), or some mixture thereof.

autonomy is in bad faith because in actuality aesthetes pander commercially to society even while claiming to be independent of it. Fully autonomous art instead would be shocking to encounter because of its authentic independence from familiar aesthetic concepts.<sup>57</sup>

Adorno's Marxist critique of aestheticism is probably accurate; it is undeniable that Wilde was an excellent salesman and that William Morris's designs made a lot of money. But there is another way to use Adorno's critique to think about aestheticism's politics—an alternative made available elsewhere than in Adorno's comments upon aesthetes such as Gautier, Wilde, or Stefan George. The "Society" chapter of *Aesthetic Theory* begins by suggesting that the "double character" of autonomy might apply to subjects as well as artworks: "Prior to the emancipation of the subject, art was undoubtedly in a certain sense more immediately social than it was afterward. Its autonomy, its growing independence from society, was a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with social structure" (255). In this moment, Adorno moves back and forth quickly between the politics of the subject and the politics of the artwork: bourgeois (or, perhaps to put it another way, liberal individualist) "consciousness of freedom" grounds the idea that art can be autonomous. This link is the basis for Adorno's primary theory about the political implications of art; the artwork is bound up with social and political structures that mediate our consciousness in ways that we largely overlook or ignore. As a result, Adorno writes, "artworks exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness" (243). What is political about art is not what it says about politics, but how it mediates—and is mediated by—historical consciousness.

This argument opens a way of thinking about aestheticism's politics that does not focus upon the ways in which aestheticism protests society either by withdrawing into a Paterian "cloistral refuge" or subverting its hierarchies and norms. As Adorno and others have pointed out, the aesthete is not really a refugee; as Pater himself suggests in "Diaphaneité," the aesthete strives for invisibility from (rather than protest against) the utilitarian world. Indeed, *Aesthetic Theory* is too thorough in its distinction between the kind of autonomous art that authentically protests a reified bourgeois society (that is, nonrepresentational and modernist) and the kind that does not (everything else) to pretend that aestheticism might be forced into Adorno's category of anti-practical praxis. (That such an interpretation is even possible can be accounted for by an influential simplification made by one of Adorno's students: Peter Bürger writes in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that "Aestheticism had made the distance from the praxis of life the content of works. The praxis of life to which aestheticism refers and which it negates is the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday"; Bürger accepts at face value "the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-end rationality" (49), forgetting that for Adorno this is only the semblance of "negation.")<sup>58</sup> Rather, Pater's work becomes political in an Adornian sense on another front: it interrogates—rather than endorses—what Adorno calls the "bourgeois consciousness of freedom." Pater's revision, for example, of a Hegelian narrative of aesthetic freedom, does not lead him to affirm the autonomy of the subject; rather, art becomes the means

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<sup>57</sup> Wolfgang Iser (in language, in fact, that reads as oddly Adornian) exemplifies the surface reading of aestheticist politics against which Adorno argues: "The aesthete lives in contradiction to reality, and herein lies the revolutionary aspect of his attitude, for his approach breaks up existing, solidified forms of life" (168).

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Freedman writes, "The relevance of Bürger's analysis to British aestheticism is indisputable, and has much influenced the account I offer below. Its suppleness, its ability to historicize autonomy theories and aestheticism alike...is admirable and important" (12).

by which we are able to recognize the precise ways in which we *lack* free self-determination. And for Pater, aesthetic experience is not the abstraction into a higher realm separate from moral obligations and physical reality; it is the experience of the very tension between the two. Without overstating their similarities, I would at least propose that the unresolved tension between freedom and determination that, as I have argued, structures Paterian aesthetics belies Adorno's favorite referent for the movement: *l'art pour l'art*. It belies it not, as Adorno suggests, by attuning itself to the demands of the public ("the watchword *l'art pour l'art* was the mask of its opposite" (239)), but rather by repeatedly compromising on a subjective as well as aesthetic level the purity of "autonomy" itself. Throughout his work, Pater neither takes autonomy for granted, nor adopts a pure impressionism, and thereby constructs a model of subjectivity that is neither irretrievably solipsistic nor fully determined. Instead, it is stuck between the two possibilities. This is actually a productive place to be stuck: the experience of this dilemma is what allows the aestheticist subject to escape from reified bourgeois interiority. Marius actually attends to ways in which his personality is materially and intellectually mediated; Florian's yielding, susceptibility, and "resistlessness" show that even if he is surrounded by bourgeois interiors, he is not one himself. If anything, Florian breaks down the distinction between exterior and interior, freedom and susceptibility.

To be quite clear: I do not mean to valorize Pater by hitching his wagon to Adorno; to do so would be to unreflectively adopt Adorno's own darkly utopian vision of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and would simply repeat the critical move which hopes to find in aestheticism a politics conducive to one's own.<sup>59</sup> Instead, I believe that Adorno provides the means for identifying a politics already inherent in the attempt of aesthetic philosophy to construct and legitimize an autonomous domain of art and to extend this autonomy to the subject. If this is the case, then the political is not an "implication" we discover in Pater's work after the fact (in its effects or its subtexts); instead it enters aestheticism through the backdoor of what appears to be the very *least* political aspect of aestheticism itself: its philosophical heritage and its interest in subjective experience. The latter was, in fact, largely the focus Pater studies before the 1980s, and perhaps one of the ironies of identity politics is that in turning away from apparently apolitical scholarship, it turned away from the politics that were already there in aesthetic philosophy itself.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This is one point of difference between my argument and that of Freedman, who writes: "it is important to note that if, in his concern with the conflict between freedom and necessity, Pater is indeed a faithful post-Hegelian, he is one in the tradition of Weber, Adorno, and Foucault. . . . Pater's 'Necessity,' like Weber's 'rationalization,' Adorno's 'enlightenment,' or Foucault's 'power/knowledge,' plots the progress of . . . the increasing limitation of human powers" (65). Freedman in general tends to almost include Pater in the Frankfurt school, referring elsewhere to his "immanent critique of instrumental reason and its offspring, scientific inquiry" (67).

<sup>60</sup> See Knoepflmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel*; Dale, *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History*; and McGrath, *The Sensible Spirit*.

## II. The Individual: William Morris's Materialist Formalism

In the last six years of his life, William Morris wrote several long romances that seem intentionally designed to become obscure. Not only were the books written in a stilted, archaic language, Morris made virtually no effort to distribute or market the works. They were printed in small, expensive runs at the Kelmscott Press, and much of Morris's labor was expended upon crafting the books as beautiful material things. One's suspicion that the story is there mostly to support the ink and paper—rather than vice versa—is borne out by Morris's provocative admission about the title page of an edition of *The Earthly Paradise* published at the same time as the romances: "Ha!... Now what would you say if I told you that the verses on the title-page were written just to fill up the great white lower half?" (MacCarthy 607). If Morris's aim in writing the romances was to create objects of precious obscurity, he certainly succeeded: the romances are almost always discussed as things rather than as texts; they are more widely known among book collectors than among literary scholars.

The romances also owe their obscurity to the fact that they do not fit well, aesthetically or politically, with the trajectory of Morris's work. After Morris made his name with *The Earthly Paradise* and *The Defence of Guinevere* in the 1860s, his socialism shifted the terms of his aesthetic program. No longer did Morris write long poems about a fantastic, romanticized past; he wrote journalism and lectures. His art became decorative rather than imaginative as his workshops created tiles, wallpaper, and furniture. When he did return to literary work, it was as transparently consonant with his political commitments as were his collectively-produced fabrics: *The Dream of John Ball*, *Chants for Socialists*, *Pilgrims of Hope*, and *News from Nowhere* are unashamedly propagandistic, describing respectively the historical origins of socialism, its necessity in the present, and the beautiful future it promises. So the fact that Morris spent his final seven years writing thousands of pages of fairy tales leaves biographers looking for explanations for this sudden withdrawal from political concerns—explanations that range from Morris's discontent at having been expelled from the Socialist League (which he founded) to his unhappiness about the affair between his wife and the poet Wilfrid Blunt.<sup>61</sup>

In this chapter I argue that the romances are more than a biographical footnote or a chapter in the history of publishing. In the romances, several of the major questions that structured Morris's political thinking are translated into questions of literary form—and so become invisible if one uses the same strategy of "decoding" the romances for their allegorical political content that one might reasonably apply to Morris's explicitly propagandistic fiction. I fully accept that Morris had no intention of using the romances to make political arguments; we can take Morris at his word when he challenges politicizing interpretations: "I had not the least intention of thrusting an allegory into 'The Wood beyond the World;' it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it. If I have to write or speak on social problems, I always try to be as direct as I possibly can be" (*Collected Letters* IV:291). I will argue that the political aspect of the romance indeed does *not* inhere in its potentially allegorical aspect; it instead resides in the very "purity" and "simplicity" of the tale as a genre.

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<sup>61</sup> Jack Lindsay notes, for example, that "Morris had been driven back in on himself after 1890–1. He had a deep sense of failure and yet as deep a sense of belonging to a movement which could not betray him.... He resolved this inner conflict on the one hand in his work for a united movement and on the other hand in the romances in which he turned back to his partly-suppressed personal life, used old themes of harassed and ultimately triumphant love, and at the same time finally harmonized those themes with his social feelings and aspirations" (367).

This is because in Morris's literary work, the way that a tale is told is often more important than what it tells. To be more specific: by experimenting with narrative strategy, Morris investigates the kinds of individuality presupposed by the formal convention of authorial voice, and Morris's narrators are rarely single, discrete individuals. In fact, it is usually impossible decisively to determine who speaks the stories that Morris writes. I argue that the ambiguity surrounding Morris's narrators is more than a formal literary question because one of the primary strands of Morris's political activity was his challenge to a group of self-proclaimed "Individualists" who were also engaged in a serious investigation of forms of individuality. These social and political theorists attempted to establish and defend the boundaries around individuals, whom they thought of as atomized entities completely separate from one another and from any sort of social community. As this debate progressed, it was not only socialists who weighed in, but aesthetes as well: Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin. Morris's work is important because it reflects the most sustained attempt to combine socialist and aestheticist critiques of individualism. The romances do not abandon this critique, but continue it on a formal level.

Morris's work directly intervenes in this contested territory between individualism and socialism, even as it engages in a broader analysis of the role that aesthetic experience plays in the process of individuation. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argue that once we attend to the way in which Walter Pater imagines subjective experience as highly mediated by history, materiality, and beauty, it becomes clear that the political import of his work lies in the way that it engages with aesthetic philosophy's investigation and interrogation of autonomous individuality. It would be difficult to imagine an aesthete more different from Pater than Morris: the former is a decadent, stylized recluse; the latter a moralistic, populist agitator. Though Pater's review of *The Earthly Paradise* praised the poem for its unearthliness, Morris's work following that poem was more engaged with this world than with an abstracted, removed realm. And yet, in many ways Morris takes up where Pater leaves off, foregrounding the potential of aesthetic philosophy powerfully to address questions about the nature of individual autonomy. Especially compared to Pater's, Morris's treatment of these questions appears to be self-conscious, openly political, and straightforward; Morris explicitly justifies, for example, his turn from an "intellectual" to a "decorative" aesthetic by claiming that the former privileges art produced by individual geniuses over craftwork produced by the populace at large. But in order to treat Morris as the populist aesthete who retrieved aesthetic experience from Paterian elitism and offered it to the common worker, it is necessary to overlook a great deal of his later work. Morris's expensive romances turn away from the material production of decoration insofar as they can be treated as stories that exist only conceptually, in a reader's mind. The romance, as the most fantastic of narrative genres, exemplifies the imaginative art of which Morris's socialist aesthetics is generally skeptical. I will argue that the romances therefore reflect Morris's continuing concern with the opposition between intellectual and decorative art not by reasserting the validity of the latter but by formally interrogating the tenability of the opposition itself. Although the romances' formalism is often the starting point for asking why Morris abandoned politics, I will argue that it is in their formalism that we see Morris's political vision working itself out most powerfully.

In the previous chapter, I have argued that if we wish to understand the stakes of aestheticism, it is necessary to develop a notion of the 'political' that runs deeper than what we normally think of as 'politics'—a notion that has to do with aestheticism's confrontation of



politically charged questions surrounding subjectivity. In this chapter, I will use this characterization of the political in order to reconsider William Morris's work. In short, Morris scholarship has too often equated the politics of Morris's work with his Marxism. E.P. Thompson's 1976 *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* remains one of the most influential accounts of Morris for its careful situation of Morris within the British socialist movement, and even more so for posing the question of how Morris's romantic poetics relate to his revolutionary politics.<sup>62</sup> The premise of this question is that it is possible to speak separately of Morris's political and poetic views. One set of beliefs may influence, produce, or affirm the other, but at their core, what is "political" about Morris is what he had to say in his lectures about labor, socialism, fellowship and community; what is "aesthetic" about Morris's work is his activity as a bookmaker, designer, poet, and artisan.<sup>63</sup> Inquiries into Morris's politics—even when they depart from intra-Marxist debates over the orthodoxy or influence of Morris's Marxism—thus often amount to asking whether and how the latter forms of activity bear out or contradict the former.<sup>64</sup> Although works such as Thompson's (and more recently Bradley Macdonald's and Marcus Waithe's) are important for raising crucial questions about the interrelation of political and aesthetic domains within Morris's work, I find myself agreeing with Caroline Arscott's assertion that "the debate over whether Morris's Marxist politics were compatible with his art practice is a tired one...with which Morris himself was wearily, if anxiously, familiar" (9). Armed with the idea that theorizing the aesthetic is already an inherently social process, independent of whether or not it avows its political commitments, it becomes possible to somewhat relieve the "tiredness" of this debate. The question is no longer whether

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<sup>62</sup> Before Thompson's work, scholars had no qualms about neatly separating Morris's political and artistic activity from one another; Peter Stansky notes that "some of his later admirers prefer a compartmentalized Morris, with one compartment sealed off from another, and choose to consider his artistic activities as separate from his political influence and activities, or even ignore the one in favor of the other" (7). This was the strategy adopted in the *Times*'s obituary of Morris: "the world can afford to judge him indulgently, as not apprehending much danger from his rhetoric. We do not desire to enlarge on the unpractical extremes to which his industrial and political opinions tended; they are only the results of a warm heart and a mistaken enthusiasm...and are as nothing compared with the lasting worth of his better genius" ("Death" 8). Michelle Weinroth gives an account of the 1934 centenary of Morris's birth at the Victoria and Albert Museum at which Stanley Baldwin remarkably forged a vision of Morris's work that left out almost entirely his socialism: "Tributes largely concerned Morris's art and poetry. If reference was made to Morris's politics, it was soon distilled into an idealized discussion of the hero's utopianism.... The concept of class struggle never once entered into these tributes" (51). For the socialist response to this exhibition, see Robin Page Arnot's 1934 *William Morris: A Vindication*.

<sup>63</sup> The bifurcation of Morris's politics and his aesthetics is evident already in Yeats's appreciation of his work; in "The Happiest of the Poets," Yeats throughout suggests that Morris's work stands up to aesthetic rather than political standards of truth: "I do not think he troubled to understand books of economics, and Mr. Mackail says, I think, that they vexed him and wearied him. He found it enough to hold up, as it were, life as it is to-day beside his visions, and to show how faded its colours were and how sapless it was" ("The Happiest of Poets" 61); Yeats concludes, "his vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happier when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelley knew by an act of faith that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds" (62).

<sup>64</sup> I will explore this problem in more detail later in the chapter; to cite one example, Carole Silver interprets Ralph's quest in *The Well at the World's End* as follows: "In selling Ralph as a slave in Utterbol, [the barbarians] bring him into a city resembling the early despotisms Morris and Bax had described in *Socialism [from the Root Up]*.... The lands through which Ralph travels function both as cultural and historical symbols and as images of Ralph's psychological transformation" (175). Silver's claim is characteristic of much Morris scholarship for its effort to connect the romances' themes to Morris's stated political positions.

Morris's art remains faithful to the socialist ideals he elsewhere expressed, but rather what forms of politics are presupposed by the aesthetic forms within which Morris worked.

### **The Individual of “Individualism”**

What is a communist? One who has yearnings  
 For equal division of unequal earnings:  
 An idler or bungler, or both, he is willing  
 To fork out his penny and pocket your shilling!<sup>65</sup>

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the most influential statement about the rights of the individual was not, as one might expect, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*; it was Herbert Spencer's *The Man Versus the State*. Spencer's tract was an extreme statement of the rights of the individual against state power, whose intervention in any aspect of life—even when aimed at producing a beneficial collective good such as public education—risked producing, in Spencer's terms, “slavery.” Even if government provides for its citizens, “each member of the community as an individual would be a slave to the community as a whole.... The services of each will belong to the aggregate of all; and for these services, such returns will be given as the authorities think proper. So that even if the administration is of the beneficent kind intended to be secured, slavery, however mild, must be the outcome of the arrangement” (103). As is implied here, the “individual” is the absolute principle upon which Spencer's social theory is built. Spencer's text not only proposes that individual liberty is so fundamental as to trump any kind of intervention; it also naturalizes this model: “There is first of all the undeniable truth, conspicuous and yet absolutely ignored, that there are no phenomena which a society presents but what have their origins in the phenomena of individual human life, which again have their roots in vital phenomena at large. .... [B]efore meddling with the details of social organization, inquiry should be made whether social organization has a natural history” (138). The logic by which Spencer understands these “vital phenomena” is that of natural selection; he writes, “society in its corporate capacity, cannot without immediate or remoter disaster interfere with the play of these opposed principles under which every species has reached such fitness for its mode of life as it possesses, and under which it maintains that fitness” (128). Parallel to this logic of evolution, Spencer presents a logic of degeneration. Spencer writes that if “the benefits received by each individual were proportionate to its inferiority—if, as a consequence, multiplication of the inferior was furthered, and a multiplication of the superior hindered, progressive degradation would result; and eventually the degenerate species would fail to hold its ground in presence of antagonistic species and competing species” (127); Spencer concludes the book with a similar prophecy: “by accumulated small infractions of them [individual rights], the vital conditions of life, individual and social, come to be so imperfectly fulfilled that the life decays” (168). Individual freedom is healthy and natural; state intervention is unnatural and, ultimately, biologically destructive.

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<sup>65</sup> Francis Charteris, head of the Liberty and Property Defense League, in a speech to the House of Lords, July 31, 1885. Quoted in Donisthorpe, 327. Charteris in fact thought this was too generous a characterization: “That I believe to be a very fair description of a communist, with the exception that I greatly doubt his readiness to fork out his penny” (327).

Spencer's book, which became a touchstone for a group of self-proclaimed "Individualists," shows that at its origins, individualism conceives of the individual in two separate ways. First, "individuality" is evidenced by a capacity for free activity, generally in pursuit of some pleasurable end. Spencer approves of early Liberalism's "removals of hindrances to individual activities of one or other kind" (77); he disapproves of those trends that "conspire to increase corporate action and decrease individual action" (95). Second, as these passages also suggest, "individuality" is manifested through its opposition to an alien "corporate" or "social" community whose aim is to hinder individual action. Spencer never figures the individual as part of the social collective, which is portrayed instead as a group of *other* people who have come together to interfere with one's free pursuit of pleasure. Against the suggestion that the state is an entity made up of and controlled by an aggregate of free individuals, Spencer warns darkly that this is a justification for slavery: "even if so, each member of the community *as an individual* would be a slave to the community as a whole.... The services of each will belong to the aggregate of all; and for these services such returns will be given as the authorities think proper" (103, my emphasis).<sup>66</sup> In alienating power from citizens as a group to "authorities" (even if those authorities are democratically chosen), Spencer importantly removes from the free "actions" accorded to the individual the ability to voluntarily cede rights in order to ensure social harmony. Any such cession, for Spencer, is evidence of the erosion of the principles of individuality, based upon the lack of awareness that whatever protections might be provided by the state would be better produced naturally through a system in which individuals compete freely. This natural form of cooperation is the only sort of collectivism that Spencer will countenance: "the aggregate results of men's desires seeking their gratifications, those which have prompted their private activities and their spontaneous co-operations, have done much more towards social development than those which have worked through governmental agencies. That abundant crops now grow where only once wild berries could be gathered is due to the pursuit of individual satisfactions through many centuries" (125). The single proper function of the state, according to Spencer, is the defense of its borders from military threats. His theory thus inscribes at a national level the idea that autonomy consists of the maintenance of borders.

Spencer's valorization of the free pursuit of pleasure, unhindered by—and actively challenging—governmental and social constraints rallied a group of late-Victorian intellectuals, politicians, and business owners who are now largely forgotten but who were quite influential at the time.<sup>67</sup> These included writers such as Wordsworth Donisthorpe, Auberon Herbert, and the Earl of Wemyss (Francis Charteris), as well as political organizations such as the Liberty and Property Defence League (LPDL), the Personal Rights Association, and the Party of Individual Liberty.<sup>68</sup> For some, the commitment to individualism was pragmatic: Spencer provided a

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<sup>66</sup> This was a refrain sounded frequently by individualists. J. Parrington Poole warned, for example, that "Individuality is in danger of being swamped by social laws. Social tyranny at the present day constitutes a positive danger to the individual, for it tends to make him a slave to custom, a mere machine, a creature who is given a reason which he is not to presume to use, except in so far as it finds him at one with society, whose mandates he disobeys at his peril" ("The Liberty of the Individual" 612).

<sup>67</sup> Edward Bristow writes, "Thomas Huxley found Donisthorpe, a Tory barrister and mine-owner, 'an acute thinker'.... Levy, well known in London radical circles as professor of logic and economics at Birkbeck College... won testimonials from such opponents as George Bernard Shaw and E. Belfort Bax" (770).

<sup>68</sup> In a report to the LPDL, Charteris proclaimed his individualism in a way that reveals Spencer's influence: "I have been, and am, what is called an "Individualist"—that is to say, I believe in individual enterprise, and not in State or municipal interference or meddling with private enterprise. I believe it is individual enterprise that makes the

popular theory that could justify business's efforts to maintain its independence from state regulation. But Spencer appealed to many who were invested on a purely intellectual level. Auberon Herbert gathered several fellow writers to publish *A Plea for Liberty*, a response to George Bernard Shaw's *Fabian Essays in Socialism* that used the Spencerian naturalization of individualism to challenge socialist proposals such as free public education: "state socialism opposes science, and fancies it can improve the species physically by sparing us hardships, and morally by sparing us duties; whereas it is more likely to aid degeneration by encouraging the dependent character and discouraging the discipline of home" (268). The essays share in their effort to circumscribe the domain of individuality as distinct from the state. George Howell writes in his contribution, "Liberty for Labour," "In the privacies of ordinary life there is a limit which instinct seems to indicate as a kind of boundary line, beyond which legislation should not extend.... Recently, the tendency to extend the boundary has developed enormously, to such a degree, in fact, that it is doubtful whether, in the opinion of many, there should be any boundary line at all. The effacement of the individual seems to be their aim, the merging of the *man* into the *mass*; the fusion of atoms into a solid concrete body, moved and movable only by the State" (*Plea* 110). Howell's comment presents a number of exemplary figures that illustrate what was at stake in Spencerian defenses of the individual. Howell asserts the importance of defending the "boundary line" which delimits the self-sufficient individual from the encroachment of the state, and he worries that the state works to both "extend" and erase that boundary. This conception of individuality follows directly from Spencer's argument that the state and the communities are entities that are fundamentally foreign to individuality rather than made up of a group of willing individuals. Erasing the boundary amounts to "effacing" the individual, which is taken as self-evidently problematic; Howell explicitly acknowledges the atomism of his notion of individuality as he worries about the "fusion" of individuals with one another into a body under the control of an alien state.

This extreme notion of individualism produced treatises of philosophy and ethics, of political theory and sociology. Among the most notable were Wordsworth Donisthorpe's 1889 *Individualism* which constructs "a system of politics" by combining Spencer's theories with the principles of evolution, and Auberon Herbert's *The Voluntaryist Creed* which, remarkably, attempts to derive an ethics from sheer individualism.<sup>69</sup> Donisthorpe is actually quite critical of Spencer—he memorably speculates that *The Man versus the State* is "so unpractical, so unreal, and so visionary, that the conclusion can hardly be resisted that...it has been exhumed from a half-forgotten heap of the author's early writings, and published without re-examination" (264). But it becomes clear later in the chapter, originally published in *Westminster Review* as a review of Spencer's book, that Donisthorpe criticizes in order to correct rather than to refute; the author proposes his own theory of individualism. Donisthorpe, like Howell, warns against the fusion (figured here as biological rather than physical) toward which socialism tends: "If the actions of

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country what it is, and that, if State and municipal interference continues unchecked, it will undo the great and beneficent work that individual enterprise has accomplished in this land" ("The Dangers of Municipal Trading" 4).

<sup>69</sup> As a doctrine, individualism was closely linked with popular conceptions of evolution. Darwin informs Spencer's treatise, and many articles turned to evolution to support their sociological claims about the independence of the individual. Evolution was generally seen as tending toward a more intensified state of individualism; William Schooling therefore protests state control by claiming that "State action, it is clear, takes away, as regards the affairs it regulates, the choice of a suitable environment...thus does State action, by preventing the choice of environment, limit the means of adjustment, cause imperfect correspondence and consequently imperfect life, a life of friction, and the suppression of that individuality which is characteristic of progress" (*Individualism* 526).

individuals were so controlled... as to leave no liberty whatever, we should have a state of absolute socialism. This is actually the case with individual cells or groups of cells which together constitute the human body. The cells have, so to speak, ‘lost their identity’” (302–303). But Donisthorpe works to complicate Spencer’s atomistic individualism by proposing a compromise between identityless cells and pure self-interest: for Donisthorpe a “sound and progressive individualism” (302) is one which is produced through the empirical examination of the cases in which individual liberty ought to be limited—a limitation that he describes not as the interference of the alien state, but rather as the free “granting of equal liberty to others in certain departments of activity which experience, and experience alone, can demarcate” (302).

Donisthorpe’s book represents an effort to subject Spencer to a more rigorous legal and sociological analysis without abandoning the principles upon which his theory is built—to defend the principle of individualism, that is, by providing a more nuanced definition of the “liberty” which Spencer makes so absolute as to preclude even its voluntary limitation. In so doing, Donisthorpe’s treatise reflects the extent to which individualists defined “freedom” both as a state of unimpeded action and of clear separation from others. For those who believed that Individualism, in order to be tenable, must include at least some theory of community, it became crucially important to theorize forms of association that did not compromise the basic principles of autonomy and self-determination. For Spencer, the only acceptable form of community is freely-constructed economic contracts with other individuals. But Donisthorpe more generously suggested that one could demarcate certain “departments” in which others are allowed to operate freely. The most remarkable effort to allow for some form of community while maintaining an absolute defense of individuality comes from Auberon Herbert’s creed of “voluntaryism.” Herbert describes individuality through a language of self-possession that proceeds from atomistic and cellular understandings of the individual. Recounting his youthful enthusiasm for Spencer, Herbert uses the language of ownership in order to define what is meant by individuality: “I gave myself to preaching, in my own small way, the saving doctrine of liberty, of self-ownership, and self-guidance” (*The Voluntaryist Creed* 8); elsewhere he describes “deindividuation” as the moment when individuals cede to governmental power “the ownership of their bodies, and the ownership of their minds and souls” (20). Through “voluntaryism,” however, Herbert aims to make complete self-ownership compatible with ethical relations; Herbert’s neologism describes a system in which widespread charitable giving replaces taxation: “Under that voluntary system alone can a nation live in peace and friendship and work together happily and profitably for common ends. In voluntary taxation we shall find the one true form of life-long education which will teach us to act together, creating innumerable kindly ties between us all which will call out the truest and most generous qualities of our best citizens” (106). Herbert’s and Donisthorpe’s contorted and unrealistic efforts to defend one or another sort of individualism illustrate the extent to which what is at stake in the debate is the question of how to set absolute boundaries between self and other, individual and community without falling prey to a purely anarchical system. The purpose served by the tropes and ideologies to which they turn—scientific, evolutionary—is to affirm the possibility of group organization that proceeds organically from within rather than artificially from above.

### **Challenging the Rhetoric of Individualism**

This debate over individualism was, from the start, bound up with a conservative effort to protect business interests; its high-flown rhetoric of individual liberty allowed groups such as the

Liberty and Property Defence League to become effective, modern lobbies for railways, shippers, and the alcohol trade.<sup>70</sup> But the language of individualism was used by less-conservative politicians as well, many of whom drew their understanding of personal liberty from Mill rather than Spencer. Charles Bradlaugh, J.H. Levy, and William Hurrell Mallock were among those who found the principle of individualism attractive but were not willing to go quite as far as Spencerians. What makes their positions interesting is not merely that they continue to rely upon the language of individualism, but that they begin explicitly to call attention to the language in which the ideology of individualism is formulated. In its polemics, the debate over individualism often played fast and loose with language; indeed much of the debate consisted in proposing and defending competing definitions of the “individual,” of “liberty,” of “right,” and of “community.” Hence, in an 1890 debate over the eight hours’ movement, the socialist H.M. Hyndman claimed against the liberal individualist Charles Bradlaugh, that it is necessary for “the State to interfere with the right of the individual to wrong the community” (11), calling attention to the abstraction that usually surrounded the individualists’ defenses of individual right as an absolute principle. Conversely, Bradlaugh painted the following picture of socialists: “do you understand that when a man has been out of work for a fortnight they say: ‘Oh, you must go on starving; you shall not be allowed to fill the cupboard or the coal cellar by extra exertion.’ (Applause and uproar.)” (21). This was a claim that Hyndman had already countered in his 1883 *The Historical Basis of Socialism*: “Every means was allowable which helped to drag more surplus value out of the worker. Fined if a minute late, fined if they sat down...such were the indirect ways by which the capitalist class forced more and yet more unpaid labour out of the helpless flesh and blood which had fallen under their remorseless grip. Fine freedom indeed; noble liberty that for which our middle-class ceaselessly strove—the freedom to enslave at will for gain; the liberty to work to death for profit. But for the wage-earning class it meant the choice either to accept the capitalist conditions...or to starve, to freeze, or to shiver in want and misery like beasts in the forest” (162). Hyndman challenges the rhetoric of “freedom,” “liberty,” and “choice” by exposing the larger structural constraints that exist outside the simple unit of the “individual.”

That “individualism” itself was a term that could encompass poles as opposite as the reactionary elitism of the Liberty and Property Defense League and a pro-union politician such as Bradlaugh shows the mutability inherent in the term. Indeed, Bradlaugh expressed many views antithetical to those of Spencer’s followers; in “The Coming Struggle,” he compares contemporary economic organization to that of feudalism: “now the lord claims the land as his own freehold, without any admission of obligation accompanying the ownership, and regarding himself as unduly taxed if any fiscal imposition touches his pocket” (6). And, in fact, Bradlaugh’s fellow freethinker Annie Besant suggested that his apparent “individualism” was merely a political convenience: “M. Agathon de Potter, a well-known continental writer, rejoices over the introduction of Mr. Charles Bradlaugh’s Bill for expropriating landlords who keep cultivated land uncultivated...as a direct step towards Socialism. The shrinking of English politicians from the name does not prevent their advance toward the thing, and the Liberty and Property Defence League is justified in its view that politics are drifting steadily in a Socialist direction” (“The Socialist Movement” 220).

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<sup>70</sup> See Bristow, 780–781. Bristow quotes one MP’s observation that “the noisy fussiness of the teetotalers is as nothing against the steady pressure of the interest they attack” (780).

In *The Historical Basis of Socialism*, Hyndman directly takes on the Spencerian notion of liberty, arguing that “the middle-class ideas of personal freedom, equality before the law and freedom of contract, have meant simply economical and social tyranny, worse in its physical results for the proletariat than any direct despotism ever known. Therefore this sham liberty which invokes such shameful oppression must be swept away, and real liberty based upon social and economical equality of conditions substituted” (466). Hyndman’s effort to distinguish between “real” and “sham” liberty, and his attempt to equate “personal freedom” and “social tyranny” were common features of those entries into the debate over individualism that espoused neither extreme of evolutionary sociology nor socialist revolution.

Writing in the *Contemporary Review*, Grant Allen begins his article on “Individualism and Socialism” by proclaiming himself to be both an Individualist and a Socialist; Allen suggests that “the supposed opposition between Individualist and Socialist... melts away for all practical purposes into a phantom of language” (730). Allen points out that Individualism is impossible so long as it begins with an inherently unequal set of conditions. Allen accuses Individualists of not having “read their Mill on Liberty” (732) and defines an Individualist as “a man who recognizes without stint the full, free, and equal right of every citizen to the unimpeded use of all his energies, activities and faculties, provided only he does not thereby encroach upon the equal and correlative right of every other citizen” (732). Allen’s moderate proposal is that everyone ought to start out with an equal share of property and wealth, “and every boat should stand thereafter by its own accidents” (738); what is most interesting about his essay, however, is its repeated attempts to unmask the language in which the opposing sides have cloaked themselves. Not only, Allen argues, do Individualists fail to understand the liberal principles that stand behind the idea of autonomous individuality; many socialists are socialists “in name only” (738).<sup>71</sup> Mostly, they are against inequality broadly conceived and would balk at any genuinely socialist measures such as the nationalization of land.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas Whittaker, in “Individualism and State-Action” likewise appeals to Mill to clarify the confusions surrounding these terms: “we know that the word ‘freedom,’ as it is often applied, has in reality nothing to do with freedom in the sense with which we are here concerned. ‘Free-trade,’ for example, as was pointed out by Mill, is not a part of the doctrine of individual freedom.... [T]he check that has long since been put on ‘the right of private war’ was no doubt to those who were primarily affected by it an interference with their liberty; but this kind of interference with the liberty of some, it is universally admitted, is required in the interests of the liberty of all” (57). The subtext of Whittaker’s claim is its attack on the inconsistency implied by

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<sup>71</sup> This observation that “individualism” and “socialism” were potentially identical could be put to conservative as well as liberal ends. Robert Buchanan, in the context of an extended debate over individualism with Thomas Huxley (who had attacked Spencer’s ethics), argued that “the triumph of Socialism, historically and morally is the triumph of Individualism” (87) and that “the destruction of Individualism would end the last hope of the higher socialism. Over-legislation would restore slavery to mankind, and preserve the semi-disintegrated feudality which is still so large a portion of our political system.... The creed of the higher Socialism, not the creed of those who believe that Socialism conflicts with individualism, is that which follows the Law of Nature, by basing individual chances on the natural freedom and equality of men” (88). For the debate in its entirety (including a response by Huxley) see Buchanan, *The Coming Terror and Other Essays and Letters*, 1–97.

<sup>72</sup> Allen’s is one of a number of efforts throughout the 1890s to resolve the opposition between individualism and socialism. J.E. Symes in 1894 offered “An Eirenikon to Socialists and Individualists” by proposing that socialism ought to be available to the elderly and the young while those in middle age should be left to pursue their ends individualistically.

the fact that Spencer and his followers were willing to allow state interference only in the barest of cases involving the invasion of the state by enemy forces; Whittaker points out that this is logically inconsistent with the absolute form of individualism that they claim to defend.

It was not only liberal politicians who attempted to wrench the opposition between individualism and socialism from the Spencerians; socialists were also quick to point out the rhetorical tricks that the theory of individualism played. William Morris was one of the first to challenge individualists' attempt to link a market free from government regulation to the ideal of individual expression. In an 1884 article in *Justice*, Morris responds directly to the article that became the first chapter of Spencer's *The Man Versus the State*, noting that the fear that socialism suppresses individuality has become so widespread that "our Socialist lecturers are all familiar with this objection which seldom fails to be raised at question time in meetings where those are present who have any claim to be considered educated" ("The Dull Level of Life" 2). In his article, Morris uses scare quotes liberally to propose that the Spencerian definition of individuality masks its opposite: "the mill hand...need not be very anxious about the loss of his 'individuality' in a new state of things; the work-girl...might be excused perhaps if she were willing to barter the said 'individuality' for the chance of a 'square meal' a-day: nay the banker's or lawyer's clerk...may be mean spirited enough to find little solace for his life of mean drudgery in the contemplation of the theoretical 'individuality' secured to him as a prime blessing by the system of free contract" (2) The article presages socialist efforts to reclaim the language of, rather than to directly protest, individualism; as Morris envisions it, socialism is not characterized by state control, but rather by voluntary cooperation that results in the authentic liberty to do as one pleases: socialism aims "to use the forces of nature by means of universal cooperation for the purpose of gaining generous and equal livelihood for all, leaving them free to enjoy their lives" (2).<sup>73</sup>

William Morris's journal, *Commonweal*, continued the effort to undermine doctrines of individualism. Nearly every issue contained attacks on individualism or individualists, including frequent critiques of the LPDL's annual reports. Sometimes, the term "individualism" in *Commonweal* simply shorthands any point of view that opposes itself to socialism. Edward Aveling writes in 1886, "every difficulty propounded to the Socialist recoils upon the head of the individualist, and ... every question as to how he will do this, that or the other, may be in part answered by the retort: 'And in what fashion are you doing it?'" (34). In their series of articles on the origins of socialism, Morris and E. Belfort Bax describe an ordinary opposition between the two: "We now have to deal with that Mediaeval society which was based on the fusion of ideas of tribal communism and roman individualism and bureaucracy" (61); the lectures reported by *Commonweal* not infrequently mention events such as "a debate held at the Secularist meeting place upon Socialism v. Individualism" ("Branch Meeting Rooms" 8) or "a debate between T.E. Wardle and H. Hardaker, the subject being 'Socialism v. Individualism'" (September 4 1886, p. 183).

But elsewhere, *Commonweal* is less willing to accept the opposition between socialism and individualism. George Bernard Shaw writes, "the only Individualism which is not common ground for [Auberon Herbert] and for all Socialists is individual ownership of more than an

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<sup>73</sup> Morris continued to challenge individualist doctrine; he later wrote in the "Statement of Principles of the Hammersmith Socialist Society" that "the idea put forward by some who attack present society, of the complete independence of every individual, that is, of freedom without society, is not merely impossible of realization, but when looked into, turns out to be inconceivable" (quoted in "The Life of William Morris" 2:241).



equal share of that portion of our wealth which is *not* earned by individuals, but which is given by Nature or gained association” (“Mr. Auberon Herbert” 90). Shaw suggests that “individualism” does not name a group of people opposed to socialism, but rather a concept whose opposition with socialism is only produced by a false understanding of individuality in the first place. Shaw’s strategy is interesting because it directly addresses the assumptions about what an “individual” is that underlie the Spencerians’ praise of self-sufficiency and free competition. This point was made ironically by other writers who suggested that individualists themselves benefited from their collective organization. In a review of the 1885 LPDL report, Thomas Binning refers to its members as “the band of landlords, lawyers, publicans, pawnbrokers and lesser banditti”; he hopes “that the report will be read and pondered in every workman’s Club, in order that the wiles of these wolves may be understood, who hunt in packs themselves and preach individualism to the sheep in order that they may more easily devour them” (13). Binning’s report, while opposing individualism to socialism, rhetorically challenges the premise that individualism stands for “individual enterprise,” suggesting instead that its success depends upon a collective resembling a criminal gang on the one hand, or a pack of animals on the other.

Annie Besant, who two years later joined Morris’s Law and Liberty League, wrote in 1886,

It is feared by some that the success of the Socialist movement would bring about the crushing of individualism, and an undue restriction of liberty. But the Socialist contends that the present terrible struggle for existence is the worst enemy of individualism, and that for the vast majority individuality is a mere phrase. Exhausting toil and ever-growing anxiety, these crush out individuality, and turn the eager promising lad into the harassed drudge of middle age. How many capable brains are wasted, how many original geniuses lost to the nations they might illuminate, by the strife for mere livelihood? The artist fritters away his genius in ‘pot-boilers’; the dramatist writes down to the piece that will ‘pay,’ and harnesses his delicate fancy into coarse burlesque full of wretched witticisms.... Individualism will only really develop fully when Socialism has lifted off all shoulders the heavy burden of care. (227)

Besant continues by pointing out that the only form of liberty with which Socialism interferes is the liberty to enslave others. Besant’s intervention is particularly significant since it appeals to a definition of individuality that is not explicitly political, suggesting that not only are “freedom” and “liberty” terms that are highly mutable within the political arena, but that there might be a positive content to these terms. One of the things that makes “liberty” so susceptible to taking on a range of meanings is its tendency to be conceived of negatively: “liberty from,” that is, rather than “liberty to.” Besant’s comment suggests that individual liberty might have a content, and that that content is creative, artistic activity.

### **The Origins of Aesthetic Freedom**

When Oscar Wilde took up this possibility in an 1891 essay in the *Fortnightly Review*, he therefore wrote to an audience that was familiar both with Individualism and the Socialist response. Many of Wilde’s rhetorical moves in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” were also familiar: the essay turns on the paradoxical assertion that “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism. Socialism...by converting private property into public wealth...will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism and

ensure the material well-being of each member of the community. It will in fact give Life its proper basis and its proper environment” (1175). Liberals (Allen) and Socialists (Shaw) had already argued that socialism made room for forms of individuality that were ethically superior to those afforded by capitalist competition; they had also pointed out that the terms in which the debate was being conducted were becoming so rhetorically empty that the poles of Individualism and Socialism could, in a few sentences, be made to mean the same thing. Even Wilde’s rhetoric of nature—society is a “healthy organism”; life must be given its “proper environment”—had been turned against the individualists by socialists. What *was* original about Wilde’s argument was its implication that aestheticism contained a Paterian model of subjectivity that could found a type of individualism fully compatible with socialism. While Pater stops short in “Diaphaneité” of explaining exactly how the diaphanous character could “regenerate” society, Wilde builds directly upon Pater’s suggestion that the Renaissance fostered an environment in which Raphael “stood still to live upon himself, even in outward form a youth, almost an infant” (“Diaphaneité” 220). Wilde writes: “the Renaissance was great, because it sought to solve no social problem...but suffered the individual to develop freely, beautifully, and naturally, and so had great and individual artists, and great and individual men” (1193). In the final paragraph of Wilde’s essay, the influence of Pater is unmistakable: “what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others or suffering it ever, and his activities are all pleasurable to him, he will be saner, healthier, more civilized, more himself.... The new Individualism, for whose service Socialism...is working, will be perfect harmony” (1197). Wilde responds to Individualists by proposing an ideal form of individuality in which the lack of constraint is not its definition, but its condition. The turn to a Paterian model that privileges “intensity” in all activity allows Wilde to purvey a notion of individuality that is, like Spencer’s, focused on the pursuit of pleasure, but that finds this pleasure in subjective sensation rather than the material accoutrements of wealth. Wilde removes the individual from the market and places him in the museum.

And yet, even this turn to art in order to render individualism more harmonious was not entirely original. Matthew Arnold had suggested almost a decade earlier in *Culture and Anarchy* that art may be capable of breaking the binary of individual freedom and state control, claiming that aesthetic education would have the effect of channeling those individual inclinations of which Spencerians were so defensive into activities other than competitive commercialism.<sup>74</sup> In “Doing as One Likes,” Arnold challenges the notion of individual liberty as simply the absence of restraint. The essay claims that the “prevalent notion...that it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to be able to do as he likes” (117) is nothing more than another way of worshipping utility, or “machinery,” as an end in itself. As a result, Arnold writes, “there are a good many people in our paradisiacal centres of industrialism and individualism taking the bread out of one another’s mouths” (122). Like socialists, Arnold finds that the theory of individualism does not naturally encourage social well-being, but instead justifies unethical behavior. Unlike

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<sup>74</sup> Regenia Gagnier suggests that Arnold is directly responding to theories of individualism: “It was precisely this fear of selfish or competitive individualism...that led to Matthew Arnold’s *Friendship’s Garland* (1886–71) and the more important *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which offered aesthetics or “Culture” as a solution to anomie, anarchy and class conflict” (“The Law of Progress” 320). Gagnier casts the sort of individualism I am here calling “aesthetic” as psychological, noting that through a respect for “interestingness” of character Arnold allows individualism to slip back into his protest against it.

socialists, however, Arnold does not find it necessary to sacrifice liberalism in order to get beyond individualism; instead, the promulgation of “poetry and aesthetics” will encourage individuals to strive for the development and transformation of the self: “The great thing, it will be observed, is to find our *best* self, and to seek to affirm nothing but that; not—as we English with our over-value for merely being free and busy have been so accustomed to do—resting satisfied with a self which comes uppermost long before our best self, and affirming that with blind energy” (135). What Arnold and Wilde suggest is that aesthetic experience could be an “individualist” pursuit that not only does not run the risk of encroaching upon the personal liberty of others, but also gives the “freedom” promoted by individualism a quality higher than that of economic wealth.

It would not be unreasonable to ask why art should be able to fulfill such an exalted role. Whence the assumption that aesthetic experience is somehow allied with “freedom” and “individuality”? For Wilde and Arnold, John Ruskin is the source of the idea that art functions as a domain of free activity, independent of—or transcending—political control. Like the doctrines of individualism, Ruskin’s aesthetic theory often investigates the balance between the freedom of an individual to do as he likes and the necessity of conforming to rules. And like individualists, Ruskin privileges the expression of free individuality over the external determination or limitation of activity. Ruskin approaches this argument through his interest in the historical and psychological conditions under which art is produced: *The Stones of Venice* reads architectural form as the legible inscription of these conditions. Art thus allows Ruskin to make critical judgments about aesthetic and cultural form simultaneously. The volumes of *The Stones of Venice* map a trajectory according to which an emphasis on form for its own sake increasingly limits the domain in which the individual artist is allowed to express himself. The work’s second volume praises the decorative Byzantine splendor of St. Mark’s basilica as the extension of a culture in which adornment is the cultural expression of religious devotion (2:101); it likewise praises Gothic architecture, which privileges the individual expression of the artisan over technical skill. The Renaissance however, constitutes for Ruskin the “Fall” during which lesser artists are reduced to the function of executing the designs of the towering figures; art is either “a base and helpless copy of more accomplished models; or, if not this, a mere accumulation of technical skill, in gaining which the workman had surrendered all other powers that were in him” (3:15). Ruskin’s interest in the social conditions surrounding artistic creation leads to a philosophy of aesthetics that privileges those historical moments in which the greatest liberty of expression is available. Art is good when it creates a mode of activity that transcends other forms of servitude.

This logic is most concisely and famously expressed in Ruskin’s introduction of his analysis of the Gothic period. Ruskin introduces the chapter by describing form as the manifestation of the builders’ conscious state: “Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, *legibly expressed in it*” (3:153). So, for example, the “rigidity” of Gothic architecture expresses the builder’s “character” of “obstinacy” (3:154); when Ruskin refers to “Gothicness of character” (3:154) he is describing equally an architectural feature and an psychological condition. Architecture’s formal qualities manifest mental state of the builders who produce it on the one side; on the other, the critic deciphers aesthetic forms in order to learn about their creators. Ruskin instructs his readers not to mechanically identify architectural features (to which *Stones* is part manual,

part travel guide), but to make the connection between these features and the spirit in which they were constructed:

It is a law for Gothic architecture, that it shall use the pointed arch for its roof proper; but because, in many cases of domestic building, this becomes impossible for want of room... flat ceilings may be used, and yet the Gothic shall not lose its purity. But in the roof-mask, there can be no necessity nor reason for a change of form: the gable is the best; and if any other—dome, or bulging crown, or whatsoever else—be employed at all, it must be in pure caprice, and willful transgression of law. And wherever this is done, the Gothic has lost its character; it is pure Gothic no more. And this last clause of the definition is to be more strongly insisted upon, because it includes multitudes of buildings, especially domestic, which are Gothic in spirit, but which we are not in the habit of embracing in our general conception of Gothic architecture. (3:210)

Ruskin argues that “Gothicness” is not reducible to the particular architectural elements that commonly appear in Gothic buildings: the authenticity of the Gothic is to be determined by an evaluation of “character” in multiple senses. Is a non-Gothic element introduced out of necessity, or out of “pure caprice, and willful transgression”? Understanding the builder’s motivation is crucial to making aesthetic judgments; one can use Gothic architectural features and yet not create a piece of “pure” Gothic architecture if one’s motivations are not correct. Conversely, if the builder’s “spirit” is Gothic enough, that makes the building Gothic even if it does not conform perfectly to the canon of arches, vaults, and floor plans upon which the bulk of Ruskin’s work is focused.

Because Ruskin’s aesthetic is so focused upon the mental state of the builder that produces it, it is crucially important that form be a transparent, unhindered medium for the expression of character. This transparency is fully achieved only in the Gothic period, when the artisan was allowed to build as he saw fit rather than submit to a master-plan. This is the argument that sparked the imaginations of later socialist reformers such as Morris: the demand for formal perfection—for designs executed with perfect technical skill—prevents the artisan from using form as the medium of self-expression that Ruskin promises it can be. Ruskin writes, “If you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make a tool. Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness... but out comes the whole majesty of him also” (162). Art itself (Ruskin makes it clear that what he is saying is “not... true of architecture only” (170)) thus becomes important primarily as a medium of individual expression; to artificially limit this expression is, Ruskin claims in the most dramatic passage of the chapter, tantamount to perpetuating slavery. Ruskin writes, “And now, reader, look round this English room of yours.... Examine again all those accurate mouldings and perfect polishing.... Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African or helot Greek” (3:163). For Ruskin, form is literally legible as the manifestation of the relation between producer and user; the more the user capriciously demands formal perfection, the more producers are forced to become “cogs and compasses” (3:162) in the machine that churns out decorative trinkets.

Ruskin’s call for pleasure to be reintroduced into labor rallied later socialists, who saw in it not only an aesthetic theory, but also a protest against a capitalist system that perpetuated structurally invisible forms of economic slavery. Morris in particular lit upon the idea that labor could be made pleasurable through its aestheticization in order to develop his own utopian

visions: in the future described by *News from Nowhere*, all forms of slavery disappear once workers become free to pursue whatever means of expression most suit them. This political appropriation of Ruskin, however, was hasty in its willingness to overlook what Ruskin himself identified as the political implications of the kind of aesthetic “freedom” that he championed: for Ruskin, this freedom did not point the way toward a revolutionary future, but looked back nostalgically toward the past. After his challenge to British taste for turning artisans into slavish copiers of designs, Ruskin refines his definition of freedom: “I know not if a day is ever to come when the nature of right freedom will be understood, and when men will see that to obey another man, to labor for him, yield reverence to him or to obey his place, is not slavery. It is often the best kind of liberty,—liberty from care” (3:164). Ruskin contains the revolutionary potential of his essay by circumscribing aesthetic liberty within an archaic caste system. It is not hard to see the problematic political implications of privileging artistic freedom over political—one is tempted to say “actual”—freedom. Ruskin himself veers dangerously close to allowing the freedom of the artist to justify the most egregious manifestations of despotism: if allowed to express themselves aesthetically, Ruskin writes, “men may be beaten, chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like the summer flies, and yet remain in one sense, and in the best sense, free” (3:162). One need merely reverse the syntax of the sentence to see its problematic implications: if men are allowed freedom of aesthetic expression, they may be “chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like the summer flies.” This is not, of course, what Ruskin means, but it is in many ways what Ruskin says. Liberty from care is the “best” kind of liberty; the freedom to paint however one likes is the “best” kind of freedom.

Ruskin introduces the idea that artistic activity is a privileged domain of freedom, allowing later Victorians to turn to this conception of art in the debate over individualism, but these appropriations of Ruskin ignore the strength of his distinction between aesthetic and political freedom. This is a distinction so strong that it is not at all clear that the former guarantees the latter. Joseph Bizup notes that “Like Marx, Ruskin recognizes the revolutionary potential arising out of the conditions of factory labor, and like Morris, he attributes this impulse to a crisis of desire: the working classes do not know what they should want. But in contrast to these more radical thinkers, Ruskin endeavors to defuse this potential by substituting aesthetic autonomy for political liberty” (188). This dynamic is even more apparent elsewhere in Ruskin’s writing about art, which makes it clear that “aesthetic freedom” can in fact refer to a tightly constrained set of possibilities. In “The Lamp of Obedience,” Ruskin asks how we can tell whether innovation is authentic artistic creativity or whether it is mere mannerism for its own sake. In answering this question, Ruskin paradoxically proposes a “Law of Liberty,” which he defines as “chastisement of the passions, discipline of the intellect, subjection of the will...fear of inflicting, the shame of committing, a wrong...respect for all who are in authority, and consideration for all who are in dependence...in a word, that Service which is defined in the liturgy of the English church to be perfect Freedom” (204). One must be careful to understand Ruskin’s use of the term “freedom”; just as it justifies a feudalist political system in “The Nature of Gothic,” here it signifies subjection, service, deference, chastisement, and shame. This is a conscious redefinition; Ruskin is worried that the very word “liberty” carries the negative connotations of luxurious license, reckless change, and anarchy. Ruskin works to assure his reader that deference really can be a form of freedom: “Obedience is, indeed, founded on a kind of freedom, else it would become mere subjugation...while a measure of license is necessary to exhibit the individual energies of things, the fairness and pleasantness and perfection of them all

consist in their Restraint” (205). Unlike Arnold, who turns to art in order to render individualist liberty more edifying, Ruskin turns to art in order to circumscribe and reduce the domain in which liberty operates.

If on the one hand, Ruskin privileges the Gothic for the extent to which it allows the individual to express his freedom in material form, on the other Ruskin is highly skeptical of any kind of artistic production that directly challenges convention. Just as in “The Nature of Gothic,” liberty “from care” circumscribes the realm in which freedom is available, in “The Lamp of Obedience,” the constraints of nature and law—and natural law—circumscribe the realm in which artistic originality is deemed valuable. Because the revolutionary potential of “The Nature of Gothic” has to do with its demand that the labor of factory workers be freed from wage-slavery, it is crucial not to overstate the extent of this freedom.

Ruskin is important here not merely because he, like Spencer, happens to be interested in the relation between individual and community; Ruskin is important because he introduces the possibility that the aesthetic domain can mediate political conundrums about the degree of freedom individuals ought to be allowed. Ruskin thus lays the groundwork for essays such as Wilde’s, which turn to aesthetic autonomy and autonomous individuality in order to valorize the liberty made available by a socialist utopia, and shift focus from the control that might be exerted by the universalized state to the creative freedoms that will be afforded the individual. Ruskin does so rhetorically as much as conceptually. His turn to “freedom,” as we have seen, relies on the possibility that the word can do different kinds of theoretical work in different contexts.

That said, I would argue that there is something fundamental to the aesthetic domain itself that makes it possible for “art” to step in at these crucial moments and productively complicate the relation between individual and community. Beginning with Kant, and increasingly over the course of the nineteenth century, aesthetic philosophy treats the artwork as a specialized domain, constitutively independent of physical gratification, of moral doctrine, of material contingency, of philosophical reasoning. It is this autonomy that makes it possible for British aestheticians to conceive of artistic labor as operating somehow outside the normal “machinery” of society and that gives a quality of “pleasure” that is not limited to base self-satisfaction. It is unlikely that Ruskin had any of the rigorous treatments of aesthetic philosophy in mind (George Landow notes that Ruskin’s lack of awareness of German philosophy “is the only major gap one can discern in his knowledge” (18)), but nonetheless Hegel’s arguments about the autonomy of the “sphere of art” and the freedom accorded to the activity of artistic production constitute the philosophical basis upon which arguments such as Ruskin’s can be made.<sup>75</sup>

That the work of aesthetic philosophy was in large part to construct an alliance between art or beauty and individual freedom is, as I have argued in Chapter One, one of the primary reasons that an apparently disinterested aesthetic philosophy can become available for political use. The interrelation of aesthetic and individual freedom manifests itself both through the Kantian notion that aesthetic judgment is undetermined by moral concepts or physical inclination and more generally through an interest in “genius” as a mode of individuality that both disregards and establishes aesthetic norms. In Hegel, the focus on aesthetic freedom shifts from

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<sup>75</sup> The British Hegelian Bernard Bosanquet, however, does suggest that there is a similarity between Ruskin’s and Hegel’s projects; see *Science and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 381.

isolated instances of genius to the connection that Ruskin describes between inner consciousness, material form, and liberty of expression.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* directly takes up the question of how art relates to individual freedom. Hegel first confronts the idea that freedom is a purely negative term: "Now the highest content which the subject can comprise in himself is what we can point-blank call *freedom*. . . . In the first place, on its purely formal side, it consists in this, that in what confronts the subject there is nothing alien and it is not a limitation or a barrier. . . . all distress and every misfortune has vanished, the subject is reconciled with the work, satisfied in it, and every opposition and contradiction is resolved" (97). This idea of freedom as the purely formal lack of opposition is divided into two sorts. On the one hand this lack of resistance can mean the purely physical satisfaction of inclinations: we experience opposition when we find ourselves hungry, thirsty, or tired, feelings to which we are subject but from which we can easily free ourselves by eating, drinking or sleeping. This sort of satisfaction, however, Hegel points out "is not absolute" (98) and will arise again and again. Hegel then proposes that freedom can take "higher" forms than the simple freedom from physical necessity. This higher freedom can be thought of in terms of the state: "In a state which is really articulated rationally all the laws and organizations are nothing but a realization of freedom in its essential characteristics. When this is the case, the individual's reason finds in these institutions only the actuality of his own essence" (98). But it turns out that the even the sorts of resolutions to unfreedom offered by the state are just as ephemeral and short-lived as hunger, since they apply only to "single relative matters and their single objects: this house, this sum of money, this specific right, this specific law" (99). Hegel proceeds to ask again what sort of "freedom" we can imagine that is not temporary, that does not remove resistance only in particular cases. Hegel describes this freedom even higher than that afforded by the rationally organized state as follows: "In it, validity and power are swept away from the opposition between freedom and necessity, between spirit and nature, between knowledge and its object, between law and impulse, from opposition and contradiction as such, whatever forms they may take" (100). Hegel proposes that what we discover there is not just an absolute form of freedom (as lack of necessity) but the dissolution of the very opposition between freedom and necessity. Art, as well as religion and philosophy, are the "realms" (101) in which this experience is made available. Hegel's hierarchy of different forms of freedom thus proposes that art is capable of dissolving the apparent opposition between freedom and necessity upon which a political definition of freedom rests. In an important sense, it is art (or, depending on the historical period, religion or philosophy)—and not politics—which serves as the guarantor of subjective autonomy. It is only through the higher forms of aesthetic experience that we become free from our dependence upon the material world and free from the vicissitudes of contingency.

What is specifically important about art, as opposed to the other domains in which subjective freedom are available, is its strong connection to materiality. It is this connection that Ruskin draws upon in "The Nature of Gothic" in order to demonstrate how subjective freedom can manifest itself aesthetically even when political systems constrain other (lesser) forms of liberty. Art, for Hegel, liberates the subject from the constraints of materiality and particularity. Although religion and philosophy also allow us to go beyond the contemplation and experience of mere particulars, what is notable about art is, to put it crudely, that it occupies a "middle ground" between the concrete realm of materiality and the abstract realm of spirit. This is important, as Pater noted in his own reading of Hegel, because it allows the viewer to see

abstract thought presented in material form. But Hegel is as much, if not more, concerned with the dynamic by which art is produced as with the art object itself. The production of art, for Hegel, is a process in which the artist makes manifest his own inner “spirit” in a material form. Hegel writes, “The universal need for expression in art lies, therefore, in man’s rational impulse to exalt the inner and outer world into a spiritual consciousness for himself, as an object in which he recognizes his own self. He satisfies the need of this spiritual freedom when he makes all that exists explicit for himself *within*, and in a corresponding way realizes this his explicit self *without*, evoking thereby, in this reduplication of himself, what is in him into vision and into knowledge for his own mind and for that of others” (36). In this highly condensed formulation, the key term is “reduplication”; Hegel describes the practical activity of producing art as one in which the formation of matter in a particular way is a means by which a subject not only expresses himself, but leaves a material trace of his subjectivity in the physical world: “[man] has the impulse, in the medium which is directly given to him, and externally presented before him, to produce himself, and therein at the same time to recognize himself. This purpose he achieves by the modification of external things upon which he impresses the seal of his inner being, and then finds repeated in them his own characteristics. Man does this in order as a free subject to strip the outer world of its stubborn foreignness, and to enjoy in the shape and fashion of things a mere external reality of himself” (36). In the work of art, then, materiality and individuality are united.

Hegel is therefore important for understanding two moves that Ruskin makes in introducing a relation between artistic and subjective freedom. First, Hegel separates different kinds of freedom in a way that shows that there is a mode of freedom higher and more important than the mere absence of physical—or even political—constraint. Second, Hegel describes the work of art as the means by which this higher individual freedom can take material form in a moment of artistic creation. It does so not because it is mere “caprice”—a bounded realm of activity in which one can do whatever one likes. As Hegel puts it, the production of art is more than “a mere play on chance and fancies which might just as well be left alone as pursued” (30). Rather, it does so because it transforms the material world from something that is stubbornly particular and separate from thought into something that is fully coincident with it. The lack of resistance that results is the kind of freedom Hegel describes. One way in which Hegel describes this coincidence between inner and outer spheres is by saying that the subject, through the work of art recognizes “himself” in the material world; as an object freely created, the work of art manifests materially the inner consciousness of the creator. This is the very logic of “The Nature of Gothic.” For Ruskin, the worker under feudalism is “freer” than the modern individual not only because he can execute his own designs and create architecture in any manner that he pleases. He is also “freer” because he is able to externalize in material form his own subjective consciousness. This leads Ruskin to observe the same dynamic relation between expression, formation, and recognition as Hegel: because the worker is able to express himself in material form through the work of art, the viewer can understand the characteristics of the artist who (and of the age that) produced it. Art thus becomes at once the form in which individuality manifests itself materially and the legible evidence of a free spirit.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the emphasis on artistic production as the intentional formation of material that proceeds from Hegel’s aesthetics through Ruskin’s. It opens a way of thinking about “form” as neither a transhistorical category nor a capricious mannerism; instead it is through the peculiarities of form that it becomes possible to decipher the



characteristics of a particular individual or historical period—aesthetic form is the trace of history and of consciousness. If this is the case, then it becomes clear why art would be grouped with enterprises as lofty as religion and philosophy. In an illustration of the importance of aesthetic form, Hegel writes that we can convey the content of a book, but that does not satisfy our need for art: “the content of a book may be indicated in a few words or sentences, and nothing else should be found in the book beyond the universal aspect of its content which has already been stated”; but “whatever validity a content may have in itself, we are still not satisfied with this abstract validity and crave for something further” (95–96). This “something further” is precisely the particular form that a work of art takes—the material or particular manifestation of content upon which subjectivity has left its imprint. The casting of natural material into a form mediated by human intention is thus the moment in which for both Ruskin and Hegel, individual freedom manifests itself.

It is based upon this definition of aesthetic form that I would like to offer a “formalist” reading of William Morris’s work, which unites aestheticism, socialism, and individualism. Socialism’s reliance upon the idea of “aesthetic freedom” in its response to the debate over individualism is more than a turn to the simple notion that artists are free to create whatever they like. It calls into play a notion of aesthetic form as a process of expression that evidences the very moment in which the individual leaves a purely atomized mode of existence by imprinting his inner “spirit” onto a material object that then becomes legible to others: aesthetic form produces the material evidence that other individuals exist. This gives it powerful potential in the face of arguments such as Spencer’s that individuals are discrete and the boundaries between them insurmountable.

I will argue that in realizing this potential, William Morris’s literary work becomes political through its form rather than through its propaganda. After discussing the way that Morris directly addresses Spencerian individualism and the Ruskinian notion of form in his lectures and journalism, I will turn to the most obvious literary site at which these intellectual trends converge: his 1890 romance *News from Nowhere*, which imagines a future socialist utopia in which decentralized socialism has produced an aesthetic individualism in precisely the way that Wilde envisions. Although the work is certainly significant for its dogmatic effort to show how artistic activity might produce noncompetitive forms of individuality, I will ultimately argue that it is the romance’s form that contains the most interesting intervention into the debate over individualism. My interpretation of the formal significance of *News from Nowhere* will, in turn, open new interpretive possibilities for the romances that follow it. Focusing on *The Well at the World’s End*, one of Morris’s last works, I will argue that the work is just as coherent an engagement with the problematic of individualism as Morris’s lectures on the topic, and that this engagement occurs precisely at the site where the romance has taken to be a break with Morris’s early work: its apolitical, fantastic genre.

### **Morris as Formalist**

In a pamphlet about William Morris and his circle, Morris’s biographer and friend J.W. Mackail makes Morris’s attempt to reconcile individuality and socialism the very content of his personality:

[Morris] had also found the secret of the world—fraternity. He had found out the great truth that solitary life is sterile life; that art is not, or ought not to be, an abstract and lonely thing, but the joint energy of minds and hands working in common sympathy....

Do not misunderstand this to mean that he either sustained or desired any merging or blurring of personality. It was one of his most fixed and most fertile doctrines that only in a life thus socialized could personality have natural growth and unhindered scope. In the world as it is now, individual genius is everywhere checked, cramped, and thwarted just for want of a common social atmosphere. . . . [Morris's] best friends said of him that he seemed to need no one. He was often far away by himself. . . . But this lonely self-centred dreamer was at the same time a man of action who naturally and easily gathered others around him, who had an immediate practical effect on all with whom he came into contact. (11)

Mackail's argument is by now familiar: the claim that socialism improves on capitalism because it allows for the expression of individual personality could be lifted directly from Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism." Mackail's observation is telling for its illustration of the extent to which the debate over individualism influenced both Morris's thinking and his contemporaries' perception of him. Mackail is careful to distinguish between art produced collectively and a lack of individual personality, and portrays common dependence as the condition for the "natural" and "unhindered" development of identity. Mackail sees this not only as a component of Morris's theory, but a component of his life as well: Morris is at once "self-centred" and immediately in contact with those who gather around him.

Morris's sprawling oeuvre of essays, lectures, journalism, stories, and "romances" (not to mention designs, tiles, wallpaper, and furniture) colligates aesthetic and political individualism on a number of levels. First, Morris directly turns to art to reconcile the claims of individualism and of socialism: by turning economic production into aesthetic activity, Morris steers clear of centralized statist socialism without having to endorse anarchy. As do the other aestheticians I have discussed, Morris discovers in the idea of aesthetic freedom the possibility of non-competitive individualism. Second, by turning to form, Morris is able to expand the range of aesthetic activity from the carving of architectural features or crafting of beautiful personae to *any* productive activity that attends to beautiful form. As we will see, this can include, remarkably, processes as apparently unaesthetic as city management and the plotting of farmland. Finally, Morris's work itself performs this relation between individual expression and form—but it also complicates it. The romances are less a static manifestation of Morris's individual personality than the exploration of new modes of personality that might be made possible by socialism.

In an 1884 essay, "Factory work as it is," Morris demonstrates quite clearly his awareness both of the contentious debate over individualism and of the proposal that socialism will enhance rather than limit individual liberty. Morris theorizes that a "healthy and undomineering individuality will be fostered and not crushed out by socialism" (15). It is difficult to align Morris neatly with any of the camps who were discussing the political, philosophical, and aesthetic aspects of individualism in the 1880s. In a lecture that surprised its audience with its direct politicization of art, "Art under Plutocracy," Morris takes a stance against the division of labor in factories that privileges individual work over interdependent production. Under the guild system, "the unit of labor was an intelligent man. . . . [N]o great pressure of speed was put on a man's work. . . ; it used the whole of a man for the production of a piece of goods. . . ; in short, it did not submit the hand and soul of the workman to the necessities of the competitive market, but allowed them freedom for due human development" (*Collected*

*Works* 24:176).<sup>76</sup> Morris emphasizes the conjunction between freedom and artistic activity: “It was this system...which produced the art of the Middle Ages, wherein the harmonious cooperation of free intelligence was carried to the furthest point which has yet been attained, and which alone of all art can claim to be called Free” (176–177). Conversely, Morris argues, modern capitalism has produced a “workshop-system,” in which “the unit of manufacture is no longer a man, but a group of men, each member of which is dependent on his fellows, and is utterly useless by himself” (177). Morris’s political aim is to imagine a way in which such interdependence would be positive rather than negative; as he constructs his own workshops in which people are allowed to use their “whole” selves in the production of something, he defines the Socialist goal as the production of “a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he forms a portion. This...is the essence also of the struggle in which we are engaged” (“Foreword” 375). Morris imagines the transformation from the problematic reduction of an individual to a cog in a larger machine outside of which he serves no purpose to a “Commonwealth” in which individuality and interdependence are fully compatible.<sup>77</sup>

Although Morris makes many explicitly Marxist arguments for how this sort of society might be achieved (“Factory Work” notes, for example, “we have not set ourselves to build up a system”; rather, “we are assisting in bringing about a development of history which would take place without our help” (14)), what makes his work notable is the way in which aesthetic theory plays a crucial role both in imagining and effecting such a transition. Morris explores the possibility raised by Besant, Wilde, and Ruskin: that aesthetics can offer a model of free individuality that neither attempts to dominate others nor disavows its membership in a social group. In “Art under Plutocracy,” aesthetic and political freedom blend into one another; “free popular art” manifests independence from both the necessities of the market and from the allegiance to a utilitarian design. To make this argument, Morris draws directly upon Ruskin, whose “The Nature of Gothic” had a significant impact: “To my mind...it is one of the most important things written by the author, and in future days will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century. To some of us when we first read it, now many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel” (367).<sup>78</sup> From Ruskin, Morris drew the lesson that labor might be made pleasurable if the laborer treats his work as art rather than drudgery, and that in order for this to be the case, labor itself must be liberated from the capitalist system which subjects the worker to demands rather than allowing him the liberty to produce what and as he likes.

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<sup>76</sup> The *Times* reported of the lecture, “Mr. Morris announced himself a member of a socialistic society and appealed for funds for the objects of the society. The Master of the University then said to the effect that if he had announced this beforehand it was probable that the College Hall would have been refused” (Quoted in Latham, 161).

<sup>77</sup> Citing Morris’s essay “Art and Socialism,” Peter Stansky points out that this coincidence of individual and interdependence “modifies the accepted view that Morris was against individualism. He would be sympathetic to the individual aspirations of the members of the [Art Workers’] Guild and approved of these aims in the context of group activity: ‘It is true that all art springs from cherishing individuality of mind, that is to say freedom of thought and imagination: it may also be true as some people think that the whole tendency of civilization is to extinguish individuality of mind, in that case it must be true that it is the tendency of civilization, of progress as ‘tis called by some, to extinguish art’” (126).

<sup>78</sup> Ruskin’s presence in “Art under Plutocracy” is also his presence *at* “Art under Plutocracy”; Ruskin chaired the meeting at Oxford at which the essay was first delivered.

An important effect of this turn to Ruskin is an increased emphasis on the materiality of art. By defining art as “the expression of man’s pleasure in labor” (“Preface” 1), Morris and Ruskin shift the focus of aesthetic experience away from the moment in which a spectator encounters a work of art toward the moment in which the artist produces it. For Morris “art” is the process by which beautiful things are produced rather than the beautiful things in themselves. This turn away from Paterian sensation and experience leads to a different kind of formalism. As we have seen, for Hegel art is the manifestation of consciousness in material form; form is literally the way in which material is formed—and is thereby liberated from its status as mere material. Likewise for Morris (and Ruskin), the way in which ordinary labor is converted into artistic labor is through the imprint of the laborer’s individual consciousness on his product—rather than the “mechanical” execution of a design which leaves no trace of the person who produced it. Although it might seem that the arts-and-crafts aesthetic, with its focus on making objects that can be used, has little to do with what we are accustomed to calling “formalism,” this is probably only because we tend to hear that term in the modernist sense that opposes formalism and realism, high form and banal reality. Instead Morris gives us a quite different definition: “For, and this is at the root of the whole matter, everything made by man’s hand has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly” (23:165). Morris exalts the “lesser art” of decoration by attributing to it the estranging effect that Victor Shklovsky would describe in literary terms a generation later; Morris writes, “we, for our parts, are busy or sluggish, dulled to his eventfulness of form in those things which we are always looking at. Now it is one of the chief uses of decoration...that it has to sharpen our dulled sense in this matter: for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, which men have so long delighted in” (“The Lesser Arts” 4). For Morris “form” is the evidence of something’s made-ness; the place where pleasure in that formation is expressed as the object itself.

Hence, although Morris believes that he is greatly expanding the definition of art, he has really not departed that far from Hegel. Morris distinguishes, for example, between “these master-arts, these arts more specially of the intellect” and decoration, but then imagines decoration through much the same dynamic by which Hegel describes the production of art. He reasserts this distinction between “Intellectual” and Decorative” in “Art under Plutocracy” which only serves to confirm that the basis of Morris’s aesthetic theory is a formalism which recognizes the shaping of material by an individual as the fundamental principle by which we can recognize something as art: “I must ask you to extend the word art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture, and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay, even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds... For I must ask you to believe that every one of the things that goes to make up the surroundings among which we live must be either beautiful or ugly...either a torment and burden to the maker of it to make, or a pleasure and a solace to him” (23:165). For Morris, it is the pleasure with which artistic production is allied that serves as the criterion for beauty; his odd list of things that might be called art—“the management of towns”’—has in common the transfiguration of some or other existing material into another form.

In his lectures and essays, Morris confronts one of the problems of autonomous individuality that underlay the debate that was going on in more openly political arenas. Namely, how is it possible to break out of a binary that places untrammelled individualist competition on the one side and fully universalized state control on the other? Those engaged in the political

debate had proposed several solutions. Liberals such as Allen and Bradlaugh imagined a sort of uneasy combination, where competition is maintained, but the playing ground is leveled as much as possible. Committed Socialists, of course, wanted a full-scale leveling, but, if there was to be no central state, were unclear about how to keep such a situation from devolving back into individualist anarchy. “Form”—conceived of as the process of formation—intervenes to dissolve this opposition. It allows the individual to “express” him or herself and thus translates to a safely aesthetic level the individualism that is problematic in political terms. “Form” is the quality that makes something aesthetic as well as the manifestation of the personality that stands between medium and viewer.

These two aspects of Morris’s thought—the emphasis on the pleasurable crafting of material on the one hand, and the attempt to resolve a sense of individual liberty with a commitment to socialist unity on the other—are most extensively developed in Morris’s *News from Nowhere*. The romance thematizes the dynamic interrelations between individual production, collective existence, and aesthetic freedom. At the same time, it occupies an unusual generic status as the kind of non-decorative “Intellectual” art of which Morris was skeptical; the work announces its own uneasiness about the possibilities of conventional aesthetic forms. The romance offers a double lens, as it were; even as it describes a twenty-third-century future in which all labor has become pleasurable artistic creation, it is the manifestation of Morris’s own artistic labor in the nineteenth century. In what follows I will examine Morris’s prose fiction through this double lens, on the one hand identifying its internal aesthetic theories about the relations between individuality, production, form, and the collective; on the other examining its construction of aesthetic relations between author, object, and reader.

### **News from Nowhere**

William Morris’s utopian romance *News from Nowhere* is probably the most self-conscious attempt in late-Victorian fiction to render individualism and socialism fully compatible.<sup>79</sup> The story tells of a socialist who awakens hundreds of years in the future to discover that socialism has indeed led to a fully-realized aesthetic individualism. Ownership of private property has disappeared entirely, but nobody is compelled to do anything. The pleasure made available by artistic activity, however, has intervened to make individuals *want* to perform all of the functions necessary for the collective’s well-being—from garbage collection to home construction. The story thus takes up directly the terms of the debate over individualism, not only as it has been set out by Spencerians, but also as it had been responded to by socialists and aesthetes. Morris agrees fully with Individualists that nobody ought to be compelled by the state

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<sup>79</sup> Darko Suvin places *News from Nowhere* among other attempts to address social dilemmas of the 1880s through fiction, one of which follows this plot: “Socialists led by Hyndman and Burne-Jones (!) revolt through mass demonstrations and seize London, and the troops fraternize with them. After one week, they hold a plebiscite that votes in socialism as against individualism by a margin of 7.5 to 5.5 million votes. The new, clearly quite legal government repeals private property at which...all British ships flee the country with the rich and their possessions on board. Morris is appointed minister for industries in the socialist government of 1888 as the only practical person in the whole crowd who knows how to keep the expenses of production down” (“Counter-Projects” 90–91). Patrick Brantlinger also notes that the romance takes its place among a number of utopian and dystopian visions concerned with the problems of individualism: *News* and Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* “portray futures in which the rugged aggressive individualism and the equally rugged work ethic of the past have come to an end... Works by all of these writers [Carpenter, Jeffries, Hudson, etc.] reflect the decline of the aggressive individualism expressed by Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’” (49).

to perform specific kinds of activities; he draws from Ruskin the idea that by allowing labor to become expressive activity, one makes it enjoyable; and, like Wilde, he proposes that the result is a society in which all individuals have become artists.<sup>80</sup> The romance describes a world in which doing as one likes naturally, uncoercively, inevitably contributes to the social good.<sup>81</sup>

The first thing that William Guest discovers upon awakening in the twenty-third century is that economic profit has ceased to become the motive for citizens' vocations. Guest is met with blank confusion when he tries to pay a waterman who ferries him across the Thames: "I think I know what you mean. . . .you feel yourself bound to give me something which I am not to give to a neighbor, unless he has done something special for me. . . . [this] seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom; . . .you see this ferrying. . . .is my *business*, which I would do for anybody" (50). The romance's first lesson is that the elimination of private property frees labor from an economic framework: the waterman ferries simply because he wishes to, and not because he is forced to. Morris invites us to relearn the word "*business*" as busy-ness; in the utopian future, the term refers to an individual activity rather than to a corporate entity. Indeed, the society that Morris describes is a massive, seamless fabric of interconnected voluntary "business." Pleasure in labor has become universal. The coincidence of what everyone wants to do and everything that needs to be done is so magical that Guest himself marvels that it seems to be "make-believe" (73) or like a "dream" (75). This is perfectly realized collectivism: factories are replaced by "banded-workshops," where "folk collect. . .to do hand-work in which working together is necessary or convenient; such work is often very pleasant" (81).

Guest's task is to figure out how humanity has arrived at this happy situation in which it is able to ask, as Morris puts it in his Preface to "The Nature of Gothic," not "Why were we born to be so miserable? but rather, Why were we born to be so happy?" (368). One of the first things that Guest discovers is that citizens of Nowhere are allowed complete latitude to do whatever they like, whenever they like. There is no centralized government to intervene in everyday affairs; there is no legal power that guarantees social harmony. In this sense, Nowhere is much more accurately described as an anarchy than as a socialist state. And yet, in this anarchic state of affairs, chaotic competition for dominance has not ensued.

This ideal reconciliation of personal liberty and social obligation—society is harmonious and goods are abundant despite the fact that there are no laws, no families, no money, and no government—is what motivates Morris's socialist utopia. In 1888, two years before *News from Nowhere* was serialized, the American socialist Edward Bellamy had written a utopian novel,

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<sup>80</sup> Contemporaries recognized the novel as an intervention into the debate over individualism. Maurice Hewlett, a fellow novelist interested in Iceland and medievalism, criticized *News* on precisely these grounds: Morris "would violently overthrow institutions and *compel* freedom" (Faulkner 345); Hewlett concludes, "Mr. Morris. . . must face facts: he must (he really must) read history. And if History tell him that the spirit of the time (not the spirit of a clique or two) is for Socialism and against Individualism. . . there's an end of the matter. History cannot lie though Historians can. But history will tell him nothing of the kind. The course of the world tends otherwise" (353).

<sup>81</sup> In considering the relation of the novel to the debate over individualism, Marcus Waithe observes that the apparent freedom of individuals to pursue whatever makes them happy is facilitated by the unlikely prospect that "all members of humanity are naturally made happy by the same things" (163), and that this assumption carries with it a naturalized ethics that in fact "seems to leave limited room for the exercise of practical freedom, or for morality" (166). This apparent contradiction in the novel is interesting primarily not because it undermines the likelihood of Morris's utopia (which is patently impossible for a much wider range of reasons), but rather because it illustrates the effect of equating "practical" and "aesthetic" freedom. By making aesthetic pleasure the highest form of individual satisfaction, Morris does assume that the "same thing" makes everyone happy, but this thing—the appreciation of beauty—is defined so broadly that the universality of its appeal is not quite as unlikely as one would presume.

*Looking Backward*, in which the government requires everyone to work from age twenty-four to age forty-five. To Morris, this seemed rather grim; he wrote a negative review of this novel whose narrator describes their social order as “so wholly based upon and deduced from [compulsory labor] that if it were conceivable that a man could escape it, he . . . would have . . . cut himself off from his kind, in a word, committed suicide” (47). *News from Nowhere*, then, is an attempt to retain socialist interconnectedness without imagining a state that effectively enforces its socialism through capital punishment. Instead, Morris imagines a world in which personal liberty is absolute and untrammelled, and yet does not lead to individualist capitalism.

How is this possible? As is suggested by Morris’s essays and lectures, “art” is the crucial term by which the competing demands of individual and community are reconciled. In order to explain how labor has become pleasant—one might object that boating is one thing, but hard manual labor is another—Morris attributes to all activity the quality of aesthetic pleasure. One of Guest’s interlocutors explains: “all work is now pleasurable . . . because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists” (123). This conversion of manual labor into artistic creation is the linchpin that holds *Nowhere* together; Hammond notes that “it is this change which makes all the others possible” (123). Morris finds a way out of Bellamy’s vision of universal compulsory labor by turning to aesthetic pleasure.

On one level, this is interesting simply as a further articulation of aestheticism’s attempt to come to terms with the debate over individualism and socialism. If previous British aestheticians approach contemporary politics either obliquely or from on high, Morris’s serialized romance—which shared its pages in *Commonweal* with articles such as “The Argentine Republic and English Radical Reformers” (January 11, 1890) and “The Labor Struggle: How to Get the Eight Hours Day” (May 3, 1890)—is a direct intervention. But as a (dogmatic) intervention into the thorny thicket of individualism, *News* can seem unsatisfyingly naïve. In many ways, *News* is more reductive and simplistic than Morris’s essays that explicitly address the problems that the romance magically solves. The non-fictionalist Morris is much more ready to acknowledge that the institution of, or rather the progress toward, the society that *Nowhere* imagines is difficult, slow, and imperfect. In this regard, *News* is neither a great novel nor great social critique; taking it at its word makes it an amusing artifact that symptomatizes its cultural moment. If the novel in itself is not fascinating, it is at least fascinating that someone would think to write it.

But to take the novel as dogma or artifact is to ignore the tensions that are created by writing something that looks very much like a novel to expound one’s anti-novelistic aesthetics.<sup>82</sup> I would like to suggest that the novel only seems to answer its political questions too easily and too quickly if we ignore its literary status and treat it as a thinly-veiled socialist tract. The novel’s demand that we reconsider the relation between art and labor requires us also to rethink the nature of the aesthetic experience produced by the novel itself. I would like to suggest

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<sup>82</sup> *News from Nowhere* is often portrayed as a formal protest against the bourgeois nature of the nineteenth-century novel; this position is formulated most fully by Patrick Brantlinger who writes in “*News from Nowhere: Morris’s Socialist Anti-Novel*” that it is “a significant criticism of the fiction of Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot. *News from Nowhere* is a conscious anti-novel, hostile to virtually every aspect of ‘the great tradition’ of Victorian fiction” (35). More recently, John Plotz has focused upon the concept of cultural “portability” to make a similar claim: “Morris sees himself, in fact, as refuting one of the Victorian novel’s core assumptions: that personal identity and cultural privilege are portable properties, and that characters’ capacity to retain a durable sense of self even when amongst strangers is what engenders readerly empathy. Morris believed that the novel’s paradigm of sanctioned identification with certain people was problematic because it underwrote disidentification elsewhere” (932).

two ways in which the novel uses its status as a work of art to reframe the opposition between individualism and socialism. Both turn on an interrogation of the notion of individual autonomy.

As I argue above, proponents of Spencerian individualism were primarily concerned with drawing clear and stable distinctions between individuals, and between individual and community. When Donisthorpe holds Spencer's absolute version of this distinction to be untenable, he responds by looking for more nuanced ways in which to maintain it. Even liberal individualists hoped for a situation in which "resetting" social inequalities would provide a social tabula rasa upon which a politics of fair individualism could be inscribed. But the narrative voice of Morris's novel calls the very boundary around individuality into question. If we look at the novel's introductory chapter, which tells us that the novel is the transcription of a dream told to the narrator by a friend, it becomes clear that the narrator is strangely unable to establish boundaries around his own individuality. The "I" which tells the novel encompasses a surprising range of characters. Although the narrator begins by describing his friend's story, he then decides it would be easier simply to pretend to be that friend: "our friend says that from sleep he awoke once more.... But, says he, I think it would be better if I told [the adventures] in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them...since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than anyone else in the world does" (45). The "says he, I think" at the beginning of this sentence makes it difficult to parse: where does the transition take place between one first-person narrator and another? On the one hand, the sentence only makes sense if it is spoken by the novel's first narrator, the person who hears the story. But this reading would only be possible if the sentence read "says he, *he thinks* it would be better if I told the story in first-person."<sup>83</sup>

Lest this seem like quibbling, consider that the sentence more or less winks at the reader, suggesting that the two narrators are actually one and the same. Indeed, the novel offers clues that *both* narrators are the real-life William Morris: we never learn William Guest's real surname, after all, and the narrator hears this story "up at the League"—the Socialist League, of which Morris was a founder. The weird openness of the narrating voice has led to critical disagreements: Carolyn Lesjak views it as evidence of the novel's construction of a mutable identity that allows for the constitution of new forms of subjectivity; James Buzard argues that it merely affirms an ethnographic boundary between insider and outsider since Guest remains a spectator in Nowhere.<sup>84</sup> What is interesting about both interpretations is that they demonstrate the extent to which the novel's internally neat delimitation of the boundary between individual activity and collective experience is not so neat at the novel's borders. If the "aesthetic" within the novel is what makes this division harmonious, the aesthetics of the novel once again call it into question.

The narrator's inability to speak as an autonomous individual manifests the novel's wider uncertainties about the concept of aesthetic autonomy. In the novel, art has lost any separation from life: the effect of universalizing art into every kind of production is that there is no longer any specialized aesthetic realm. The novel thus simultaneously builds upon and challenges the

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<sup>83</sup> This is also significant because it manifests a shift in the role of the narrator as the receiver and the producer of an aesthetic object: he shifts from merely hearing to the story to taking an active role in reproducing it for an audience, thus dramatizing the shift in emphasis for Morris more generally from an aesthetic of reception to an aesthetic of production.

<sup>84</sup> See Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel*, 141–180, and Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-century British Novels*, 299–314



Hegelian narrative of the “freedom” offered by art: art, for Morris, is indeed the material manifestation of an individual’s free expression, but it does not, for Morris, occupy a specialized “sphere” like that of religion and philosophy. This perplexed relation to aesthetics leads the characters themselves to be perplexed about the function of art: characters are confused by the purpose of ancient paintings, which they seem to regard on the same level as archaeological artifacts. When turning to the aesthetic allows socialists and aesthetes to challenge the terms of the debate over the individualism, what makes this challenge possible is the way in which art differentiates itself from everyday activities: it makes available a “higher” individualism than that of economics and politics. Even while Morris ascribes to art this capacity to liberate everyday activity from mere drudgery, he eliminates this independence of art. Art is everywhere, and so it is nowhere.

The novel repeats this confusion about the status of aesthetic autonomy on a formal level: it seems that Morris was not quite sure whether it was to be taken as a political argument or a personal fancy. Despite the fact that it had a clear didactic purpose when serialized in *Commonweal*, Morris later suggests in a letter that it ought to be treated merely as his private vision and not as a political program: “as to the future as foreshadowed by my book, one can only in such a work say what one likes oneself” (“Foreword” 310). Morris reiterates elsewhere: “the only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author” (quoted in Silver 141).<sup>85</sup> Morris simultaneously treats the novel as an argument against Bellamy and as a piece of disinvested personal rumination. The novel thus calls into question the distinction between utility and autonomy that in the first place makes possible art’s production of a pleasure independent of mere gratification. For Kant, beauty produces aesthetic pleasure only if it is divorced from a particular end; likewise; for the characters in *Nowhere*, labor becomes artistic as soon as it is performed for its own sake rather than for some reward. The novel itself, however, is unable so neatly to make this distinction between utility and uselessness. Both through a form that disavows the autonomy of form and through a narrator that undermines his independence, the novel complicates the idea that individuality can be thought of as atomized, cellular, and discrete.

### **Toward an Anti-Subjective Aesthetic**

The instability of the narrator in *News from Nowhere* is not an anomaly in Morris’s work. Throughout his fiction, Morris explores the strategies by which narrators represent their stories and are represented by literary form. In attending to the formal qualities of Morris’s narration, I am developing an assertion that Anne Janowitz makes in her book about Morris’s poetry: “his poetry acknowledges and aims to make sense of the contest of individual and communitarian identity formation,” specifically by “knit[ting] together a poetic which responded to the claims of both inner self and social teleology, locating in the narrative impulse of the medieval romance a counter-weight to the inwardness of romantic lyricism” (217). I suggest that the balancing of lyrical inwardness and epic narration is not a balance between poetry and prose, but rather a process that is visible within the progression of Morris’s use of fictional forms. In many ways, *News* represents a transitional moment between Morris’s early experimentations with subjective

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<sup>85</sup> Maurice Hewlett in *National Review* agreed with Morris: “the interest of paper paradises is mainly biographical. Nobody cares to discuss the potentialities of the *Republic* or the *Utopia* from the present...but both have a high interest historically... Personally, of course, they are priceless documents” (Faulkner 343–344)

narration and the later romances, in which narration becomes entirely detached and lacks any sort of interiority.<sup>86</sup> One of Morris's earliest short stories, "Lindenberg Pool," is remarkable for how little it predicts any of Morris's future aesthetic development.<sup>87</sup> The gothic tenor of "Lindenberg Pool" makes it quite unlike the later romances, including *News*. The narrator of the story recounts a nightmare caused by reading Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*, emphasizing the uncanny sway that the book holds over him: "there was something in it that fixed my attention and made me think of it; and whether I would or no, my thoughts ran in this way, as here follows. So I felt obliged to write, and wrote accordingly" (*Hollow Land* 141). The narrator suspects his own sanity: "May the Lord help my senses!.... I shall go mad, I am mad, I am gone to the devil, I have lost my identity" (144). Morris veers here toward a Poeian subjectivism, in which story is told from a radically interior space in which access to objective reality is precluded by senses, dreams, and madness. This difficulty of distinguishing between subjective and objective is repeated formally through the frame of the tale, which has many of the characteristics of a dream, but is not explicitly described as such. Although the narrator tells us that he is reading at night, and that he finds himself transported out of himself into the body of a thirteenth century priest, there is no falling asleep at the beginning of the story or waking up at the end. And if our perspective is limited to the interior space of the narrator, that interior space is itself highly unstable, since he transforms suddenly into another character. There seems even to be an internal schism between the internal monologue of the thirteenth-century priest and nineteenth-century narrator: "'Had not the Jews of late,' thought I, the priest, 'been very much in the habit of crucifying children in mockery of the Holiest....? These men are atheists, you are in a trap... 'Ah, sharp one,' thought I, the author, 'where are you at last? try to pray as a test....once for all trust in God, or I fear you are lost'" (149). On all of these levels, the story is as much interested in playing with conventions of narration as retelling a Gothic tale.

This complicated construction of a narrating voice reaches its climax when the narrator is emphasized thematically through the narrator's—and hence the reader's—inability to determine what is actually happening to him. He finds himself invited to the bedside of a noble, whose servants ask him to administer last rites. In the moment that the narrator offers the communion wafer, the figure in the bed transforms: "with a slow upheaval of the rich clothes among which he lay, with a sound that was half snarl, half grunt, with helpless body swathed in bedclothes, a

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<sup>86</sup> Counter to Frederick Kirchoff's suggestion in both *William Morris* and *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self* that "The six romances Morris wrote in the last years of his life mark a significant return to the form and subject matter of his earliest prose" (*William Morris* 137), I will argue that the late romances actually reflect a significant break from the narrative forms of the early work.

<sup>87</sup> Published in 1856 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the story, like most of the other works printed there, was unsigned. As a result, later efforts to compile its contents resulted in at least six separate lists attempting to separate the works of Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, William Fulford, Rossetti, and Giorgiana Macdonald (Burne-Jones's future wife). Although "Lindenberg Pool" is not among the items whose authorship is disputed, the very necessity of asking the contributors who were still alive in 1903 to account for which of the works they had written shows that the pieces are not distinctive enough to be easily recognizable as Morris's. Indeed, the magazine itself is an interesting (and unconscious) exercise in the sort of collective authorship that British medievalists believed to have characterized the thirteenth century: two impassioned defenses of Ruskin, for example, combine a Morrisian exaltation of artistic activity with a religiously moralizing view of painting's educational effect. Stansky cites the magazine as one in a series of moments when Morris affirmed his commitment to communistic models of aesthetic production (though points out that this was the case more with extraliterary modes of aesthetic creation): "Morris did have a certain proclivity for groups and guilds, a tendency to think in terms of brotherhoods, in arts and politics if not so much in literature, who would work together" (39).

huge swine that I had been shriving tore from me the Holy Thing” (151). What makes this climactic moment of transformation significant from a narrative point of view is the way in which Morris has altered it from the original story in Thorpe’s *Mythology*. There, the reader is told in advance that the body in the bed is actually a pig, and a clear distinction is established between the voices of narrator and priest:

On one holyday-eve, when the family were from home, the servants of the place indulged in great revel and merriment, which at length proceeded so far, that in their state of drunkenness they wrapped a swine up in bed-linen, placed a cap on its head, and laid it in the master’s bed. They then sent a message to the priest, summoning him to come without a moment’s delay to administer to their master, who lay at the point of death. The priest was instantly there, and observing no deception, read to the swine and did everything required by his vocation; but when he was set to administer the sacrament, all present burst into a fit of laughter, and the swine snapped the bread out of his hand. (215)

Morris’s retelling of the tale not only renders it more gothic, emphasizing the connection between the sacrilegious revelry and the beautiful; it also shifts the tale from a moral allegory to a dramatic narrative by making the revelation of the pig beneath the sheets a surprise to the reader as well as to the priest.

In the context of Morris’s work, this is quite unusual. Like many of Morris’s other literary creations, it is a transcription of an already-existing narrative. But rather than simulating an older, folkloric form (as in the romances) or describing the future in language drawn from the past (as in *News from Nowhere*), it turns an objectively narrated story into a subjectively-bounded narrative. In other words, the Morris of the 1890s would have modified Thorpe’s *Mythology* by rendering its language formally more archaic rather than shifting its narration into an interior subjective space. Another little-known story makes this contrast even more apparent. “Frank’s Sealed Letter,” the only of Morris’s fictions to be set in the nineteenth-century present, stages a direct interaction between narrator and reader: “I will tell you how I fell; and then I pray you all to pity me, and if you can love me, and pray for me that I may be forgiven” (*Hollow Land* 236). The narrator continues to confess a tortured romantic involvement with Mabel, to whose caprice he is as helplessly subject as is the narrator of “Lindenberg Pool” to the influence of Thorpe’s “The Sunken Mansion.” Rebuked by Mabel, the narrator finds himself trapped in what he hopes is a dream: “O how I tried to wake, to find myself, with my heart beating wildly and the black night round me, lying on my bed, as often when a child I used to wake from a dream of lions and robbers and ugly deaths and the devil to find myself in the dear room. . . . But no dream breaks now; it is desperate, desperate earnest. The dreams have closed round me and become the dimmest reality. . . . the walls of this fact are closed round about me now like the sides of an iron chest hurrying on down some swift river” (238). If the melodrama of the story does not make it exemplary on a purely literary level (a later editor of Morris’s work compared it unfavorably to another story: “The Two Partings is certainly rot, but I don’t think it (the prose) much worse than Frank’s Sealed Letter, the authorship of which is not disputed” (*Hollow Land* xxii)), it nonetheless makes it important to Morris’s development as a writer of fiction. The story’s literary failure consists precisely in the extent to which it is trapped within the internal drama of a character, which produces a plotless, self-involved confessional narrative. Morris, in his later fiction, does precisely the opposite, eschewing subjective angst and drama for the often mechanical plotting of event after event after event.

What is striking about Morris's early prose fiction is not just its use of first-person narration, but the discrepancies between the narrative modes that Morris explores<sup>88</sup>. If "Frank's Sealed Letter" is written from the perspective of an individual within affect, and "Lindenberg Pool" is written from the perspective of an individual trapped within imagination, "A Dream" instead layers narrators in a series of recounted stories and dreams: "I dreamed once, that four men sat by the winter fire talking and telling tales, in a house that the wind howled round. And one of them, the eldest, said: 'When I was a boy, before you came to this land....'" (*Hollow Land* 16). The story doubles or triples the narrative frame: it recounts the dream of a narrative about a person recalling the past. Other stories have much more in common with Morris's later work; though they generally lack the stylized, archaic English of the Romances, "Gertha's Lovers" and "Svend and his Brethren" deploy basically the same narrative forms. Both begin by surveying a far off land in the distant past: "Gertha's Lovers" opens, "Long ago there was a land, never mind where or when" (*Hollow Land* 40) and "Svend," "A King in the olden time ruled over a mighty nation...North, south, east and west, spread that land of his, the sea did not stop it" (*Hollow Land* 113). Finally, "The Hollow Land," the longest of Morris's early stories combines these modes of narration, with a speaker who directly acknowledges his presence but turns immediately to the distant past: "Do you know where it is, the Hollow Land? I have been looking for it now so long, trying to find it again, the Hollow Land; for there I saw my love first. I wish to tell you how I found it first of all, but I am old, my memory fails me: you must wait and let me think if I perchance can tell you how it happened" (*Hollow Land* 154). One would hesitate to call Morris's literary work formally experimental in absolute terms—none of these narrative strategies are revolutionary (or even particularly creative) in the context of mid-century fiction. But what is interesting is that Morris is using them at all, since they are so notably absent in the rest of his literary work.

As purely literary as these issues appear to be—and as divorced from the debate over individualism I have discussed—I believe that they provide an important clue to the way in which we ought to be thinking about the political significance of Morris's art. These formal experiments reveal that Morris's fictional output is socially engaged in modes other than thinly-masked propaganda or protest through tacit refusal. *News from Nowhere*, for example, addresses not only through its content but also through its formal construction of a narrative voice the question of how the individual relates to society; it addresses this question, that is, not by dressing up Morris's Ruskinism in fictional clothing, but rather through the strategies themselves of fictional representation. Morris's early work reflects a similar interest in subjectivity through its experimentation with the ways in which stories can be told: from a perspective entirely trapped within one character's psychology; from the perspective of a character literally taken out of himself and placed into the body of another; from the perspective of a character who dreams of the reminiscences of an old man; and from a perspective that is essentially characterless. This last mode of narration, which Morris uses for "Svend and his Brethren" and "Gertha's Lovers," characterizes the late romances, which usually read as though nobody is telling them at all. And

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<sup>88</sup> Writing of Morris's contributions to the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Frederick Kirchoff notes their unusual narrative structure; "one is frequently uncertain about the conventions of reading appropriate to a given piece or the precise significance of the events narrated.... The result is a dislocation of narrative voice, which seems to come from many places at the same time. This dislocation is mirrored by other features of the texts. Narrative connections are missing or ambiguous. Not only is the speaker's location uncertain; his perceptions are often either random or obsessively detailed" (*William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self* 27).

yet, if we see these as an extension of Morris's exploration of ways of imagining subject-positions from which a narrator can speak, we can see the narrative strategies of the romances as subtly exploring the possibilities not only of fictional construction but also of the construction of subjective experience.

### The Late Romances

The full title of *News from Nowhere* emphasizes that it is neither a novel nor complete: *News from Nowhere, or, An Epoch of Rest: being some chapters from a Utopian Romance*.<sup>89</sup> The title's assertion that the work is a romance is usually taken as an assertion that it is *not* a novel. This is an important claim because it suggests that by writing in a non-novelistic genre, Morris resists what had become by the end of the century an identifiably middle-class literary form. But calling the work a romance is more than an assertion of difference; it also is an assertion that the work belongs with the long fictional narratives that he wrote in the 1890s. These ten works begin with the explicitly socialist *A Dream of John Ball*, *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings*, and *News from Nowhere*, all of which directly express Morris's political commitments. John Ball is the unusual, if strangely fascinating, story of a socialist who wakes up in the sixteenth century and begins teaching socialist lessons about the future: "this shall he do belike; he shall sell himself, that is the labour that is in him, to the master that suffers him to work, and that master shall give to him from out of the wares he maketh enough to keep him alive and to beget children and nourish them till they be old enough to be sold like himself and the residue shall the rich man keep to himself" (103). This mannered, archaic language is the medium in which all of the romances are written; *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings* intersperses it with dialogue that takes the form of epic poetry as it investigates the clan as an origin of society that suggests how communistic social impulses can triumph over stratified social relations.<sup>90</sup>

In the work that follows these four romances, Morris seems to give up entirely on turning his fiction to didactic ends. Shaw was the first to note that the late romances seem to reflect Morris's turn away from politics: in "Morris as I Knew Him," Shaw remembers that Morris "began to pour out tale after tale of knights in armor, lovely ladies, slaughterous hand-to-hand combats.... [T]his was a startling relapse into pre-Raphaelitism; and the Socialist movement took no interest in it.... [Morris] needed a refuge from reality.... I have used the Morris stories in that way myself, and found them perfectly effective" (May Morris xxviii–xxix). Shaw's comments reflect the extent to which the genre and the content of the romances appear on the surface to be simple escapism, in both their production (Morris's writing) and their reception (Shaw's reading).<sup>91</sup> As a result, the late romances are often passed over in surveys of Morris's work: they

<sup>89</sup> In a clever reading, Buzard points out that each of the nouns in the first part of the title—"news," "nowhere," "epoch," and "rest"—fail to describe what the book is actually about. See Buzard, 264–265.

<sup>90</sup> Carole Silver relates *Wolfings* to the vigorous "upper barbarism" praised by Morris in "Socialism from the Root Up": "To Morris, the triumph of Gothic equality and communality over Roman exploitation and self-interest depicted in *The House of the Wolfings* is a foreshadowing of the triumph of the proletariat in the Marxist revolution to come, the victory that will result in a higher stage of social development" (131). Silver sets the tone for other treatments of the early romances by characterizing them as Morris's attempt to construct "socialist myth rather than Marxist history" (135). For analysis of the relation of Morris's politics to the early romances see also Florence Boos, "Morris's German Romances as Socialist History."

<sup>91</sup> Blue Calhoun argues in regards to Morris's poetry that to portray it as "retreat" from social engagement is to mistake the pastoral genre for simple escapism: "In the idle dream itself, its stylistic simplicity and its dialectical relationship with the poet's real world, we can see that Morris's aesthetic response is not escape, but a kind of

escape the dominant critical narrative that seeks to make sense of Morris's political trajectory as that, in the words of the subtitle to E.P. Thompson's survey, "from romantic to revolutionary." Thompson dismisses the romances thus: "we are already aware in *The Roots of the Mountains* of the motive for writing which becomes dominant in the other late romances—that of pure self-indulgence in pleasurable reverie in which neither Morris's intellect nor his deeper feelings are seriously engaged" (678). In a 1975 essay titled "Had Morris Gone Soft in the Head?" (a quotation from Thompson) Robert Currie notes that their apolitical status underlies the romances' scant treatment in major tomes of Morris scholarship. Even Fiona MacCarthy's more recent and authoritative biography treats the romances almost exclusively in terms of their material qualities—the vellum, the typeface, the ink—gesturing only momentarily to a thematic feminist reading.<sup>92</sup> Attempts to rectify critical inattention to the romances usually consist in arguing that their themes are a coded continuation of Morris's political concerns.<sup>93</sup> Frederick Kirchoff notes, "In the recurrent characters and narrative structures of the romances, Morris establishes a set of psychological archetypes by means of which he can explore the process of individuation, sexual relationship, and social interaction that must be accounted for in any version of the Earthly Paradise" ("Introduction" 13). David Latham suggests that the romances reflect Morris's turn to a "visionary" socialism: "The prose romance is not a lecture cloaked in romantic garb, nor a didactic fable with a specific message. Rather the romance provides the medium for Morris to express and to experience his social values" (166). Although Latham is correct to turn to the "medium" of the romance in order to identify its relation to Morris's socialism, Latham ultimately obscures medium by emphasizing content, arguing that Morris's continued commitment to socialism is apparent in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* when Hallblithe daydreams of finding his lover and returning home to work in fields (170). Such an interpretation is selective—elsewhere in the story, Hallblithe finds no aesthetic pleasure in constructing a boat with which to sail home—and only serves to reiterate the romances' resistance to compelling political interpretations.

Although these efforts to reclaim the romances are generally quite adoring (Kirchoff compares the books, remarkably, to the late work of Shakespeare and Beethoven), the romances' obscurity is not entirely undeserved. One might say that the most satisfying aspect of the romances is that one does not feel obliged actually to read them; a cursory survey of their content is enough of a basis for discussing the role that they played at the Kelmscott press and in book publishing more generally. As Amanda Hodgson frankly states, the "persistent wrenching of language into an unexpected form in terms of vocabulary and structure does not disguise the unsophisticated, even banal, basic pattern of the sentences. Morris writes a very shapeless

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writing often mistaken for escape literature—the pastoral" (5). Calhoun sees the pastoral as a highly engaged genre serving the function that many twentieth-century Marxists assign to art in general: "The primary motive of the pastoral is a vision of the natural world that sets it in evaluative juxtaposition with the civilized world that threatens it—the complexities of urban society in general, and in the last two centuries the problems of industrialization in particular" (5–6).

<sup>92</sup> David Latham periodizes Morris's socialism as aesthetic, then militant, and then visionary; he notes that literary evaluation of Morris's final period depends upon one's own politics: "Socialists, like E.P. Thompson, regretted it as a self-indulgent return to irrelevant art. . . . Conservatives, like J.W. Mackail, welcomed the 'full and unreserved return of the author to romance'" (166).

<sup>93</sup> Christine Bolus-Reichert has recently offered a more nuanced argument that while "the turn to romance is unequivocally a turn to aestheticism. . . . Morris adopts the romance form not in order to escape from the world, but rather to reform it from within an ethos of absolute idealism" (74).

prose.... At its worst, the writing is overwhelmingly bland and repetitive” (166). Indeed, the romances’ “wrenching” of language yields so little literary artistry that it immediately makes one willing to forgive Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* its Latinate obscurity. The romances are long (*The Well at the World’s End* contains almost 230,000 words), repetitive, and hastily-written.<sup>94</sup>

And yet, even if the romances are not particularly good, they are not for that reason uninteresting. Rather than defending their aesthetic value or redeeming Morris from the accusation of escapism, I would like to explore how the romances complicate the way in which we understand the relations between Morris’s socialist writing, his fictional output, and his aesthetic theory. Specifically, I would like to suggest that the romances reflect Morris’s turn away from forms of fiction that present themselves as simple transcriptions of subjective experience, and that this turn to an “anti-subjective” fiction provides an inroad into understanding the political significance of Morris’s later work. Morris’s turn away from modes of fictional narration that either focus upon the internal experience of the narrator or mediate narrative through a single individual, toward forms of fictional narration whose narrative mediation is problematic (*News*) ultimately leads to the romances, where any novelistic notion of a narrator disappears entirely. In this formal development of his work, we can identify an implicit challenge to the model of bounded, self-sufficient individuality presupposed by the individualists. My approach to the romances thus differs from the most common ways in which critics usually connect the form and politics of the romances. Often, the romances’ archaism is read as a formal protest against contemporary society; Ruth Kinna notes, for example, that “Morris believed that the style of his work was as important as its content: in the prose romances, for example, he importantly filled out his idea of fellowship, but he also developed an idea of romance in which he projected his hopes for the future back into a fictionalized ideal of the past” (185).<sup>95</sup> Parallel with this view of the romance as negative protest is another which treats it as a genre which uses its decisive break from reality in order to give voice to a specific political vision. I would suggest, however that the more compelling contention comes from critics such as John Plotz, who suggests that the romance demands a different kind of relation between reader and artwork: “by rejecting the realist novel’s logic of distinctive personality and its attendant exclusions, Morris offers a new model for the sympathy that artworks engender between persons” (936). I will argue that *The Well at the World’s End* is to a large degree engaged in working out what this new model could be.

On the one hand, the focus of Morris’s aesthetics on production and use is borne out by the romances both materially and in terms of their plot. The “story” is often as decorative and repetitive as the designs that adorn the printed page; we might think of the romances as something to be “used” in exactly the same way as a Morris pencil box or pipe. A retrospective in the 1912 *Times Literary Supplement* notes, “It was the fashion to say that his poetry and his prose romances were like his wall-papers” (“Morris in the Present” 312); in a letter to his daughter, Morris himself compared writing *Well* (or as he puts it, “doing” *Well*) to hanging wallpaper: “I have been working hard at my paper hanging all day & last night I did a good bit of well” (*Collected Letters* 3:403). More recently, Stephen Arata has proposed that “the pleasures

<sup>94</sup> Yeats is likely the only reader to find the romances too short, referring to “those prose romances that became, after [Morris’s] death, so great a joy that they were the only books I was ever to read slowly that I might not come to quickly to the end” (“Four Years” 71).

<sup>95</sup> As Bradley J. Macdonald points out, this fictionalized ideal was specifically that of the English medievalist and Gothic movements. See *William Morris and the Aesthetic Constitution of Politics*, 75–100.

Morris's poems offer to readers are never intense. Instead they are placid, continuous, and very much attuned to the rhythms of the body. . . . Poems composed by a body occupied with the rhythms of tapestry-weaving might best be read by a body occupied by rhythms of a similar kind" (203). What is true of the poems may also be true of the romances: the aim is not to produce a state of aesthetic transport or a narrative that rewards close literary analysis, but rather to objectify the story itself—to make it a thing we can use to pass the time, a thing that functions to make an hour more pleasing.

And yet, even as the stories seem to endorse a purely functional aesthetic, they also repeatedly stage the question of how form exercises a transformational effect upon content. One might say that the romance is capable of producing some enjoyable experience only because of the way it uses form to estrange itself from the everyday: the Kelmscott book is precious precisely because it is unusual, and it is unusual in its attention to the way the book is manufactured as well as to what is in it. Similarly, the episodic nature of the romance as well as the archaisms of its language give it a ritual quality that distinguishes it immediately from the novel: the romance insistently calls attention to its own modes of construction, both materially and literarily. The extent to which they foreground their status as objects that have been produced makes the romances even more interesting conjunctions of aesthetic and politics than the propagandistic fictions such as the more openly political works such as *News from Nowhere*, *John Ball*, or *Pilgrims of Hope*. Although the material form of the romance certainly calls into play Morris's political commitments, I would argue that its literary form does so equally—and, further, that the distinction between material and literary form may not be easy to make. Ruskin makes available a more progressive notion of individualism by turning to the Hegel's argument that aesthetic form manifests both the freedom from political and material contingency and the freedom to "imprint" one's inner spirit upon nature through the process of forming material. William Morris's romances continue to develop this logic. They challenge the assumption, made by both Hegel and Ruskin, that artistic expression is necessarily the activity of an isolated individual: as material objects, the romances manifest the decisions of an entire range of artisans involved in their construction. This challenge to the idea that art originates with an individual is continued by the formal frames of the romances.

### **The Tale of *The Well at the World's End***

It would not be impossible to read *The Well at the World's End* as a morality about the perils of individualism. The romance begins by describing a king who tells his four sons that they ought to leave home and pursue adventures, but that one of them must stay at home to care for his parents: "since I am growing old and past the age of getting children, one of you, my sons, must abide at home to cherish me and your mother" (1:4). When the sons draw lots, Ralph, the youngest, discovers that he must stay. Disgruntled, he sets out anyway. As soon as he leaves, it becomes immediately apparent that he has no choice but to ally himself with communities that he discovers along the way in order to ensure his well-being and safety. In an exemplary moment, Ralph discovers that simply not deciding with whom to ally himself is not an option: "and also he thought that if anything untoward befell, he had some one to fall back on in old Oliver: yet on the other hand he had a hankering after Hampton under Scaur, where, to say sooth, he doubted not to see the lady again. So betwixt one thing and the other, speech hung on his lips awhile, when suddenly the carle said: 'Hist! thou has left thy horse without the bushes and he is whinnying. . . there is now no time to lose. To horse straightway, for certainly there are foemen'"



(1:67). Ralph's indecision about where to go and whom to join forces him by default to flee hostile forces under the protection of the "Carle" Roger, who is one of several companions he meets as he begins searching for a life-extending well at the "world's end." The story is organized by the series of communities that Ralph enters often only to escape: "Cheaping-town," "Higham," "Bourton Abbas," "The Four Friths," and "Utterbol." In many ways, the "tale" demonstrates the impossibility of simply going it alone and fending for oneself; Ralph depends heavily upon others' support throughout his quest and ultimately returns home, rejoins his family, and assumes the mantle of kingship. The upshot of Morris's romance is that self-formation is a process that depends upon the intervention of the community; it does not produce a unique and discrete individual, but rather returns him to the collective that is his origin.<sup>96</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the communities that Ralph encounters are often the site to which critics look in order to recover the implicit political commitments of a work that appears to be pure fantasy.<sup>97</sup> Along the way, for example, Ralph becomes particularly concerned with the widespread practice of treating women as chattel. Roger explains of the despotic Burg of the Four Friths, "As for their women they are brought hither and sold at the market-cross to the highest bidder. And this honour they have, that such of them as be fair, and that is the more part of the younger ones, fetch no ill penny" (1:87). Displeased with this as well as other aspects of the Four Friths' political organization, Ralph muses, "Withal the chief thing that he desired was to get him away from the Burg, for he felt himself unfree therein; and he said to himself that if he were forced to dwell among this folk, that he had better never have stolen himself away from his father and mother" (1:85). These sorts of observations recur throughout the romance; Ralph is particularly interested in the practices of slavery that he encounters, and a good portion of the first book involves Ralph's quest to free a woman from slavery. He interrogates another companion, Clement, about the town of Cheaping Knowe as they approach: Ralph "asked him many things concerning Cheaping Knowe; and at last about the thrall-market therein. And Clement said that, though he dealt not in such wares, he had often seen them sold" (1:280); Clement continues to describe the town's leader "who had gotten the castle in those days, and

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<sup>96</sup> In *The Romances of William Morris*, Amanda Hodgson reads *Well*, along with the other romances, along these lines. She argues that *Well* hews close to Morris's socialist ideals by examining the organization of society; in general, Hodgson suggests, the romances evidence Morris's awareness that the socialist paradise for which he had been agitating in the 1880s would not be achieved: "As Morris became more and more certain that the revolution would not occur in his lifetime, he had increasing reason to seek to define and experience through art the transformation which he believed was approaching for later generations. Such transformation could take place for him only through the mythopoeic power of romance which makes it possible to grasp in fantasy what is evasive in reality" (156). I would challenge this biographical reading by pointing out that it comes into conflict with Morris's aesthetics by presuming that the romance is essentially an escapist form; the reading also selectively reduces the romances to certain thematic strands.

<sup>97</sup> In contrast to modern approaches that have often read *Well* by deciphering its symbols, both H.G. Wells and A.C. Swinburne suggest the fruitlessness of such a project. Wells writes, "Life is too short for many admirable things—for chess, and the unraveling of the *Faerie Queen* and of such riddles as [*The Well at the World's End*]. Ever and again the tale is certainly shot and enriched with allegory. But as we try to follow these glittering strands, they spread, twist, vanish, one after the other, in the texture of some purely decorative incident" (Faulkner 411). Swinburne writes, "It should be remembered that when an allegorical intention was detected in...*The Wood Beyond the World*, Mr. Morris for once condescended to disclaim the misinterpretation of his meaning.... No commentator, I should hope, will ever waste his time on the childish task of inventing an occult significance for the incidents and adventures...set before him and impressed upon his memory in this later and yet more magically beautiful tale" (Faulkner 414–415).

was the tyrant of the town; and how that he had so many men-at-arms ready to do his bidding that none in the town was safe from him if he deemed it more for his pleasure and profit to rob or maim, or torment or slay, than to suffer them to live peaceably” (1:281). Ralph’s quest thus illustrates not only that each person must depend upon a community of other individuals, but also that unrestrained individualism leads to a state of despotic freedom in which all must fear for their liberty.

Such moments evidently thematize the political concerns that characterized Morris’s public positions in the 1880s, but do not do much to complicate them. What makes the romance particularly significant is the way in which it produces a metafictional investigation of literary form alongside the themes of individualism that it addresses. A “tale” itself, *The Well at the World’s End* is full of “tales” and “stories” about these towns, villages, and the well, that Ralph must evaluate and interpret. Initially, Ralph is a rather poor spectator, utterly failing to recognize the difference between reality and representation, between truth and fiction. In Higham, one of the first villages that he visits on his quest toward the well, Ralph is invited to watch the town put on a play: as two characters on stage are kissing, “there came creeping, as it were from out of a cranny of the rocks, a worm huge-headed and covered over with scales that glittered in the torch-light. Then Ralph sprang up in his place, for he feared for the maiden that the worm would devour her: but the monk who sat by him pulled him down by the skirt, and laughed and said: ‘Sit still, lord! For the champion also has been provided’” (1:30). Ralph’s impulse to intervene in the spectacle reflects not only an unawareness of the conventions of drama, but also an inability to distinguish the artificial from the real, art from reality. Ralph’s reaction is amusing to be sure, but the moment is serious as well: it clues us into the fact that literary representation will play a crucial role in the narrative that follows, and that art itself serves a rather different function than that with which we might be familiar. Ralph’s companion explains that the play, along with the others performed that evening, serves a clear social purpose: “when it was all done, the monk said: ‘This play is set forth by the men-at-arms of our lord Abbot, who have great devotion toward St. George, and he is their friend and their good lord’” (1:31). The monk continues to explain that the other artisans in the town—scribes, limners, clothiers, and webbers—each put on a play to honor a historical period or a historical personage. Though Ralph does derive a sort of “pure” aesthetic pleasure from his spectatorship at one moment in which the plays “seemed to him exceeding fair, and like to ravish the soul from the body” (1:31), it is clear that the drama is not as distinct from Ralph’s reality as Ralph’s is from our own.

The scene initiates a series of moments throughout the romance in which the quality and purpose of aesthetic form is investigated.<sup>98</sup> Later in the narrative, Ralph is flustered at a question the monk has posed, and sings a song rather than answers. The song is a relatively unremarkable poem sung by a young laborer to his beloved, full of Morrisian imagery of fields, summertime, and birds. What makes the poem interesting is the moment in which it breaks from the narrative of the romance:

Yet he knew not how to set his youthful words against the father’s wisdom; so he stood up, and got his shirt into his hand, and as he did it over his head he fell to singing himself

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<sup>98</sup> Dona L. Ruby notes that the aesthetic presentation to the hero of his own story is one of the characteristics that unites the late romances: “One of the principal techniques Morris uses for slowing down and bringing variety to the plots is to have the hero contemplate a picture which holds the truth of his story if he can only learn to understand what it is that he sees. Each hero carries in his mind a picture or pictures which he refers back to even as he continues his journey” (69). Ruby offers examples of such pictorial representation from each of the six romances.

a song of eventide of the High House of Upmeads, the words whereof were somewhat like to these:

Art thou man, art thou maid, through the long grass a-going?

For short shirt thou barest, and no beard I see,

And the last wind ere moonrise about thee is blowing.

Would'st thou meet with thy maiden or look'st thou for me?

We also know that Upmeads is a rural village (the story refers to Ralph's father diminutively as a "regulus or kingle" (1:1)) and on the surface, this moment exemplifies nothing more significant than the way in which art can be fully integrated into everyday activities such as getting dressed or harvesting fields as Ralph sings to himself distractedly. The question that begins the song, though—about the gender of the addressee—reflects back on to the song itself, as we ask after its genre. Taken in context, Ralph's song poses several questions besides those that it explicitly asks. The narrator (or, more accurately, the tale) tells us that Ralph is singing "himself," but the song suggests that he might be singing "of" himself as well: we are frequently reminded in *Well* of Ralph's youthful appearance, and like the addressee of the song, Ralph himself is at this moment putting on his shirt. As Ralph adopts the persona of the lyrical poet, one is reminded of Morris's earlier romances, in which the distinction between verse and prose is fluid; characters in *The House of the Wolfings* slip in and out of poetic form as they speak to one another. Ralph's song thus implicitly and explicitly poses questions about the stability of generic categories; its initial inability to distinguish between male and female replicates itself through the poem's unstable relationship with the prose that surrounds it.<sup>99</sup>

On the one hand, such moments seem to bear out the mode of aesthetic experience that Morris espoused in his nonfictional writing: skeptical of "intellectual" genres of art that could only be produced by the rare genius, Morris instead espouses an everyday sort of formalism, which takes seriously popular forms such as the folk song or the pageant-play. Both the production and experience of art are linked to concrete, useful ends. But later in the novel, Ralph is a much less ideal spectator; the usefulness of the narrative precludes rather than proceeds from its formal qualities. We see this most clearly when Ralph encounters a tapestry that portrays a woman for whom he is searching. The scene is a strange combination of a perfectly arts-and-crafts aesthetic and a completely oblivious viewer. Wandering the halls, Ralph discovers a room upon which the Morris workshop seems to have anachronistically left its mark: "Its roof was all done with gold and blue from over sea, and its pavement wrought delicately in Alexandrine work. On the dais was a throne of carven ivory, and above it a canopy of baudekin of the goodliest fashion, and there was a foot-carpet before it, wrought with beasts and the hunting of deer" (1:117). We might expect Morris to continue by describing the pleasure that Ralph takes in interacting with these finely crafted objects (which one must assume gave their creators great pleasure to produce). But what catches Ralph's eye most is none of the decorative filigree, but rather an "arras" whose workmanship he essentially ignores in favor of its content: "As for the

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<sup>99</sup> That the poem raises questions about the framework of narration puts it in the company of Morris's earlier poetry as described by Calhoun: "In the early work [the pastoral] is intimated in the narrator's character and tone; in the multiple comparisons of individual tales, of tales and framework, of framework and lyric interludes; in the calendar arrangement of the tales; in their idyllic frames and landscape description" (7). Although the structural complexity of Morris's narration is more apparent in his poetry, and so has been more readily acknowledged by scholars of Morris's poems than by scholars of his fiction, I argue that the fiction likewise demonstrates a high degree of social engagement through its narrative form.

walls of that chamber, they were hung with a marvelous halling of arras, wherein was wrought the greenwood, and there amidst in one place a pot-herb garden, and a green garth with goats therein, and in that garth a little thatched house. And amidst all this greenery were figured over and over again two women, whereof one old and the other young; and the old one was clad in grand attire...and this one was clad in sorry and scanty raiment” (1:117).

What makes Ralph’s experience significant in the context of the romance is that he proceeds directly to the representational content of the tapestry—the two women who “were figured over and over” (1:117)—rather than appreciating the technical skill it must have required to produce the figuration itself. Indeed, when he imagines the workman, it is as a copyist of reality rather than as an imaginative creator of beautiful things: “when he had looked long at the greenery and its images, he said to himself that if he who wrought that cloth had not done from the young woman after the likeness of the Lady whom he had helped in the wildwood, then it must have been from her twin sister” (1:117). In this moment, Ralph imagines representation layered upon itself: the woman he met twinned by her sibling as well as her tapestry. And if there should be any doubt that Ralph is utterly failing as the ideal spectator of a work of arts-and-craftsmanship, he becomes enthralled quite literally with the woman rather than with the tapestry: “Long he abode in that chamber looking at the arras.... He abode there so long that the dusk began to gather in the house, and he could see the images no more; for he was filled with the sweetness of desire when he looked on them” (1:118). Ralph refuses both the enlightenment model of disinterested aesthetic judgment (by becoming bodily aroused by the woman represented) and the Morrisian model of aesthetic use (by focusing on what the tapestry represents rather than finding tactile pleasure in its use). For Ralph whatever “art” there is in the tapestry serves a literally representative function that elides any possibility of appreciating the work for its own sake.<sup>100</sup>

In the tapestry scene we see an unstable tension that will characterize Ralph’s encounters with other tapestries, books, and stories that describe the well. Even as Ralph wants to look past the medium into the thing itself, the various media through which the story of the well is represented prevent him from ever establishing a reliably truthful narrative of where it is, how to find it, or even whether or not it exists. “Subjectivity” intervenes between the spectator and what is represented as characters cast stories of the well in their own terms. The appellation Morris scribbled on the book’s title before it went to print—changing the work from “a story” to “a tale”—is deceptive; *Well* is not one tale, but many.<sup>101</sup> Ralph is always eager to hear about the Well, and almost always finds only hearsay:

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<sup>100</sup> Bolus-Reichert also notes *Well*’s interest in modes of spectatorship, proposing a difference between “active” and “passive” looking; I would hesitate, however, to draw ethical implications as immediately from the romance as does Bolus-Reichert, who argues that “the adventure offered by reading also demands aesthetic distance: distance from ourselves and our everyday life.... Morris’s romance’s, like most romances, establish an aesthetic distance that can only be crossed by the sympathetic imagination—by active rather than passive looking and by active rather than passive reading.... The attention we pay to the aesthetic dimension of life...is therefore crucial in remaking the world” (91). *Well*’s own representation of the aesthetic practice of looking, I would argue, goes beyond simply critical “distance” and ethical “sympathy”: Ralph is importantly unable to establish the distance from representation that would allow him to see its difference from reality and he treats art as informative rather than didactic.

<sup>101</sup> If, as Plotz notes, “‘Story’ and ‘story-telling’...are two of the most excoriated words in *News from Nowhere*” (937), it is particularly interesting that tales and tale-telling assume such a central importance in *The Well at the End of the World*. Morris’s attention to the process of story-telling (and to the important difference between story and tale) affirms the high stakes involved in the process of narration.

But Ralph was walking to and fro hastily, and he turned to Richard and said: ‘Well! well! but why dost thou not tell me more of the Well at the World’s End?’

Said Richard: “I was going to tell thee somewhat which might be worth thy noting; or might not be worth it: hearken! When I dwelt at Swevenham over yonder, and was but of eighteen winters...three folk of our township, two young men and one young woman, set out thence to seek the said Well: and much lore they had concerning it, which they had learned of an old man, a nigh kinsman of one of them. This ancient carle I had never seen, for he dwelt in the mountains a way off. (1:241–242)

Ralph’s exclamation—“Well! well!”—reads as much as an attempt to call the well into being as an invitation for Richard to tell his story, but the story itself turns out to have been filtered not only through Richard, but also through three people he knew as a child as well as an old man who might not even exist.

The metafictional aspect of a romance whose own title—properly capitalized—appears in its text more than a hundred times is remarkable for an artist such as Morris, who in general makes so little room for thinking about art as a representational means, usually treating it instead as a pleasurable activity.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, Ralph’s experience as an interpreter edges ever closer to our own until we arrive at the nineteenth chapter in which the two coincide entirely: the chapter’s title is “Ralph Readeth in a Book Concerning the Well at the World’s End.” And yet, this is an empty center: “the book told not much about the Well at the World’s end, but much it told of a certain woman whom no man that saw her could forbear to love” (1:121). Yet again, Ralph’s desire to wrest information from narrative is thwarted by narrative form itself—the book he has discovered is a fatal one. As he reads about the woman, “anon he was the thrall of her love, and might not pluck his heart away from her to do any of the deeds whereby men thrive and win the praise of the people.... As for Ralph, what he had read was sweet poison to him; for if before he was somewhat tormented by love, now was his heart sick and sore with it” (1:121–122). The mysterious stories about the well, and the strangely compelling books that tantalize but do not in form are in many ways Morris’s own bid to heighten the strange, mysterious attractiveness of his own romance. In more ways than one, *Well* is a book about itself.

This reflexive quality of the romance reduplicates itself through the characters themselves who are highly aware of the ways in which they are mediated through their various forms of representation. When Ralph finally meets the Lady of Abundance whom he has seen and heard described in the tapestry, the book, and the stories of his companions, his first request is that she retell these stories: “Said Ralph: ‘...Fain had I been to see thee sitting in thine ivory chair in thy chamber of dais with the walls hung round with thee woven in pictures—wilt thou not tell me in words the story of those pictures? and also concerning the book which I read, which was also of thee?’ ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘thou hast read in the book—well, I will tell thee the story very soon, and that the more since there are matters written wrong in the book’” (1:167). The distortions produced through the peculiar way in which each tale of the lady is told—“deformations” of the truth that are the condition for aesthetic form itself—facilitate the romance’s own progression, allowing it to repeat again and again the “same” tale of the Lady of

<sup>102</sup> Such self-referentiality is not, however, completely incompatible with Morris’s earlier work; James Buzard complicates the notion that *News from Nowhere* is an “anti-novel” by arguing that it does not challenge novelistic conventions, but gives them “an intensity and heightened self-consciousness which the novels could scarcely have borne. To have dwelt as obsessively as Morris’s text does upon the role of interruption in fiction, one feels, would have scuttled the nineteenth-century novel” (“Ethnography as Interruption” 447).

Abundance. While up to this point, we have heard only secondhand reports of the Lady, the longest sustained scene in *Well* spreads over several chapters in which she tells Ralph about her own past. Even as Ralph confronts the original of the tapestry, the book, and the folkspeoples' stories, he encounters yet another layer of self-representation as it becomes clear that the Lady of Abundance's life story is yet another tale that is partial—both in the senses of being incomplete and interested:

So at last she sat down quietly beside him, and fell to speaking to him, as a tale is told in the ingle nook on an even of Yule-tide.

### CHAPTER III. THE LADY TELLETH RALPH OF THE PAST DAYS OF HER LIFE

“Now shalt thou hear of me somewhat more than the arras and the book could tell thee; and yet not all, for time would fail us therfor—and moreover my heart would fail me.” (1:169)

The Lady's story resembles the book that promises the truth but provides instead yet another refraction of it; the text emphasizes the tale-like quality of her autobiography, comparing it directly to stories told by a fire.

These refractions of a single narrative through a variety of media and people begin to suggest that there is no 'single' narrative at all and reflect Morris's interest in how the narrative construction of personality intervenes in the moment that a story takes form. Just as *News from Nowhere* is mostly made up of long expository narratives that report about the future, *The Well at the World's End* is a set of stories that report on the well. Ralph is frustrated by the multiplicity of voices, which only heighten his desire to find the well that stands behind all of them. The effect on the romance as a whole is to fracture it into a series of first-person narratives that lack the unifying novelistic voice that might, in another text, bind them together. The range of tales tends to bewilder us as much as it does Ralph. If one of the literary failings of the romance is that it repeats itself compulsively without organizing the tales that constitute it into any coherent, single form, this failing succeeds in eliminating a unitary voice that would make sense of the sprawling book for its reader. In a scene in which Ralph tries to gather information about a town he is about to enter, we see, succinctly, the fracturing of what at first promises to be a single tale into the chorus of voices that tell it. Responding to Ralph's inquiry about the captives held in Four Friths, Roger says to Ralph, “‘Yea, lord, I will tell thee the tale of them, which setteth forth well both the wise policy and great mercy of the folk of the Burg’” (1:87). After explaining its slave market Roger turns to the crowd in the inn: “‘Speak I sooth, my masters' quoth he, turning toward them of the town. Said a burgher somewhat stricken in years, ‘Naught but sooth; peaceable mean like to me eschew such servants....’” “‘That is sooth,’ said a somewhat younger man.... ‘Yea,’ said a third, ‘we were better without such cattle....’ Said another, ‘Yet are the queens good websters....’” (1:88). Roger's tale continues seamlessly as each in a series of voices picks up where the previous leaves off, and Morris's text produces yet another moment in which narration exceeds the boundaries of the individual.

I would suggest, then, that while Morris's "tale" is clearly interested on a thematic level in the way in which the individual fails ever to fully separate himself from a community, its more significant investigation of the nature of individuality occurs on a formal level through the novel's kaleidoscope of "tales." Morris brings together a chaotic multiplicity of voices and stories that are not united through a governing narrative intelligence, but rather hang together haphazardly in a romance that exceeds any reasonable limits of literary form. Aesthetically, it is

notably lacking in hierarchies of events and meaning that would render it the kind of readable narrative that we would expect from a novel of the period. In this sense, it may offer a model of aesthetic “freedom” in which a story has been liberated from the conventions that hold it together. One wonders: if for Hegel and Ruskin, the work of art is significant because its form evidences the material expression of inner spirit, of what inner consciousness is *The Well at the World’s End* an expression? To say “William Morris’s” seems facile and too literal; instead, perhaps we might imagine that what it expresses is the consciousness of the brand of socialism that Morris espoused. It is an anarchic harmony of stories, none of which—not even that of the Lady of Abundance herself—succeeds in asserting authority over the others, and yet, which produces in Ralph, who hears them, the desire to hear more.

When we arrive at the end of *Well*, we discover one final level of narrative mediation. At the end of his adventure, Ralph discovers that he has shifted roles from the person who hears to the person who tells stories; a Prior in his home kingdom says to him, ““One thing thou art not to forget, young conqueror, to wit, that thou art to come here early one day, and tell me all thy tale at full length”” (2:270–271). Ralph agrees, and it is the account of this retelling of his own story that ends *Well*:

Certain it is that Ralph failed not of his promise to the good Prior of St. Austin’s at Wulstead, but went to see him speedily, and told him all the tale of his wanderings as closely as he might, and hid naught from him; which, as ye may wot, was more than on day’s work or two or three. And ever when Ralph thus spoke was a brother of the House sitting with the Prior, which brother was a learned and wise man and very speedy and deft with his pen. Wherefore it has been deemed not unlike that from this monk’s writing has come the more part of the tale above told. And if it so be, it is well. (2:277)

Even in this ordinary scene of narrative, the tale’s source is both split and mediated. Though Ralph tells his story “as closely as he might”—he is not, unlike the Lady of Abundance, limited by time to a partial tale—there are in effect two “originals”: the one Ralph speaks to the prior and the one that is written down by the “learned and wise man.” And the printed story that we have is, it turns out, only a partial, conditional account; it *might* be the “more part” of Ralph’s speech. Although the romance lacks a sense of humor, we might hear, in the last sentence of the paragraph—“if it so be, it is *well*”—at least a clever twist. Here, in language itself, is the elusive “well” that has been refracted through so many narratives.

The novel’s strange self-consciousness about its narrative voice was noticed by its reviewers. *The Athenaeum* shortly after Morris’s death gently criticized *Well*: “Beautiful, to our minds at least, as is this ‘Wardour Street English,’ it is after all an artifice, and, as such, does not strengthen, but weakens the full illusion which the worker in imaginative prose is supposed to seek. The moment that in any imaginative picture artifice is obtruded where even art is weak unless she disguises herself, illusion (which must be always born of the artist’s sincerity) begins to grow dim” (“Well” 238). To this reviewer, Morris’s romance forces its reader to attend too much to its means of representation—formalism gets in the way of aesthetic illusion.<sup>103</sup> This, as I

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<sup>103</sup> This reviewer’s comment may also provide a way to connect the internal formalism to the novel to those analyses of the romances that treat them primarily as material artifacts produced by the medievalist Kelmscott press. The experimentation with conventions of representation extends the material play of the romance itself, printed in an archaic font, bound in vellum and laced, and filled with faux-fourteenth-century woodcuts. Morris extends the play on the conventions of representation not only to the printed page, but to the illustrations, to the binding, to the print run. In so doing, he creates an object that confounds the distinction between real and fictional on as many levels as

have been arguing, is the very strategy of the romance that foregrounds the modes of narration that usually disappear as the story's frame. But even this is not as interesting as the solution this reviewer proposes: "The truth seems to be, as the present writer more than once remarked to Morris, that if he really wished to throw around the reader the veil of full illusion which most imaginative artists in prose endeavour to throw around him, *he should have written these stories not in the epic, but in the autobiographic form*. Then the archaisms that are interspersed in the narrative would not have seemed to the reader more artificial, and therefore more insincere, than those in the dialogue of Scott's novels.... This is easily seen if we contrast the beautiful realism of the dialogue between the characters who live in the story before us with the movement, trammelled if fascinating, of the narrative portions surrounding them" (238, my emphasis). The "dialogue" between the characters consists in large part of the "tales" that they tell one another; what Morris's friend hopes for is a form—an autobiographic, personal form—that would contain this dialogue and render it a coherent whole. This coherent, narrating individual is precisely what the romance refuses to offer.

### Collective Formalism

Whether or not the collective narrating voice of *Well* is essentially "socialist," the romance perpetually calls to the foreground questions about the intersection of individual consciousness and literary form. My goal here is not to caress Morris's artistic activity into compliance with his political views: I would challenge the notion that *Well* is an "aesthetic" work with "political" implications. Rather, *Well* demonstrates ways in which Morris's narrative form carries with it implications about individuality; in the romance, form is the effect of the refraction of a unitary story—that of the "Well at the World's End"—through individual perspectives. This is more than perspectivalism: the plot dramatizes the way in which individual characters shape the same 'material' into a range of forms. I want to emphasize that what is important is not only that the form of the romance thus engages with the rhetoric of individualism by turning away from a "bourgeois," novelistic mode of narration toward a more reflexive and collective set of narrative conventions, but that the origin of this turn is a Ruskinian theory of form in which political community and artistic creation are inseparable. It is not necessary to go back and "add" a political reading to the romances by showing their allegories of socialist communities; it is, as I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, in the very "purity" (to use Morris's own word) of the literary form itself that social dynamics are inscribed.

To be more specific, Morris takes from Ruskin a theory of the way in which form can manifest relations between individuals rather than detach from society and become a transhistorical category: indeed, it is at the very moment that form is divorced from its origin *in* the individual (Ruskin argues that this is the hallmark of Renaissance art) that it becomes politically problematic, demanding rigid adherence to an external ideal rather than offering freedom of aesthetic expression. What Morris emphasizes in (or, perhaps, introduces to) this line of reasoning is the fact that such a theory of aesthetic form bars one from treating art as the triumphant product of individual genius: art, as activity (rather than object), is not only available to everyone; it prevents us from taking subjective inwardness as absolute. Morris's formalism thus protests both reactionary and liberal individualisms which seek to ascertain and defend the

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possible; the book masquerades as an artifact from the world it represents, just as its content masquerades as the ancient tale that it frequently describes.



boundaries around persons rather: because aesthetic form names the process by which one recognizes one's own inner subjectivity in material reality—and (using Ruskin's metaphor) “reads” that of others—it decisively breaks with the notion that consciousness is atomized, self-grounding, and distinct. Despite the romances' reputation as symptoms of Morris's withdrawn, fanciful daydreaming, they in fact reveal the functioning of this dynamic more than any other of Morris's activities. They show that politics is not something that Morris does in *Commonweal* and aesthetics something he does at Kelmscott, but rather that there is a politics within Morris's literary work independent of its incidental sympathies with his openly-stated political views.

Both Morris's aesthetic theory and the romances thus evidence yet another way in which it becomes difficult to accept the thesis that aestheticism simply celebrates aesthetic autonomy. This might seem like a roundabout route to this conclusion—Morris said outright, after all, that he disliked the *l'art pour l'art* slogan, and he is widely recognized as a great literary propagandist. Moreover, as *News from Nowhere* demonstrates, Morris's vision of the future is one in which art has been so integrated into everyday life that there is no such thing as a separate “aesthetic experience”: art is everywhere, so art is nowhere. But if we stop at these observations, we run the risk of casting Morris as simply “against” aesthetic autonomy, when, in fact, the central importance to Morris of aesthetic form as a means for addressing questions about the relation between individual and collective reflects that Morris is unwilling simply to erase any notion of aesthetic autonomy. Narrative form, that is, remains crucially important to Morris—it is the means by which the Nowherian future is imaginable in the first place, and it is the mechanism within art that resolves the impasse between individualism and socialism. It is simultaneously inward and communicative, individualist and communitarian. This treatment of the idea of aesthetic autonomy is similar to the way Morris treats anarchic individualism. He does not respond to anti-government Spencerians with the opposing view that the state ought to exercise universal social control; rather, he rethinks individualism in such a way that untrammelled personal liberty produces rather than undermines altruistic social cohesion. Similarly, Morris does not counter the principle of aesthetic autonomy by eliminating every distinction between art and life; rather, he rethinks aesthetic form in such a way that it retains a unique status within society even as it becomes universally available.

It is on this level that Morris begins to rethink some of the main currents of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophy. Morris turns to aesthetics to ratify his own commitments about how the individual ought to relate to the community, but also to challenge the idea that aesthetic experience is a phenomenon particular to a single individual. Exploring the ways in which art can erode calcified notions of individuality and allow for the imagination of new ones, Morris counters the logic of individuation that characterizes the tendency of Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics to link the autonomy of the work of art to the autonomy of the individual (we might think here, again, of Adorno's contention that aesthetic autonomy “was a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with social structure” (*Aesthetic Theory* 255)). If we were to refer to “aesthetic experience” within Morris's paradigm, it would not be disinterested, abstract contemplation, but rather would be materially invested on every level. Art is making things and using things; it does not transport one into another realm, but instead allows one to experience the physical world all the more fully. Aesthetic pleasure does not occur in isolation; it always involves a communicative connection either with the original creator or eventual user of the art object, which is more of a conduit between persons than the basis for an independent aesthetic “sphere.” Although it might be tempting to celebrate this as a

more “progressive” aesthetics, I would hesitate to claim that there is something inherently leftist about the idea that our experience of a work of art challenges rather than affirms the sensation that we are isolated individuals. Morris’s use of the language of art against the discourse of individualism reflects merely one way in which the logic of aesthetic autonomy can be politically deployed. What is most important is not whether Morris successfully outlines a viable political purpose for art, but instead the very fact that he calls our attention to the way in which art—through its autonomy or through its form—can modify, even challenge, our assumptions about categories such as the “individual” that are crucial to the ways in which we imagine our political existence.

### III. The Body: The Science of Aesthetic Pleasure in Late-Victorian Psychology

#### The Dog's Piano

In the August 1880 issue of *The Popular Science Monthly*, the science writer Grant Allen poses a simple but unusual question: do birds have aesthetic feelings? Were this question asked by an aesthete, one might expect it to be a provocative entrée into an ironic treatise on beauty. But Allen asks entirely in earnest. He corrals the empirical evidence: birds have a strong preference for sugar and ripe fruits (“Aesthetic Feeling in Birds” 651). They not only sing, but they have musical preferences, choosing “the relatively pure and simple musical tones to confused noises; and the relatively pure and simple analytic colors, red, blue, green, and yellow, to confused mixtures such as brown, gray, and mud-color” (653). Allen argues that birds even appreciate form as such, as evidenced through both their ornamentations and their behavior: “The nests of weaver-birds...display a considerable taste for orderly arrangement. For one must remember that the building of such nests, though doubtless instinctive and inherited, is not a mere organic process...; it is as much art as the building of a honeycomb or a savage hut. The flight of birds in play...all approach very nearly to our own idea of dancing” (658). That Allen is entirely serious in endeavoring to answer this question is evidenced by the fact that he later returns to the question as it relates to dogs (and even insects).<sup>104</sup> Allen ponders whether dogs, in a more evolved state, might use their superior sense of smell as the basis for an art of odor, complete with instruments that emit smells rather than sounds: if “we had a highly cultivated race of animals descended from dogs, it is probable that they would be able to receive just the same sort of enjoyment from the scent-piano” that we humans receive from Beethoven’s sonatas (“The Dog’s Universe” 550). Allen draws on Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer to assert that there is nothing special about the human species that enables it, as opposed to other animals, to appreciate beauty: “the pleasure of form probably has a purely sensuous origin.... Hence there is no reason why it might not be felt by intelligent animals, just as we know that it is felt, and acutely felt, by hardly more intelligent men” (“Birds” 657).

Allen’s question highlights the issues that I will be raising in this chapter, which can be expressed through four interrelated questions: First: what is gained or lost with a scientific account of aesthetic experience? Approaches such as Allen’s can seem quite reductive: although they usually claim that by first understanding basic questions about how animals experience aesthetic feelings we will then be able to explain the more complex manifestations of those feelings in humans, treatises of empirical aesthetics rarely are able to account for aesthetic phenomena more complex than lines, curves, or color fields. But is this apparent reductiveness merely the effect of evaluating empirical aesthetics through a philosophical lens? Perhaps empirical approaches are significant for their capacity to highlight the importance of the moment of perception and to validate the response of a reader, viewer, or listener as a topic of aesthetic inquiry.

Second: how does the development of a “scientific” aesthetics reconfigure disciplinary boundaries between philosophy, psychology, and biology? By claiming that aesthetics ought properly to be considered a science, psychologists seem to participate in an increasing rationalization of intellectual domains and to push the notion that even the most abstract realms of human thought could best be approached through positivist science rather than through

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<sup>104</sup> For Allen’s discussion of the insect’s capacity to enjoy color, see *The Colour-Sense*, 81–96.

humanistic learning. Is this simply part of a familiar trajectory of the increasing ascendancy of science over the nineteenth century? What are the limitations of a narrative that pits science against humanism?

Third: what are the cultural and political stakes of claiming that aesthetics is a branch of science rather than of philosophy? One way of arguing for a more empirical approach to aesthetics is by claiming that aesthetic experience is an evolutionary phenomenon that either manifests the excess leisure made available by more “advanced” forms of life or plays a role in the day-to-day processes of natural selection by rendering some individuals more attractive than others. On this view, aesthetic quality becomes naturalized as racial value, as evidenced by Allen’s comparison of “intelligent animals” to “hardly more intelligent men” (657). This is obviously problematic, but evolutionary aesthetics might also serve to challenge hierarchies of aesthetic value dominated by an elite literary class.

Fourth: to what degree is the human capacity to experience aesthetic pleasure unique? And if it is not, then must we reconsider the ways in which we assign value to activities and artifacts that we consider “aesthetic”? Here, I argue that scientific approaches to aesthetic experience demand a controversial and sometimes explosive rewriting of narratives about the individual. To the aesthetic psychologist, the self is not a metaphysical entity that transcends particularized bodily and mental responses, but rather the mere sum of the electrical currents and muscular activity that courses through the body at any particular moment. Although this may sound like a “scientific” theory, it bears surprising resemblance to the forms of selfhood often imagined by aesthetes and decadents.

Framed by these questions, the dog’s “scent-piano” imagined by Allen reveals itself to be more than amusing Victorian curiosity dreamt up in a moment of idle speculation. Rather, it represents the tensions that were produced by the confrontation of the science of the mind and the study of beauty between 1855 and 1880: the piano, a common novelistic metonym for domesticity, sophistication, or middle-class values, is no longer the exclusive property of the sophisticated English, or even of humans. And hierarchies of aesthetic value based upon the senses—instrumental music, as auditory, is inherently superior to mere perfumes—appear to be less stable once they are explained away as symptomatic of the relative propensities of human and canine organs. Finally, the dog’s piano illustrates the way in which scientific findings raised questions that demanded a response from philosophical domains: if there is nothing fantastic about the idea that dogs might evolve into a more-developed race, then do our theories of aesthetic experience need to be rethought from an evolutionary and biological perspective?

### **The Interdisciplinarity of Victorian Psychology**

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant admires Burke’s treatment of the beautiful and the sublime, but believes it to be of limited value because it remains at the level of psychology. After elaborating his own theory of aesthetic pleasure, Kant writes, “The transcendental exposition of aesthetic judgments that has now been completed can be compared with the physiological<sup>105</sup> exposition, as it has been elaborated by a Burke...in order to see whither a merely empirical exposition of the sublime and beautiful would lead” (158). The path down which it leads turns out to be short. Kant summarizes Burke’s argument that the sublime is grounded on the drive to self-preservation, and notes that though this may be true, it does not

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<sup>105</sup> Paul Guyer notes here that “In the first edition, the word printed here was ‘psychological.’”

help us understand aesthetic judgment: “As psychological remarks these analyses of the phenomena of our mind are extremely fine, and provide rich materials for the favorite researches of empirical anthropology. If, however, one locates the satisfaction in the object entirely in the fact that it gratifies by means of charm and emotion, then one must not expect of *others* that they will assent to the aesthetic judgments that *we* make...if, therefore, the judgment of taste must not be counted as egoistic, but...pluralistic...then it must be grounded in some sort of a priori *principle*...which one can never arrive at by scouting about among empirical laws of the alterations of the mind: for these allow us to cognize only how things are judged, but never to prescribe how they ought to be judged” (159). An empirical approach cannot constitute the basis for a critique of aesthetic taste, because it remains confined to individual sensations of pleasure and pain rather than reaching out in hopes of finding commonly shared principles that govern aesthetic judgment. For Kant, in other words, psychological or physiological approaches to philosophical questions about aesthetic experience may very well be quite interesting—among our “favorite” anthropological questions—but they do not yield a coherent science of aesthetic judgment.<sup>106</sup>

This evaluation of the empirical method of studying the operations of our mind underlies Kant’s more general rejection of any attempt to scientifically examine oneself in the way that other objects can be submitted to objective analysis. In *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), Kant explains the impossibility of treating the mind as though it were fundamentally the same as any other material object: “still farther even than chemistry must empirical psychology be removed from the rank of what may be termed a natural science proper; firstly, because mathematics is inapplicable to the phenomena of the internal sense and its laws.... But not even as a systematic art of analysis, or experimental doctrine, can it ever approach chemistry...; the observation itself alters and distorts the state of the object observed. It can never therefore be anything more than an historical, and as such, as far as possible systematic natural doctrine of the internal sense, i.e. a natural description of the soul, but not a science of the soul, nor even a psychological experimental doctrine” (141–142).<sup>107</sup> This strict distinction between philosophy and psychology is the same distinction that backs Kant’s argument that empirical analyses can never form the basis of a philosophy of aesthetic taste.

Kant does not argue that it is impossible to understand the workings of the mind because they are fundamentally mysterious and unknowable—only that we must ask questions about our own consciousness differently than we ask questions about other things. The difficulty of taking an empirical approach to aesthetics, then, lies in the limitations of psychology itself as a discipline. But in order to understand the difference between psychological aesthetics as practiced by Burke and as it was done in the late-nineteenth century, it is necessary to understand the massive changes that took place in what “psychology” itself meant between the time of Kant and the time of Allen. If it *were* possible to examine objectively the workings of mind, then what would happen to Kant’s objections to Burke’s approach? How might such a possibility change

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<sup>106</sup> Martin Jay has discussed the modernist resistance to psychologism, and cites Kant as its origin: “The philosophical critique of psychologism can be traced at least as far back as Kant’s claim that ‘in logic we do not want to know how understanding is and thinks and how it hitherto has proceeded in thinking, but how it ought to proceed in thinking. Logic must teach us the correct use of the understanding, i.e. that in which it is in agreement with itself’” (94).

<sup>107</sup> For further discussion of Kant’s rejection of a science of psychology, see Gary Hatfield, *The Natural and the Normative: Theories of Spatial Perception from Kant to Helmholtz*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 1990, 67–164.

our understanding of aesthetic experience, and, conversely, how might the study of aesthetic experience affect the practice of psychology? These changes began as soon as Kant's successor, Johann Friedrich Herbart, took the position of chair of philosophy at Königsberg. One of Herbart's major works, as its title indicates, directly challenges the idea that there is a fundamental distinction between metaphysics and psychology: *Psychologie als Wissenschaft, neu gegründet auf Erfahrung, Metaphysik, und Mathematik* (1824)—“Psychology as a Science, Newly Grounded on Experience, Metaphysics, and Mathematics.” Against Kant, Herbart argued that individual consciousness *can* be subject to mathematical explanation, and treated concepts (*vorstellungen*) as variables that could be manipulated in equations.<sup>108</sup>

Herbart's work asserts that the proper way to study the mind is to use scientific, mathematical terms rather than philosophical concepts. A fundamental principle of Herbartian psychology is that the basic elements of thought, “representations” (*Vorstellungen*), are forces that compete with one another to come to consciousness in ways that can be represented via physics equations. Mental activity literally obeys a set of physical laws that can be expressed in symbolic terms, just as can phenomena such as gravity, momentum, and velocity. The second section of *Psychologie als Wissenschaft* outlines a detailed “Statics of the Spirit” that elaborates these laws in ever-increasingly complex equations.<sup>109</sup> Thought obeys the same laws of physics as do objects in the phenomenal world.<sup>110</sup> This aspiration toward a physico-mathematical model of mind is carried yet further by the psychologists who follow Herbart. In the mid-nineteenth century, E.H. Weber and Gustav Fechner established a field of “psychophysics.” Fechner describes the field thus: “*Psychophysics* will refer to an exact study of the functional or interdependent connections between body and spirit, and generally between the bodily and spiritual, physical and psychic worlds” (*Elemente* 8).<sup>111</sup> Unlike Herbart, Fechner bases his psychophysics on empirical observation rather than speculative calculation, famously expressing the magnitude of a stimulus and the magnitude of a sensation as a logarithmic equation, using laboratory experiments that measured the “just noticeable differences” between two stimuli as the basis of his results.<sup>112</sup>

These simple experiments opened the possibility that psychology might be able to answer some of the questions that had previously been the exclusive domain of mental philosophy,

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<sup>108</sup> Gary Hatfield suggests that Herbart may not have achieved the radical break from Kant for which he strove: “Comparison of Herbart's project with Kant's rejection of empirical psychology as a foundation for philosophy suggests that Herbart was not so different from Kant as he may have hoped.... Both authors sought to discover a set of principles not justified solely on the basis of experience but nonetheless applicable to all experience” (119).

<sup>109</sup> Herbart's elaboration of the physical laws of mind is extremely dense. Théodule Ribot helpfully surveys it in *German Psychology of Today* (1886), where he offers the following as an example of a Herbartian calculation that determines the relative intensity of two mental representations, *a* and *b*: “*a* remains in consciousness with the intensity:  $a - \frac{ab}{a+b} = \frac{a+b}{a^2+ab+b^2}$ . *b* remains in consciousness with the following intensity:  $b - \frac{ab}{a+b} - \frac{b^2}{a+b}$ ” (35). This is among Herbart's simpler equations.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Askay and Jensen Farquhar have argued that in this regard, Herbart was influential for Freud's early understanding of consciousness: “According to Herbart, active ideas of varying degrees of strength compete to be above the threshold of consciousness. The weaker (‘inhibited’) ideas disappear from consciousness and form a mass of unconscious ideas which continue to exert pressure against the ideas in consciousness.... In this position, Herbart obviously anticipated some of the primary ideas underpinning Freud's position in, for example, *Civilization and its Discontents*, particularly the conflict between acceptable and unacceptable ideas...” (157).

<sup>111</sup> My translation.

<sup>112</sup> For a more detailed account of the relation between Fechner, Wundt and Herbart, see Boring, 265–287.

preparing the ground for a series of confrontations between philosophers and psychologists that continued until the end of the nineteenth century. This debate is often taken to be exemplary of a rich moment just prior to (or early in) the development of academic specializations that later became entrenched. Because “psychology” is a term that is capacious, new, and mutable, it is able to encompass a kaleidoscope of intellectual activities, from evolutionary sociology, to experiments on color blindness, to speculation about the mind-body problem. Jenny Bourne Taylor argues that the disciplinary shiftiness of the term allows for a complex and mutable notion of identity: “‘Psychology’ was not a unified discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. It was more a point of intersection of various fields of knowledge—philosophy, physiology, aesthetic and social theory. And while particular models of identity, sanity, and consciousness were firmly located in specific notions and institutional practices...they cannot automatically be pinned down to a single meaning” (*In the Secret Theatre of Home* 19). More recently, Rick Rylance praises the early interdisciplinarity of psychology in terms that imply that it meets some of our contemporary academic standards of value: “the high-Victorian psychology of the years 1850–80 was a more open discourse, more spaciouly framed in its address to common issues, and with an audience crossing wide disciplinary interests... It was an unshapely, accommodating, contested, emergent, energetic discipline... [T]he broad audience for psychology perceived the issues it raised as matters of common, not specialized, intellectual and cultural concern” (*Victorian Psychology* 7). Rylance figures this interdisciplinarity in positive terms; the field “opens out everywhere, fertile in its sources” (13); Rylance hopes his work will reveal “the sheer bustle of its discursive world, and help challenge those obstructive images of pinched, ungenerous anxiety and morbid repressiveness attached to classic conceptions of ‘Victorianism’” (15).<sup>113</sup> Victorian science is sometimes even imagined as a pristine moment prior to the corrosive effects of disciplinary division: Virginia Zimmerman writes, “In the twenty-first century, considering science and literature together seems novel.... However, the disjunction that makes the conjunction so appealing is itself a product of the twentieth century and obscures the fact that disciplinary boundaries are a recent invention” (6).

In these accounts, Victorian psychology is attractive because it freely crosses the disciplinary boundaries that later restricted it, which, in turn, made relatively arcane intellectual debates directly appealing to a certain educated public (thus fulfilling some of current academia’s own ideals of interdisciplinarity). This interdisciplinarity is apparent from the early issues of the journal *Mind*, whose mission statement could, with a few modifications, very well serve as the rationale behind a contemporary journal. The editor, George Croom Robertson, writes, “Psychology...will be understood in the widest sense, as covering all related lines of objective inquiry. Due prominence will be given to the physiological investigation of Nerve-structures. At the same time, Language, and all other natural expressions of products of mind...the Manners and Customs of Races as evincing their mental nature, mind as exhibited in Animals generally—much of what is meant by Anthropology and all that is meant by Comparative Psychology—will come within the scope of the Review.... Beyond Psychology account will be taken of Logic, Aesthetics, and Ethics.... Even as a scientific journal, [*Mind*] cannot evade ultimate questions of the philosophical order, suggested as these are with peculiar

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<sup>113</sup> Praise of the interdisciplinarity of Victorian science abounds. Laura Otis writes, “[t]he notion of a ‘split’ between literature and science, of a ‘gap’ to be ‘bridged’ between the two, was never a nineteenth-century phenomenon...[s]cience was not perceived as being written in a ‘foreign language’—a common complaint of twenty-first century readers...science was in effect a variety of literature” (xvii).

directness by psychological inquiry.... *Mind* will, farther, expressly seek to foster thought of bold sweep—sweep that can never be too bold.... Nor, in this connection, will the History of Philosophy be overlooked.... *Mind* will include among its contributors some of the foremost workers in psychology and philosophy on the Continent and in America” (n.p.). With its “bold sweep,” *Mind* aims to cross disciplines and provide a forum in which specialists can share their insights with one another; it even strives for a cosmopolitan transatlanticism. These were promises on which the journal made good. Not only did it recruit as contributors the foremost European and American psychologists, it devoted its “Critical Notices” sections almost exclusively to French, German, and Italian works on psychology that were not yet translated for an English audience. Its topics ranged from geometrical axioms, to formal logic, to the way philosophy is studied at Oxford, to the linguistic nature of collective and abstract terms. In a recent collection, Anne Stiles praises the journal as an example of nineteenth century interdisciplinary collaboration: “scientific articles... were accessible to a general readership. This was, after all, a period during which Britain’s leading philosophical journal, *Mind* (1876–present), frequently provided a venue for introducing the latest work in experimental psychology and neurology” (10).

This range of subjects allowed for a recalibration of familiar models of individual identity. Roger Smith has argued that one of the reasons that psychology was such an engaging topic for Victorians was that it addressed fundamental questions about individual identity in a completely new way that called into question familiar notions of will and responsibility: “the discussion was philosophical but not necessarily remote, as language expressed emotive, concrete values. Thus, in the midst of dry language there was often a lively hint that viewing the mind in its physiological relations somehow shifted the balance against the self and repudiated the self’s responsibility.... When philosophy referred to the moral will and the self, everyone, at some level, grasped that the very identity of what it is to be human was at stake” (88). If this is the case, then the stakes of the conclusions psychologists reach are quite high, touching on fundamental issues of ethics and free will in a way that is immediately relevant to their audience. As Smith suggests, a scientific model of the self threatens to compromise the primacy of human agency. If what one experiences as consciousness is really a set of electro-physical stimuli and responses, then how can one really be held responsible for one’s actions? Or, at a more fundamental level, is it even possible to refer to a “self” that transcends and unites the individual mechanisms of psychophysical activity?

But I would argue that what makes the early debate over psychology so interesting is that these are precisely the sorts of questions that psychologists hoped to *avoid*—questions that seemed part and parcel of an old, Kantian “metaphysical” way of thinking that focused excessively on abstract concepts and too easily dismissed concrete realities. In the resistance of early psychologists to modes of thought that were deemed too “philosophical,” one sees the signs of a shift toward a different way of thinking about individuals: less in terms of unobservable faculties, wills, and desires, and more in terms of nerves, currents, and organs. Although this turn to a physiological model of the self allowed for some crossover between biology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, this was a more restrictive form of ‘interdisciplinarity’ than recent accounts have suggested, as it organized these disciplines along specific ideological lines. Although Robertson figures Psychology in the first issue of *Mind* as “a kind of common ground whereon thinkers of widely different schools may meet” (“Prefatory Words” 5), the journal itself makes clear that this terrain is well within the boundaries of experimental science. Often, authors



in *Mind* argue less for a rapprochement between experimental and speculative approaches and more for the acknowledgment that speculative approaches are strictly secondary to experimental ones. One series of articles discusses the institutional role of philosophy at various universities, praising the University of London examinations for including traditional philosophical topics as subsets of psychological areas of study. The course of study which “is not only clearly conceived but betokens a real concern for the promotion of philosophical study and work” seems mostly to promote philosophy as long as it looks like psychology. “The heads ‘Senses, Intellect and Will, including the Theory of Moral Obligation’ show that Moral philosophy is understood in the wider sense of Mental Philosophy, while this last is interpreted chiefly of psychology,” and the most advanced philosophical degree is in “‘Mental science,’ with... the following as subsidiary subjects—‘Physiology of the Nervous System and Organs of the Senses in man and other animals, History of Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Political economy’” (“Philosophy in London” 539). In Croom’s introduction to the journal, he writes that what was previously known as the study of “Logic, aesthetics, and ethics” (“Prefatory Words” 4) is recast in psychological terms as the study of “Knowing, Feeling, and Willing” (5). If *Mind* puts on display the contest between philosophy and empirical science at the end of the nineteenth century, in some ways that contest is won in advance, due to the fact that the framework in which that tension must be discussed, according to a journal such as *Mind*, is one of scientific observation rather than of conceptual principles. The subtitle of *Mind*—“a journal of psychology and philosophy”—which is sometimes taken to represent the fluidity of the boundary between the two, is therefore slightly deceptive. The “and” between the disciplines by no means implies equality between them; it is more often than not a journal exploring ways in which psychology can either solve philosophical questions or show how it might eventually do so.

There is a limit to the capaciousness of the interdisciplinarity of Victorian psychology, and this limit is not only important, it is defining. Victorian scientists’ work may not fit neatly into our modern disciplinary divisions, but this does not mean that it was methodologically ecumenical. To the extent that Victorians were aware of a lack of rigid disciplinary distinctions, this was seen as a problem that needed to be solved rather than a freedom that promoted creative intellectual activity. George Henry Lewes expresses this most vividly. In *Problems of Life and Mind*, Lewes explains that the new science of the mind does not wish to enter into a dialogue with philosophical thought, but rather to destroy it altogether. Lewes writes, “at present Metaphysics is an obstacle in our path: it must be crushed into dust, and our chariot-wheels must pass over it; or its forces of resistance must be converted into motive powers.... It is toward the transformation of Metaphysics by reduction to the Method of Science that these pages tend. Their object is to show that the Method which has hitherto achieved such splendid success in Science needs only to be properly interpreted and applied, and by it the inductions and deductions from experience will furnish solutions to every metaphysical problem that can be rationally stated” (5). For Lewes, “metaphysics” stands for quasi-religious obscurantism, and he laments the tendency of many to find insoluble questions attractive: “even some great captains of Science... are ever and anon seen to cast lingering glances at those dark avenues of forbidden research, and are stung by secret misgivings lest after all those avenues should not be issueless, but might some day open on a grander plain. They are not quite at ease in the suspicion that other minds confessedly of splendid powers can deliberately relinquish the certain glories of scientific labour for the nebulous splendours of Metaphysics” (8). Throughout *Problems of Life and Mind*, Lewes associates metaphysics untransformed by positivism with sorcery, seduction, forbidden

fruit, and secrecy. Science is figured as the bright light that promises to eliminate metaphysical obscurity.

The rejection of “metaphysics” as too abstract and nebulous directly corresponds to an argument that the human mind itself is neither abstract or nebulous: rather, with the proper tools, it can be studied and explained just as exhaustively as any other phenomenon. For psychology to be an empirical science, there has to be something “there” to observe—something more concrete than “imagination” or “intuition.” When it came to describing the self, gestures of exclusion, division, and line drawing abound. The condition that makes it possible to understand the physiological realities of the mind is exactly the rejection of philosophical approaches that tend to sidetrack thought into abstract (if interesting) philosophical questions. Many early textbooks of psychology introduced the discipline in precisely these terms. Wilhelm Wundt writes, “The view that psychology is an empirical science... is of recent origin. It still encounters in the science of today oppositional views, which are to be looked upon, in general as the remnants of earlier stages of development.... *Metaphysical psychology* generally values very little the empirical analysis and causal synthesis of psychical processes. Regarding psychology as a part of philosophical metaphysics, its chief effort is directed toward the discovery of a definition of the ‘nature of mind’ that shall be in accord with the whole theory of the metaphysical system to which the particular psychology belongs” (6, emphasis in original). Oliver Munsell: psychology “has to do with *the attributes*, and not with *the essence* of mind. It must not therefore be confounded with pure metaphysics. The two have their necessary and legitimate points of contact; but their spheres are not identical” (4). James Sully: “We do not make any assertion as to the ultimate nature of mind or of body.... These problems lie outside science altogether, and belong to the domain of philosophy or metaphysics” (*Elements of Psychology* 21). James Mark Baldwin: “Leaving the general problems of the theory of knowledge to metaphysics, we have only to do with the process of perception, considered as an operation of mind” (*Elements of Psychology* 111).

It may not seem like the attack on metaphysics—especially to the extent that such a rejection is rhetorical or strategic—would seriously compromise the notion that Victorian psychology encompassed a rich array of overlapping disciplines. But this rejection is what unifies this array of approaches as recognizably interconnected. Oswald Külpe’s *Outlines of Psychology*, which was instrumental in creating a new discipline of psychology argues that the moment in which a science of the individual becomes possible is the moment in which science dismisses philosophy. His book opens by distinguishing psychology as a special science whose object is “*facts of experience*.... The ultimate and original data of our experience.... psychology belongs not with the philosophical disciplines, but with the special sciences” (1). This disciplinary distinction entails a rejection of certain ways of thinking about the self endemic to speculative philosophy: “we shall nowhere discuss anything like a ‘transcendental consciousness,’ a ‘substantial soul,’ or an ‘immaterial spirit’” (3). The findings of science mean that terms such as these are at best abstractions and at worst superstitions: individuals in reality are complex networks of nerves, bodily processes, and brains, responding to stimuli and sensation: “We may discover a relation between experiences and certain bodily processes which stand in a causal connection with the unknown excitations in the cerebral cortex and admit of detailed examination. Psychology investigates in this way the dependency of sensation upon stimulus, and that of voluntary and involuntary movements on will and feeling” (6–7). Insofar as psychology does depart from empirical study in order to delve into broader conceptual questions,

it is only to aid the scientific process: “The other mode of procedure is rather indicative than anticipatory. It consists in the introduction of general concepts for mental states or capacities,—memory, imagination, mental disposition, etc.—concepts which indicate our ignorance of their actual conditions” (7). Concepts such as these are heuristics, to be discarded once knowledge progresses. Külpe provides the concept of “practice” as an example: “we shall not mean by ‘practice’ a special psychical capacity, or even a new mental act, but merely a number of processes, not very exactly known” (7). What previously was metaphysics now becomes a handmaiden of scientific research: conceptual thought merely provides a provisional placeholder until empirical science becomes capable of accounting for the phenomena toward which abstract terms can only gesture.

The idea that the self is essentially a non-autonomous physiological concurrence of nerve energy and organic mechanisms is thus inextricable from larger questions about how disciplines distinguish themselves from one another. We are not, as Külpe points out “transcendental consciousnesses” or “immaterial spirits,” chimerical phenomena that are produced by attempting to discover the ultimate nature of the mind rather than attending empirically to processes of perception (Baldwin) or specific mental attributes (Munsell). Such a gesture is not reducible to an Oedipal reaction or an anxiety about influence (though it stems from those sources as well): it was also demanded by institutional realities. As Rick Rylance has shown, because psychology as it was practiced until the late 1870s had no dedicated forums, it struggled to make itself heard in the periodical press. Few major thinkers on psychology had any institutional academic backing (and, in fact, many had no formal scientific training); few major presses were interested in publishing books on psychology (Grant Allen’s *Psychological Aesthetics*, which I discuss later, was self-published at great expense), so polemics in periodicals were the only way to give voice to their theories. Rylance notes that “in writing about nineteenth-century psychology one is therefore writing about the *making* of a discipline. For Victorian readers, its appeal was that of the new, the exciting, the controversial. Of disputed standing in the universities (where it was largely considered to be the property of philosophers), a new kind of intellectual—of whom the unaffiliated Lewes is representative—took psychology forward in the public domain.... In this non-specialist environment, the natural medium of transmission was the periodical” (“The Disturbing Anarchy of Investigation” 241). These institutional factors meant that the polemic rather than the treatise was the characteristic genre of the early psychological essay: theories of mental science were articulated in short essays that were often heated responses to competing theories. This partially explains why “metaphysics” functions as a rhetorical placeholder more than as a designation for a particular mode of philosophical thought. The complexities of the tradition of a priori reasoning are flattened into a caricature of irrelevant intellectualism.

Interestingly, however, the rejection of metaphysics did not disappear as psychology became more authoritative than philosophy in the twentieth century. Contemporary accounts of the history of psychology (and all psychology textbooks) narrate Fechner’s experiments as the groundbreaking moment in which the study of the mind sheds the fetters of idle speculation in order to become a reliable, objective science. Morton Hunt’s popular history of psychology dramatically narrates Wundt’s first experiments using electrical apparatus to determine the delay between physically perceiving a sound and becoming conscious of that perception as the moment in which “the modern era of psychology had begun”; “all that had gone before, from Thales to Fechner, had been the evolution of its ancestors” (141). George Mandler’s recent history of experimental psychology likewise carefully excludes philosophy: “I also do not dwell on aspects

of this history that are best called *metaphysical*. Particularly during its first two thousand or so years, psychological speculation went hand in hand with philosophical and theological concerns. Most of the great thinkers before the twentieth century had important things to say about material bodies, immaterial or material minds, souls, and origins. To some degree, these thoughts have influenced psychological concerns. I cover some of these issues but I steer clear of metapsychological disputes. They tend to muddle the scientific and quasi-scientific concerns and contribute primarily historical antecedents rather than to testable hypotheses” (xvi). Philosophical questions about the mind are old-fashioned or distracting, and are certainly of little interest to the professional psychologist. This effort to distinguish psychology as scientific reflects the success of Lewes’s efforts in the late nineteenth century: for Mandler, as for Lewes, philosophy is lumped together with “theology”; conceptual disputes “muddle” the clear and indisputable truths made available by the scientific process of testing hypotheses. What at first appears to be fertile interdisciplinarity masks an effective and persistent effort to silence and exclude certain lines of abstract questioning, or, failing that, to frame them as secondary and metadisciplinary debates separate from the real work of the experimental psychologist. The contemporary disciplinary specificity of psychology exists because of, not in spite of, the self-conscious nineteenth-century debates about the epistemological status of psychology.

But I am not particularly interested in asking whether nineteenth-century psychology successfully lives up to modern standards of interdisciplinary. Instead, I am interested in something rather more specific: what does the disciplinary debate over the status of psychology mean for the study of aesthetic experience? Aesthetics may at first seem like one region of human activity among many upon which the new experimental psychology was brought to bear—psychologists were broadly interested in seeing what their methods could tell them about many fields that had previously been explored primarily by philosophers: ethics, free will, memory, epistemology, and so forth. But I believe that aesthetics constituted a uniquely fascinating field for psychologists because it was more fundamentally related to their own subject matter: it was an attempt to explain philosophically how physical sensations come to be experienced as emotional states. Burke, for example, sees literal pleasure and pain as the basis for aesthetic experiences of the beautiful and the sublime. At the same time, however, aesthetic philosophy seems to contain the most egregious abstractions of the tradition of speculative philosophy. Discussions of aesthetics among psychologists provided a way to simultaneously take on metaphysical assumptions and put forth physiological models of the self.

For this reason, arguments about the nature of aesthetic experience frequently came up in *Mind*, and crossed fluidly with discussions of pleasure and pain. The psychologist James Sully was one of the most prominent commentators on this topic. His “Art and Psychology,” published in the fourth issue of *Mind*, encapsulates the contradictions that aesthetic philosophy posed for psychologists. Sully writes that “There is probably no region of phenomena which has received less illumination from the activities of the modern scientific spirit than the process of the Fine Arts. This fact is unmistakably betrayed in the associations which still cling to the term *aesthetic*. To speak of an aesthetic inquiry is to the ordinary mind to refer to the densest stratum of nebulous thought. To call a subject aesthetic is to claim its exemption from a clear and searching excavation” (467). Psychology, Sully hopes, will relieve the adjective “aesthetic” of these unfortunate connotations by discovering systematic rules that underlie the chaos of art: “the psychological method introduces an element of objective certainty even into this seemingly chaotic region of phenomena...even the most variable aesthetic phenomena...illustrate a

psychological process, and consequently certain general laws of mind” (478). In the future Sully imagines, psychologists will clarify, excavate, organize, demystify and even, if only figurally, legally regulate the work of unruly artists.

If (as Lewes and others argue) metaphysics is nebulous, then aesthetics is the height at which the clouds become impenetrable. The solution that Sully proposes is telling because it assumes the identity of aesthetic and physical pleasure that, for Kant, had distinguished the enjoyment of art from other kinds of pleasure: “just as it is possible to determine physiologically the conditions of those uniformities of pleasurable and painful experience which are to be observed among our bodily tastes, so it may be possible to fix certain general laws of aesthetic effect. And such laws would be a basis for a modestly conceived science” (469). In the conclusion to his 1880 *Sensation and Intuition: Studies in Psychology and Aesthetics*, entitled “On the Possibility of a Science of Aesthetics,” Sully gives an example of the kind of taxonomy that the earlier essay merely suggests. Experimental psychology would render aesthetics less metaphysical by empirically examining and scientifically classifying the pleasures “which form the raw material of artistic impression”: these include “Primary Pleasures of Stimulation, dependent on certain organic conditions of single impressions,” “the gratifications derived from a perception of spatial facts,” “the enjoyments which accompany the moods of memory,” “the gratifications which accompany the filling up of the unknown,” “the satisfaction of the universal longings for something higher,” and so forth (343–344). Aside from calling this project a “science,” though, how would it differ from previous accounts of taste (such as Burke’s) that drew connections between physiology and aesthetic pleasure? In itself, Sully’s essay does not provide a satisfactory response to this question. Sully only suggests that the new Spencerian mode of psychology, which attended to long evolutionary process as well as individual introspection, might provide the key: “[T]he true and only available method of dealing scientifically with art-problems is the psychological method. By this I mean an appeal not only to the study of mental operations by individual self-reflection but also to the newer inquiries into the laws of mental development in the race, and of the reciprocal actions of many minds in the social organism” (471).

Furthermore, to the extent that Sully is familiar with “metaphysical” aesthetics, he minimizes the extent to which it already addresses the questions that he hopes to solve by means of psychology. One vein of Sully’s argument is that German philosophy is not only confusing, it is intellectually dangerous. The philosophical treatment of aesthetics is foreign, entrenched, and entirely blind to reality in its quest for fine transcendental formulas. Sully writes “[I]n Germany, where the construction of elaborate systems of aesthetics has almost grown into a traditional accompaniment of a professorship in philosophy, writers have shown a singular ability in overlooking the psychological roots of art. Most of them seem to have been so deeply engaged in seeking a transcendental formula for beauty and the creative process of art as to lose sight of the obvious consideration that, since beauty recommends itself only by a peculiar effect on our minds, we may best study its nature by examining into this effect” (472). Sully indeed makes this consideration sound “obvious,” but questions about aesthetics had not been neatly resolved precisely because it is not immediately apparent *how* one can objectify “our minds” in such a way that we can coolly examine effects upon them. The starting point of Kant’s aesthetics was that we could only come to know the operation of aesthetic effects through a process of reasoning, since the mind is not something we can separate ourselves from in order to study, like a rock, or a star, or an equation. Remember Kant’s contention against the notion of a

psychological science that “the observation itself alters and distorts the state of the object observed. It can never therefore be anything more than an historical, and as such, as far as possible systematic natural doctrine of the internal sense” (*Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* 141–142).

But my own critical move here—criticizing Sully through the lens of Kant—exemplifies the complexity of the disciplinary interactions at play in Sully’s essay. Caviling over conceptual questions was the precise tendency that Sully and his cohort wished to avoid, so the accusation of a failure conceptually to engage one’s predecessors only works as a criticism if one thinks from within the “metaphysical” paradigm that Sully is trying to break away from. The essay therefore demands of its reader a willingness to be less concerned about whether Sully is being careful in his prose and more concerned with whether or not he is right—in other words, it demands not to be read rhetorically. Experiment and observation, not language, is to be the new medium for the study of aesthetic experience. Although treatments of Victorian science by literary scholars have, since the 1980s, emphasized the linguistic and rhetorical dimension of Victorian scientific discourse, I would argue that it is important to take seriously the aspiration toward a way of doing science in which facts simply speak for themselves.<sup>114</sup> Sully’s expectation is entirely in keeping with what I have argued is the already-empirical “ground” upon which Robertson imagines philosophers and scientists meeting. In the end, this is not so much interdisciplinarity as a locking of horns: it is only possible to agree with Sully if one has accepted in advance the premise that mind *can* be studied from without in a reliable, scientific fashion—studies which Fechner, Wundt, Bain, and Spencer had been conducting for two decades leading up to the 1878 publication of Sully’s essay. Moreover, one has to agree that this discovery is so important that it constitutes an insurmountable obstacle for any art-critical endeavor that does not proceed upon psychological premises. But in order for the essay to hit its mark, it has to speak to an audience that believes the study of aesthetics to be of value in the first place.

This engagement only becomes more complex when one remembers that one of the main targets of Walter Pater’s aestheticism was *also* the metaphysical tendencies of German aesthetic thinking, such that it is impossible neatly to place psychology on one side and humanists on the other. This suggests that the reaction against “metaphysics” is more complex than a strategic rejection of humanism by an inchoate discipline striving for scientific status. As I have argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, one of the motivating forces behind Pater’s aestheticism was the desire to extract intellectual life from its concern with abstract systems and ideal formulations, substituting instead modes of thinking that would allow for a heightened, more direct engagement with the beauty of the everyday world. In “Aesthetic Poetry,” Walter Pater

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<sup>114</sup> This highlights what might be a limitation in many approaches to thinking about the connection of literature and science: namely, to think about both in terms of the rhetorical and metaphorical economies that unite them. Gillian Beer has argued that “Science always raises more questions than it can contain, and writers and readers may pursue these in directions that go past science. Such discussions in their turn provide metaphors and narratives which inform scientific enquiry.... For this is not a one-way process with science as the origin and others as its intellectual beneficiaries only. Scientists work with the metaphors and the thought-sets historically active in their communities. We can see these movements to and fro, and across, between scientific and other metaphors and models” (*Open Fields* 8). Although Beer’s approach is extremely effective in exposing the linguistic basis of much science, I wonder if its sensitive attention to the metaphorical dimension of science does not predetermine in a way similar to the psychologists in *Mind* the ground upon which the interchange between scientific and humanistic domains will be understood—only for Beer, that ground is linguistic, where for Sully (and even more so for Gustav Fechner or Theodor Lipps, whom I discuss later) it is experimental or mathematical.

identifies the aesthetic as precisely the “wild, convulsed sensuousness” (218) that Kant had taken such pains to exclude. Likewise, when Dorian Gray fully indulges his aesthetic impulses, he seeks out objects that are pleasing to his senses of sight, smell, touch, and taste as well as drugs that stimulate all the senses at once.

This similarity highlights yet another reason that aesthetics became such a common topic in discussions about how psychology modernizes, replaces, or develops philosophical disciplines. As a branch of philosophical thought, aesthetics uniquely addresses questions about sensation, subjectivity, and direct experience; for many psychologists (as for Pater) as it had been practiced up until the mid-nineteenth century, aesthetic philosophy only *removed* its practitioners even further from the direct experience of beauty. Pater bookends *The Renaissance* with his own rejections of metaphysics, writing in the Preface that “he who experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere. He may pass them all by as being, answerable or not, of no interest to him” (x); and in the “Conclusion” that “it is easy to indulge the commonplace metaphysical instinct. But a taste for metaphysics may be one of those things which we must renounce, if we mean to mould our lives to artistic perfection. Philosophy serves culture, not by the gift of absolute or transcendental knowledge, but by suggesting questions which help one to detect the passion, and strangeness, and dramatic contrasts of life” (184). The ability to live life with a full appreciation for its sensory textures depends upon the renunciation of abstract systems of thought and of the aspiration for transcendental truth. This is a sentiment that also appears in Pater’s essay on Coleridge, which laments that author’s tendency to think in terms of universal ideas rather than in terms of the relative particulars that are characteristic of modernity.

So Pater and Sully—unlikely bedfellows—together strive to make the aesthetic domain less “metaphysical.” This connection between aestheticism’s objection to philosophical systems that remove us from the senses and psychology’s effort to distinguish itself from philosophy may at first seem tenuous. What the two camps find objectionable about “metaphysics” does not seem to be the same: for Pater, the term indicates rigid systematization of thought (to which psychologists were certainly not opposed); for psychologists it means mystical obscurantism (which Pater’s circle, arguably, perpetuated). My argument, however, is that the turn against metaphysics serves a similar function for psychologists and for aesthetes: it allows both movements to argue that bodily experience is not unworthy of serious consideration, but rather stands at the basis of all of our experiences of pleasure. This, in turn, demands a reorganization of priorities that aesthetes and psychologists could equally get behind: the self is not some sort of abstract entity, but rather a material reality; furthermore, this materialism is neither depressing nor nihilistic, but rather enables new ways of understanding and appreciating experience.

The broad epistemological and disciplinary tensions that I have been describing made it even harder to answer a question that was already difficult: “what is aesthetic pleasure?” This question had, of course, puzzled philosophers since Plato, but now it was not even clear that philosophy was the right way to answer the question: the material account of pleasure developed by psychologists suggested an entirely different way of thinking about the enjoyment that we might experience when standing before a statue or a landscape. In tracing the Victorian attempt to develop a science (rather than a philosophy) of aesthetics, I will suggest that beauty is not just one phenomenon among many that psychology tried to recast in more empirical terms, but that it

constitutes a unique problem that cannot be dismissed as easily as other branches of speculative thought. This is because aesthetic philosophy already speaks the language of sensation, emotion, and feeling that was the medium of early psychological studies and it attempts to describe the connection between subjective feeling and material experience.<sup>115</sup> If the new finding of psychologists was that the body is the basis for all sensation and emotion, then what had to be explained is how this differed from what students of aesthetics had already been arguing for many years.

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<sup>115</sup> James Ward's seminal entry on "Psychology" in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is emblematic: "Higher Aesthetic Feelings" are placed between "Combinations of Sensations and of Movements" and "Egoistic and Socialistic Feelings" (583–584), since aesthetic feelings seem both to depend upon and transcend sensation. Hence, the article offers both physiological and associational explanations of aesthetic pleasure: "those colours yield good combinations that are far apart in the colour circle, while those near together are apt to be discordant" (583) but at the same time, nightingales sing more beautifully than frogs because of the environmental conditions with which we associate their song: "the croaking of frogs and the monotonous ditty of the cuckoo owe their pleasantness, not directly to what they are in themselves, but entirely to their intimate association with spring-time and its gladness" (584).



## Curved Lines and Emotional Waves

The exact nature of the enjoyment afforded by looking at something beautiful has long been a problem central to aesthetics. Kant, in the third critique, famously explains what aesthetic pleasure is *not*: physical gratification, moral satisfaction, the attainment of perfect representation. In order truly to take pleasure in an aesthetic object, it cannot be the object's physical properties that produce the pleasure, but the mere mental representation of the object. The pleasure we derive from eating a roasted pheasant is not "aesthetic," but the pleasure we derive from looking at it might be. This seems reasonable enough, but, as modern philosophers have pointed out, Kant's aesthetic theory eliminates so many of the possible sources of pleasure in aesthetic experience that it is difficult to know what "pleasure" actually means in the Kantian context.<sup>116</sup> As Theodor Adorno puts it: "[Kant's] aesthetics presents the paradox of a castrated hedonism, a theory of pleasure without pleasure" (16). Such a paradox might have appealed to Wilde's circle, but for psychologists committed to a science of the mind based on empirical observation, it could only be evidence of the obscurantism of German aesthetics.<sup>117</sup>

But what if there is simply no such thing as pleasure *separate* from physical gratification? What if, no matter how elevated the pleasure seems, it is ultimately reducible to the body? This was the argument of Alexander Bain, a physiologist who argued against an older psychology based upon mental "faculties" that suggested abstract divisions of the mind into the kinds of compartments Kant suggests. For Bain, emotional states are inseparable from ways in which the body responds to stimuli, and as such they can be empirically studied and observed. Bain's theory postulates that feelings originate in the brain, which diffuses a "wave" through the muscles and nerves of the body: "The state of Feeling... is associated with a *diffusive action* over the system, through the medium of the cerebral hemispheres" (*The Emotions and The Will* (1859 ed.) 5). This is evident from the way in which an animal subjected to pain becomes agitated, but

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<sup>116</sup> One can think of Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, which points out that Kantian aesthetic pleasure does not resemble anything we would recognize as pleasure, or Giorgio Agamben's *The Man without Content*, which argues that Kant defines aesthetics only negatively, in terms of what the aesthetic object is not.

<sup>117</sup> Kant makes a less-well-known argument about aesthetic pleasure with which psychologists probably could have sympathized. In his introduction to the critique, Kant writes that judging nature empirically naturally involve a feeling of pleasure, since "the attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure." Our need to find universal principles in nature is, remarkably, satisfied by the way nature itself works. To explain the source of this pleasure, peculiarity, Kant imagines that there must have been a moment in human history when we did find pleasure in the very judging of nature itself, but we have become so familiar with this pleasure that it has "gradually become mixed up with mere cognition and is no longer specially noticed."<sup>117</sup> The kind of judgment Kant describes is pleasurable in the exact moment that it finds a concept: judgment "where possible bringing heterogeneous laws of nature under higher though always still empirical ones, so that if we succeed... pleasure will be felt." 74 In fact, what would produce the most pleasure, according to Kant, is to discover the rules according to which nature as a whole is determined: "if someone were to tell us that a deeper or more extensive acquaintance with nature through observation must finally stumble on a multiplicity of laws that no human understanding can trace back to one principle, we would be content with this, although we would rather listen if another gives us hope that the more we become acquainted with what is innermost in nature... the simpler and more perspicuous would we find it in the apparent heterogeneity of its empirical laws."<sup>117</sup> In other words, we enjoy finding the rules that govern apparently inexplicable phenomena, and the more coherent those rules are, the more pleasure we obtain. Although Kant's mode of reasoning exemplifies the exact kind of misty German thinking against which Victorian psychologists rebelled, this claim that there is a pleasure in discovering principles through reflective judgment was one with which psychologists could have sympathized. The impulse of biological and psychological approaches to aesthetics was precisely that of discovering universal laws in nature that explained the nature of the pleasure that we take in aesthetic artifacts.

extends to complex human emotional responses as well: “Exactly as we increase a pleasurable or painful stimulus do we find the diffused expression of the bodily organs become more energetic. The hardly perceptible smile rises to the animated distension of all the features, and at last convulses and agitates every member into ecstatic violence. A link of causation is in this way shown to exist between feeling and bodily activity; so that in cases where no bodily excitement is shown, we presume either that the feeling is too weak to produce an effect sufficient to catch the eye of a beholder, or that some restraining power is at work. It must be in the nature of a state of emotion to cause the brain to diffuse or transmit currents to the various muscles and secreting organs” (6–7). This is the central point of Bain’s argument: there is no such thing as a state of consciousness, an emotion, or a feeling—including an aesthetic one—that could be independent of the diffusive waves that originate in the brain and ripple through our nervous and muscular systems. The very “nature” of emotion is an electrical current.<sup>118</sup>

As a result, pleasure must be described in the purely biomechanical and bioelectrical terms of waves, energy diffusion, discharges, and power—what Bain refers to as “the instinctive machinery of emotional expression” (17). The metaphor of the “machine” is not coincidental: the experience of pleasure is a mechanical operation based upon how our bodies are organized. Bain describes the pleasure afforded by musical harmony thus: “We are so formed that two different waves, impressing the nerve of hearing, and coinciding at regular intervals, work up a pleasurable thrill or tremor, like a species of intoxication, under which our favourite emotions are apt to kindle into a flame” (259). When we experience pleasure, according to Bain, we do not experience some abstract, unobservable emotional state, but rather a very specific series of muscular and nervous changes in the body. Bain proposes a theory of natural correspondence between a given emotional state and a given muscular configuration: “Although the course of diffusion through the cerebral hemispheres would appear to lie open in every direction, yet some emotional stimuli choose directions peculiar to themselves, or occupy by preference some one set of organs. One remarkable example of this distinctness of outlet is furnished by the contrasted expressions of pleasure and pain in the features of the face. In pleasure, the muscles affected are those that elevate the eyebrows and distend the mouth... The stimulants of pleasure and pain flow into the brain through the channel of sense, the course of diffusion through the multiplied connexions of the cerebral mass is equally open to both, yet there is something that determines the flow in either case towards certain specific quarters” (13–14).

Because pleasure and pain are, for Bain, among the most fundamental emotional states (and because they are often mixed up with more complex feelings or even experienced at the same time), it is difficult to make generalizations about their bodily manifestation. However, a significant part of Bain’s project is to catalogue in great detail the relation of muscular configurations and nervous impulses to given emotions—everything from anxiety, to esteem, to parental feelings can be observed as a bodily state. Admiration, for example, is described thus: “The tension of the features, the erection of the body, the uplifted hands, the accents of surprise,

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<sup>118</sup> The extent of Bain’s commitment to a purely physiological explanation is debated in Bain scholarship. J. A. Cardno writes, “He is not a physiological psychologist in the sense of one who believes in experiment as *the* scientific procedure, or of one who practices it. Nor is he consistently physiological in the sense of one who regards physiological events as the primary psychological source.... Nevertheless, in one sense Bain was more a physiological psychologist than is admitted; he is undoubtedly anxious to relate overt behavior (including subjective report) to covert behavior, with reference to the basic physical mechanisms” (“Bain and the Physiological Psychology” 117).

and language of energetic laudation, are characteristics of the feeling in its pronounced form” (118). Ultimately this might lead, Bain imagines, to a fully legible body, a sort of mind-reading that takes muscles as its medium: “We have seen that the physical embodiment of feelings varies, in all probability, to as great an extent as their proper mental tone varies; so that if the diffusive action were on all occasions capable of being traced by an observer, the states of an individual mind would express themselves as variously as they are felt” (28). We are not currently knowledgeable enough fully to “read” each others’ bodies, but Bain does not foreclose the possibility that we might become so, and in fact sees this goal as part of the justification for a physiologically-based psychology.

The idea that we might become so transparent to one another aroused suspicion among Bain’s critics. James Martineau argued that with his theory of embodied feeling, Bain only establishes a homology between physical and emotional states—not a causal relation: “if we could turn the exterior of a man’s body into a transparent case, and compel powerful magnifiers to lay bare to us all that happens in his nerves and brain,—what we should see would not be sensation, thought, affection, but some sort of movement or other visible change....” (505). Martineau continues: “When we are told of the ‘high charge of nervous power’ needful for ‘susceptibility of delicate emotions,’—of the ‘numerous currents of the brain’ involved in ‘wandering of the thoughts’... we lose all sense of psychological truth, and no more know ourselves again than if, on looking in the glass, we were to see an anatomical figure staring at us. There is no more occasion for such phraseology, than for an artist to paint his Madonna with the skin off” (506). These metaphors of a literally transparent body correspond directly to the transparency of meaning that Bain imagines results from the discovery of the physical effects of emotional feelings. Furthermore, it is interesting that Martineau’s objection to Bain is in some sense *aesthetic*: the role of the psychologist is to represent the mind, much as the role of the artist is to represent the body, and the quality of that representation has more to do with the compelling nature of the depiction itself than with its accurate correspondence with reality.

According to Bain, the bodily legibility of emotion is produced by the outward flow of “waves” from the brain, which produce pleasure or satisfaction to the exact degree that they are allowed to proceed unchecked. This means that a different kind of freedom is the basis for pleasure—not the interactive play of the faculties, but rather the unimpeded flow of nervous reactions. Freedom has less to do with being liberated from conceptual rules about how to judge and more to do with allowing electrical currents to flow naturally through the nervous system. The body itself provides clues about why we find certain things pleasurable or displeasurable, and so it is by studying bodies rather than by reasoning about faculties that Bain is able to develop a theory of pleasure. Bain figures pleasure as a sort of tolerable excitation, and argues that our capacity for experiencing it depends upon the nature of our physical constitution: “the susceptibility to Pleasure is a property of the mental system, and there are specific ways of reaching the chords of delight. Each constitution can take on peculiar modes of diffusion, according to the organization of the brain and its outlying connections. There is a considerable agreement among sentient beings as to the influences that can arouse the pleasurable undulation” (31). The things that we find pleasurable depend upon the ways in which our nerves connect with our brains; pleasure itself is an “undulation” that spreads from the brain through this system. Some people, who have “minds adapted for pleasure and for simplicity of life” (31) experience pleasure frequently because their bodies are adapted for it: “The forces of the cerebral organization may take naturally that direction, so as to sustain with ease a high and enduring

pitch of joyousness or delight.... This often proceeds from a constitution naturally vigorous in all the organic functions; so that while the brain is highly charged with nervous power, the various members that receive and echo the outgoing currents are also able to sustain a copious activity” (31–32). Bain seems to be arguing, though not explicitly, that pleasure consists in the electrical excitation of the nervous and muscular system just to the point that it is not overwhelmed. Furthermore, throughout the treatise, Bain figures pain as the “constraint” of the emotional wave and pleasure as the unchecked flow of that wave: “It is almost needless to say how grateful and exhilarating is the situation of free and full abandonment to all the impulses that course through the system. This, indeed, is the only situation where perfect enjoyment is at all possible, inasmuch as every variety of restraint brings in the element of pain” (65). This opposition between liberty (as pleasurable) and constraint (as painful) consistently appears in Bain’s discussions of the emotional wave.

But does such a theory of pleasure flatten the distinction between intellectual, bodily, and aesthetic forms of enjoyment? If emotion is simply a nervous response to a stimulus, then how do we distinguish the pleasure of listening to a symphony from the pleasure of eating a satisfying meal? Once the doctrine of a distinction between mind and body is eliminated, some of the older distinctions between various kinds of pleasure become untenable. For example, John Stuart Mill argues in *Utilitarianism* that “there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.... It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others” (11). Bain’s theory of pleasure does not eliminate the possibility of discriminating different kinds of pleasures, but it shifts the terms on which such a discrimination might take place. It is not by opposing the “intellect” to “mere sensation” that Bain distinguishes different kinds of pleasure, but rather by reference to the sensitivity of a given individual’s sensorium. As Rick Rylance has noted, Bain’s work came under criticism for its tendency to reduce human experience to a set of psycho-physiological impulses: critics accused Bain of “botanizing the human personality” and his psychology of performing ““a cruel operation,—a cold-blooded dissecting of [our ideas] to death”” (155).<sup>119</sup>

On one level, it is possible simply to apply Bain’s theory of pleasure to aesthetic pleasures, much as Bain applies it to all realms of human activity, from parenting, to business, to religion. But I believe that there is a deeper connection than this between aesthetics and the physiological model of the self that Bain proposes. Art serves a special function in that it enables the precise form of liberty that, for Bain, constitutes pleasure: “The effusive arts of song, the drama, music, the dance... guide the expression of feeling into appointed channels, and the effect is to heighten or prolong the genial influence of the diffusion. ... when they chance to fit in with an emotional wave they take the place of the wild and transient outburst of untutored nature... the free flow of articulate utterance peculiarly satisfies the outgoing impulses of passionate excitement, heightening pleasure, and assuaging pain” (*Emotions* (1859) 65–66). Bain argues that because so much of our everyday life is characterized by the painful constraint of an unchecked flow of emotion, art becomes an artificial (or “tutored”) way of opening an outlet for

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<sup>119</sup> Rylance situates the controversy over Bain’s work in the context of a political resistance to progressive intellectuals whose ranks included prominent scientific materialists and of a cultural struggle between Arnoldian culture and modern science. See *Victorian Psychology and British Culture*, 148–167.

the nervous waves emanating from our brain.<sup>120</sup> Art thus offers a sense of freedom not because it liberates our mind from mundane, everyday considerations, or even from merely bodily inclinations, but quite the opposite: it provides a literal outlet for waves of electrical and muscular energy that emanate from the brain.<sup>121</sup>

This leads to what might be called a neurological theory of aesthetic pleasure. Beauty inheres in the capacity of an object to encourage the free flow of emotional waves. Interestingly, formal representations of waves are peculiarly able to produce pleasurable emotional waves, since they represent and encourage unconstrained movement: “we have seen that a curved line is intrinsically pleasing, like a waxing or a waning sound, and that a varying curvature is preferable to the rigid uniformity of the circle. The oval is thus a pleasing curve; and still more so is a waving or changing curve.... There is an original charm, operated through the muscular sensibility of the eye, in the curved outline, while to this are superadded associations of ease, freedom, or the absence of constraint.... The mechanical members of the human body, being chiefly levers fixed at one end, naturally describe curves with their extremities” (266).<sup>122</sup> By attributing to the wave a natural capacity for producing aesthetic pleasure, Bain is able to naturalize his own metaphor for how the nervous system works. Waxing and waning, undulating curves, and swinging limbs all suggest forms of energy that are naturally diffusing themselves as they dissipate even as they literally allow the body to dissipate its energy by optically tracing these formal contours. Pleasure thus consists not in the absence of excitation—this would probably be something more like apathy—but in nervous excitement that is free and unconstrained.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> This means that the medium of art is just as much our nerves as it is any material that the artist uses; in other words, what the artist is really manipulating is our nervous systems: Bain writes in *The Emotions and the Will*: “The expression of fear may make a subject for the artist, whether painter or poet... Pictures and tales of thrilling interest are created out of the deepest horrors that reality or imagination can furnish. All this points to a seeming contradiction or paradox in the passion of terror, which, however is only an extension of the use, already adverted to, that may be made of pains to cause pleasure. In such cases the shock of suffering is accompanied with certain collaterals of an opposite nature; and it may be so arranged that the pain may be just enough to stimulate a copious wave of agreeable emotion.... The skillful dramatist is able to adjust the dose—although the greatest of all has not always done so. The genius of Shakspeare has not been able to submerge the painful horrors of Lear. Some minds can endure a large amount of this element, having that robustness of nerve that can throw off the pain, and not been too much excited by the diversion of the currents into the emotional channels” (68).

<sup>121</sup> This apparently simple explanation of aesthetic pleasure nonetheless highlights one of the limitations of recent discussions of the between neurology and literature. As that conjunction indicates, studies are often concerned with the relation between the two and the lines of influence that connect disparate fields. Anne Stiles’s introduction to the collection *Neurology and Literature, 1860–1920*: is representative: “Clearly, scientists and artists of the 1860 to 1920 period were paying very close attention to one another. Indeed the essays in the present volume emphasize how exchanges between literary and scientific writers during these six decades were not simply reflective—science influencing literature or vice versa—but rather dialogic or circular, a conversation where literary and scientific authors were mutually responsive to one another” (2). However, what Bain’s (as well as Spencer’s, Allen’s and Sully’s) work highlights is that there is not just neurology “and” literature, or neurology “and” beauty, but a neurology of beauty and literature. It is important to recognize this fact, since the idea of an interchange between two fundamentally separate domains—even an interchange that is dialogic and circular—runs the risk of representing those domains as coherent and self-sufficient.

<sup>122</sup> I argue in the following chapter that this observation is the origin of the art-historical convention of describing the “line” that a viewer’s eyes trace when looking at a painting.

<sup>123</sup> For Bain, the connection between freedom and aesthetic pleasure extends to the idea that proper topics of aesthetic judgment cannot be the property of any individual: “when muscular exercise, repose, or fatigue, are merely suggested to the mind... they become sources of a more refined interest. Losing altogether their egotistic nature, they

Bain sees this discovery about the natural pleasure of curves as a way to push associationist theories of beauty in a more empirical, physiological direction. In particular, Bain objects to the Scottish philosopher Archibald Alison who, in 1811, had made an effort to apply mental science to contemporary debates over taste. Alison writes, “In the Science of Mind, however, as well as in that of Body, there are few effects altogether simple, or in which accidental circumstances are not combined with the proper effect. Unless, therefore, by means of repeated Experiments, such accidental circumstances are accurately distinguished from the phenomena that permanently characterize the effect, we are under the necessity of including in the Cause, the causes also of all the accidental circumstances with which the effect is accompanied” (x). For Bain, this is not essentialist enough, and relies too much on outdated doctrines of association, which Bain opposes; Bain, instead, wishes to see aesthetic responses as hardwired into our bodies. He writes in the first volume of his work, “I believe [Alison] has here too in many instances put forward intrinsic effects as the effects of association.... There is, I am satisfied, a primitive influence in Form to produce a certain amount of emotion of the kind that enters into the compositions of Art. Curved forms and winding movements yield of themselves a certain satisfaction through the muscular sensibility of the eye.... The free movements of the arm make circular figures; to draw a straight line requires a painful effort” (*The Senses and the Intellect* 400). One effect of this line of argument is that it suggests that aesthetic pleasure exists prior to human culture: form appeals to a “primitive” element in our nature that is reawakened by artistic representation. There is no hint, in other words, that the apparent beauty of curves might be something that is culturally conditioned or historically contingent. If curves are pleasurable forms due to human nervous organization, then they must be transhistorically and transculturally pleasurable. Furthermore, Bain’s argument suggests that the reasons we appreciate a work of art are largely unconscious (in stark contrast to Kant, for whom aesthetic pleasure inheres in a heightened activity of reflection and contemplation as one searches for the correct terms within which to make an aesthetic judgment). Bain’s repeated appeals to the “muscular sensibility of the eye” (266, 400) makes the source of aesthetic pleasure largely non-intellectual: it is simply a physical sensation of whose origins we are not directly aware. Both arguments have the effect of attributing agency to natural functions rather than to artists or viewers: aesthetic pleasure is something that happens to our bodies; not something that we cultivate through study and contemplation.<sup>124</sup>

A neurological explanation of aesthetic pleasure promises to transcend apparently insoluble debates over taste by showing that individual preferences obey the laws of nervous responses. But in order to make this argument, it is necessary to claim that the site of reception of aesthetic pleasure is the body’s system of nerves and muscles rather than the mind’s conscious faculties. Bain lays the groundwork for a way of thinking about aesthetics that replaces the man

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may affect any number of persons alike, so that they have the feature of liberality, so essential to art. The sensations of organic life are exalted in the same way.... [W]hen viewed in such a manner as to be no one person’s property, they are fit subjects for the artist” (*Emotions* (1859) 255).

<sup>124</sup> Bain’s commitment to the idea that aesthetic pleasure can be traced to physiological effect more than to association is evident from his revisions to the succeeding editions of *The Emotions and the Will*: Bain references the findings of psychological aestheticians (many of whom were inspired by Bain’s own work) that the beauty of musical notes and geometric forms can be expressed numerically. See *The Emotions and the Will* (1888), pp. 227–230.

of taste or cultural sage with a set of organs and tissues that never fully add up to a “person.”<sup>125</sup> Aesthetics can be systematically explained only if the viewer of beauty is represented as a system. Bain’s systematization of the body produces a corresponding systematization of aesthetics; just as the self is replaced by component parts, complex phenomena such as paintings and statues are replaced by a conglomerate of curves and lines, colors and shadows. Ultimately what this method promises is a newly objective approach to phenomena that seem stubbornly subjective: despite all of the apparent variation in individual tastes, predilections, and pleasures, Bain’s work shows that taste originates in a universal system of nerves and muscles that not only literally exists but that can be tested and observed.

Bain’s argument about aesthetic pleasure serves to demonstrate a broader point about how we are properly to understand what a self is: we are not repositories of senses and experiences, but rather dynamic and even ephemeral confluences of currents and forces. As Bain explains at the outset of his project, “It is . . . an entire misconception to talk of a *sensorium* within the brain, a *sanctum sanctorum*, or inner chamber, where impressions are poured in and stored up. . . . There is no such chamber, no such mode of reception of outward influence. A stimulus or sensation acting on the brain exhausts itself in the production of a number of transmitted currents or influences; while the stimulus is alive, these continue, and when these have ceased the impression is exhausted” (*Senses* 61). The metaphor of the “inner chamber” implies that behind our physical exteriors there lies a space in which experience can be safely accumulated, stored, and relied upon to guarantee the transtemporal identity of the individual. By arguing against this metaphor, Bain challenges this model of the self as an accretion of sensation. All that is “there” are “nerve forces,” and “transmitted currents” that are constantly ebbing and flowing in the present—phenomena that seem disconcertingly impermanent and even unsubstantial. But Bain’s discussion of aesthetic pleasure shows why we should not be worried by the notion that the self is nothing more than constantly dissipating nervous-muscular force: the free, unconstrained flow of energy is the original source of all pleasure. Simultaneously, by arguing that simple visual forms such as curves and auditory formations such as harmony are so capable of removing constraint, Bain avoids what might be the more radical implications of equating self-restraint with pain. If containing emotional waves is a painful experience imposed by the constraints of society, one might ask, then does Bain’s theory lead to an implicit critique of those constraints? Here, aesthetic pleasure intervenes to defuse any such possibility. The pain caused by containing emotional “waves” can be relieved by simple and innocuous aesthetic forms rather than through some Dionysian state of exception that genuinely challenges the hierarchies of custom and law. It is here that we can see how a materialist aesthetic can lead in two quite diverse directions. For William Morris, for example, turning the focus of aesthetics to material practices such as labor and production allows for a reorganization of social hierarchies. For Bain, emphasizing the materiality of aesthetic pleasure as embodied response anaesthetizes the pains that result from the fact that society prevents us from doing whatever we like. Unlike Morris, Bain opts for “relief” rather than “freedom” as the social function of the aesthetic. Although Bain and Morris tend in two quite different directions, demonstrating the difficulty of ascribing to materialist aesthetics any determinate political meaning, their responses show the way in which the location

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<sup>125</sup> This is a question that Bain grapples with at the end of *The Emotions and The Will*, which unsuccessfully attempts to conjoin the physiological model of the self with a metaphysical notion of identity.

of aesthetic pleasure in bodily responses and embodied practices demands an account of the social importance of aesthetic pleasure.

Ultimately, what Bain suggests is that many of the aesthetic preferences according to which I define “myself” are in fact neurological responses based on a correspondence between the peculiarities of my physical organization and the stimulus of a work of art. As I will argue, this new way of framing aesthetic response becomes in many other Victorian aestheticians the basis for arguing that the subject of aesthetic experience might more properly be understood as an highly organized system upon which aesthetic stimuli act.

### Evolutionary Formalism

At the same time that Bain began thinking about aesthetic experience from the perspective of nervous systems and emotional waves, his colleague Herbert Spencer argued that aesthetic experiences could only be understood in their evolutionary context. Both Bain and Spencer suggest that the “individual” is an insufficient unit for thinking about the nature of aesthetic experience: Bain, because the term gives false unity to a complex system of nerves and muscles; Spencer, because the term fails to attend to the much larger biological forces that determine aesthetic response. Spencer is not often thought of in conjunction with aesthetic philosophy and, indeed, even Peter Allan Dale’s treatment of positivist approaches to the aesthetic dimension skips over the author, asserting that “Spencer in all his vast synthetic philosophy has virtually nothing of significance to say about art... Spencer is the one great exception to my earlier generalization about the impact of romanticism on the Victorian positivists. With his radical marginalization of art he would seem almost to anticipate the logical positivists” (*Pursuit* 31). Although I agree that Spencer does not make a major free-standing contribution to aesthetics, I would argue that his scattered essays and comments on beauty are important because they were perceived by later psychological aestheticians (Grant Allen and Vernon Lee) as important.<sup>126</sup> Although the aesthetic dimension may be relatively marginalized in Spencer’s thought, the few things that he did say about it were taken as important starting points for psychologists of aesthetic pleasure who followed.

The existence of aesthetic pleasure presents a perhaps even more difficult problem to the evolutionary biologist than to the physiologist: why would we be rewarded with pleasure for engaging in activities that are, by definition, useless?<sup>127</sup> What advantages are obtained by

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<sup>126</sup> Lee places Spencer in illustrious company of philosophers whose work is crucial for constructing a science of aesthetics: “[W]hatever materials for an eventual science of aesthetics have been left us by the past exist as fragmentary facts, partial observations, and lopsided hypotheses, scattered in the works of philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, Kant, Schiller, Shopenhauer, Spencer, on the one hand, and on the other, in the works of specialists of some definite branch of art like Winkelman and Morelli” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 2). Contemporary psychologists studying aesthetics, especially music, continue to see Spencer as important. Diana Deutsch, who studies musical patterns in everyday speech, believes that Spencer’s essay on music influenced Mussorgsky (personal correspondence, 6/10/2009).

<sup>127</sup> This is a problem that continues to perplex literary critics thinking from the perspective of evolutionary biology. In “Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds,” John Tooby and Leda Cosmides note that “almost all of the phenomena that are central to the humanities are puzzling anomalies from an evolutionary perspective. Chief among these are the human attraction to fictional experience (in all media and genres) and other products of the imagination” (7). They conclude that the evolutionary function of art is didactic: “the kind of truth conveyed in art... consists of the increased mental organization that our minds extract from experiencing art.... This organization consists mostly of



listening to music, looking at a painting, or admiring a statue that would explain the fact that they are pleasing? This is the topic of Spencer's 1857 essay "The Origin and Function of Music," which has a somewhat easier time accounting for the "origin" than for the "function": "But the love of music seems to exist for its own sake. The delights of melody and harmony do not obviously minister to the welfare either of the individual or of society. May we not suspect, however that this exception is apparent only? Is it not a rational inquiry—What are the indirect benefits which accrue from music, in addition to the direct pleasure it gives?" (405). Although this question might be raised about any sort of pleasure, it is particularly enigmatic for aesthetic pleasure. As Spencer points out (using a phrase that would not become a slogan for at least two more decades), aesthetic pleasure appears to exist "for its own sake," independent of any evolutionary purpose. In an essay written five years earlier, Spencer argues that objects become fit for aesthetic representation only when they have lost their use, musing that "if it be the course of things that what has performed some active function in society during one era, becomes available for ornament in a subsequent one; it almost follows that, conversely, whatever is performing some active function now, or has very recently performed one, does not possess the ornamental character; and is, consequently, inapplicable to any purpose of which beauty is the aim, or of which it is a needful ingredient" ("Use and Beauty" 373). He reiterates this observation in "The Purpose of Art," arguing that any educative property of music is strictly secondary to its essential nature: "When we come to the alleged higher meaning of music—to that instruction which a composer is assumed to utter and the listener to comprehend, we have yet a further interference with the true end. . . . Any culture-effect which may rightly be recognized must be consequent on the excitement of the superior emotions. . . . [T]he primary purpose of music is neither instruction nor culture but pleasure; and this is an all-sufficient purpose" (48). For Spencer, the beautiful is necessarily opposed to the useful, and so it is not immediately apparent how the pleasure it affords might aid evolutionary progress.<sup>128</sup>

In order to discover the function of beauty, it is necessary to think about aesthetic experience in an entirely different way: from the perspective not just of the individual, or even of humanity, but from the perspective of nature as a whole, in which humans are simply one highly-evolved species of animals. Spencer returns to this point several times in his various essays on aesthetics, treating it most fully in "Aesthetic Sentiments," a chapter added to the 1888 edition of *The Principles of Psychology*. The theory of aesthetic pleasure Spencer articulates there accords in many of its details with Bain: aesthetic pleasure, as a special form of play, is a way of releasing stored energy; Spencer describes it as "an artificial exercise of powers which, in default of their natural exercise, become so ready to discharge that they relieve themselves by simulated actions" (630). Furthermore, certain simple elements are best able to "exercise the faculties affected in the most complete ways, with the fewest drawbacks from excess of exercise" (638): for example, harmonies of colors and sounds (both of which Spencer suspects might have to do with "aereal or ethereal waves" (636); gentle-sounding instruments, sweet odors, and graceful curved lines.

But to the extent that this account focuses on the psychology of the individual it is not characteristic of Spencer's thought, which is more concerned with explaining how evolutionary

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what might, for want of a better word, be called skills: skills of understanding and skills of valuing, skills of feeling and skills of perceiving, skills of knowing and skills of moving" (24).

<sup>128</sup> For Spencer, "progress" is indeed the correct noun here—unlike Darwin, Spencer saw evolution as teleological progress toward a more advanced state.

processes play a role in the development of human consciousness than with the explanation of processes within the individual.<sup>129</sup> Spencer reveals that the kind of discharge of energy that accounts for the pleasure we take in art can be explained by our advanced evolutionary state: “activities of this order begin to show themselves only when there is reached an organization so superior, that the energies have not to be wholly expended in the fulfillment of material requirements from hour to hour. Along with occasional surplus nutrition...there occur the conditions making it possible for the states of consciousness accompanying the actions of the higher faculties” (647). Spencer maps an evolutionary progression from play to simple mimetic dances, to the “more-developed aesthetic products” (648) of ancient civilizations, to, finally, the current state of affairs, “decreasingly predatory and increasingly peaceful,” in which excess nervous activity has to be discharged through Fine Art. Indeed, Spencer sees no end to this progression: “the aesthetic activities in general may be expected to play an increasing part in human life as evolution advances.... The order of activities to which the aesthetic belong...will hereafter be extended by it... A growing surplus of energy will bring a growing proportion of the aesthetic activities and gratifications” (648). When we have excess energy that we are not required to expend on basic life-maintaining functions, we have to expel it somewhere. This is evident, Spencer says, when we see animals playing: “Play is...an artificial exercise of powers which, in default of their natural exercise, become so ready to discharge that they relieve themselves by simulated actions in place of real actions” (630). Aesthetic feeling, Spencer argues, operates according to a similar principle. The color of a painting or the smell of a perfume does nothing to help us survive, but they allow for the exercise of excess energy. Art, Spencer writes, “exercise[s] the faculties affected in the most complete ways, with the fewest drawbacks from excess of exercise. Joined to this comes...the diffusion of a normal stimulus in large amount, awaking a glow of agreeable feeling, faint and undefinable” (638).

For Spencer, it is only by reference to this much longer span of time that it becomes possible to understand that aesthetic pleasure is the leftover energy made available by our advanced evolutionary state. If previous interventions into aesthetics confronted the question of how to account for the historical vicissitudes of taste and genre, Spencer’s aesthetics take a much longer view, substituting evolution for history. Aesthetic pleasure not only symptomatically manifests evolution; it also helps it along. In “The Origin and Function of Music,” Spencer takes music to be a natural outgrowth of vocal expression: “the vocal music of pre-historic times was emotional speech very slightly exalted” (225). This hypothesis allows for speculation on the present evolutionary function of music: “having its root...in those tones, intervals, and cadences of speech which express feeling...music has all along been reacting upon speech, and increasing its power of rendering emotion” (233). Art’s cultural role thus becomes less politically or socially educative (in the vein of Schiller, whom Spencer obliquely mentions at the beginning of “Aesthetic Sentiments”), and more a biological adaptation that fuels evolutionary progress: “we may conclude that the exhibition of [our feelings] will become much more vivid than we now dare allow it to be; and this implies a much more expressive emotional language. At the same time, feelings of a higher and more complex kind, as yet experienced only by the cultivated few, will become general.... [I]t is the function of music to facilitate the development of this

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<sup>129</sup> As Rick Rylance notes, part of what makes the massive work so controversial is that “It is only at the very end that Spencer settles to a more conventionally arranged account of, as it were, the micro-psychology of the individual.... [T]hough Spencer praised Bain’s *The Emotions and the Will* as ‘indispensable...his own work jettisoned the detailed analysis of mental contents” (*Victorian Psychology* 218).

emotional language” (237). What Spencer originally casts as inherently useless ultimately becomes part of the engine of evolutionary progress. Spencer’s claim illustrates how a shift toward a more materialist understanding of the aesthetic produces a shift in how the existence of art is explained and even justified—not in terms of some abstract ideal of social improvement, but rather in terms of some observable phenomenon such as evolutionary change.

The wide lens through which Spencer views aesthetics, along with Bain’s emphasis on the materiality of our nervous system, highlights the extent to which Victorian psychology did not simply produce an inward-looking, interiorized model of the self, as has been sometimes been argued. Sally Shuttleworth, for example, asserts that the French psychologist “Esquirol’s formulation of selfhood is indicative of the radical shift in conceptions of the psyche which took place at the end of the eighteenth century as theorists tried to balance the respective ideological claims of inner impulse and social demand.... Eighteenth-century atomistic and individualistic conceptions of the self, with their emphasis on unified agency, gave ways to ideas of social interconnection and determination, and to a new interiorization of the psyche grounded on physiological theories of psychological functioning.... Only with the attempt to conceal the inner psychic workings from the prying eyes of surrounding humanity does true selfhood come into being” (39). I argue, however, that the debate over the psychological status of aesthetic experience highlights a formulation of the self both as internally fragmented into nerves and organs and as a fragment of a far-reaching biological system. Aesthetic experience becomes less a strategy for constructing and asserting selfhood (as for the aesthete) and more a means of exposing that the very idea of an autonomous “self” is a merely metaphysical construct.

This becomes especially apparent in the work of Grant Allen, whose 1877 *Physiological Aesthetics* strives to formulate an independent science of aesthetic pleasure based upon the findings of Spencer and Bain. Allen is best known for his later work as a popular New Woman novelist, but Peter Morton and others have recently begun to revive interest in Allen’s full and polymathic career, which began with aspirations to become a naturalist (Morton notes that before his writing career began, Allen “had dissected the brain of a murderer and constructed an entire evolutionary philosophy for himself, based on the works of Herbert Spencer” (“Grant Allen: A Centenary Reassessment” 407)) and concluded with Allen as one of the Victorian era’s most prolific novelists.<sup>130</sup> Allen opens *Physiological Aesthetics* by lamenting that “the subject of Aesthetics has so long been given over to transcendental rhetoric and vague poetical declamation, that the name alone upon a cover is sufficient to deter most scientific readers” (viii). Allen combats this tendency toward rhetoric and poetry with a fierce positivism that pays homage to Bain and obeisance to Spencer. Allen writes, “My object is to exhibit the purely physical origin of the sense of beauty, and its relativity to our nervous organization” (2) and claims that he is especially well-suited to write about art, since he is no great admirer of it and thus will not be swayed by personal predilection. Allen writes, “I may add, that I am not myself an excessive devotee of fine art in any form. But, on the whole, I count this as gain in attempting the psychological analysis of Aesthetics: because, as Helmholtz well observes, the worshipper of art is liable to bring with him into the consideration of its simplest elements those enthusiastic feelings which are aroused in him by its highest developments” (ix). For all of his claims of scientific objectivity, Allen’s work is itself an uneasy balance of speculative anthropology and

<sup>130</sup> For a survey of the literature relating to Allen’s novelistic career, see Vanessa Warne and Colette Colligan, “The Man who Wrote a New Woman Novel: Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* and the Gendering of New Woman Authorship,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2005) 33: 21–46.

aesthetic platitudes. It meets few of the standards of a mid-Victorian scientific treatise (there is no original research or data) and portends Allen's future as a popularizer of scientific ideas rather than one of the genuine naturalists whom he enthusiastically adored. Morton characterizes this contradiction quite well: "Allen thought of his first book as a contribution to psychology...whereas it is really a compendium of assertions and value judgments under grand but arbitrary headings, with almost nothing in the way of testable hypotheses...The trouble is that, like Spencer, Allen never seemed to pause to ask whether this kind of activity is, in any useful sense, *doing science*" ("*The Busiest Man In England*" 47).

In many ways, Allen's book does not make much conceptual progress beyond the arguments laid out by Bain and Spencer; rather, Allen's goal is to prove the validity of his mentors' claims through an exhaustive catalog of evidence. Throughout this catalog Allen's debt to his predecessors is readily apparent; Allen defines aesthetic pleasure much as does Spencer, as a pleasurable exercise of our nerves: "when we exercise our limbs and muscles...merely for the sake of the pleasure which the exercise affords us, the amusement is called Play. When we similarly exercise our eyes or ears, the resulting pleasure is called an Aesthetic Feeling" (34). According to Allen, the basic elements of aesthetic theory are not a priori principles but scientific facts: aether-waves, nerve-fibres, and bodily tissues. Allen argues that "Aesthetic Pleasure may be provisionally defined as the subjective concomitant of the normal amount of activity, not directly connected with life-serving function, in the peripheral end-organs of the cerebro-spinal nervous system" (34). Allen reiterates several versions of this claim throughout the book; the principle that he espouses is that "the aesthetically beautiful is that which affords the Maximum of Stimulation with the Minimum of Fatigue or Waste, in processes not directly concerned with vital functions" (39). Further drawing on Bain and Spencer, Allen finds the same kinds of visual and auditory phenomena to be inherently pleasing: curves are more aesthetically pleasing forms than angles, because they require less effort from our optical muscles. Allen writes, "the painful effect of all unpleasant forms is due to a modified and very slight exhaustion [of the muscles]... Conversely, the agreeable feeling derived from all graceful forms is due to the easy and unimpeded action of the muscles and other tissues concerned... a distinctly awkward motion of the head and eyes is necessary for [the] perception of a straight line...the attempt to take in any rectangular figure involves a considerable expenditure of muscular energy" (168–170). Instead of trying to discover a set of rules for making or enjoying art, or speculating about how art educates and changes individuals, Allen's aesthetics studies what happens to a person's body when it is in the presence of an aesthetic object.

Where Allen's work distinguishes itself is in its use of Spencerian evolutionary logic to explain Bain's neurological model of the self. For Spencer, the latter is strictly secondary, but Allen displays much more of an interest in integrating his analysis of the processes of evolution with the processes of particular aesthetic experiences. Allen explains, for example, that because green is a more common color in nature than is red, our eyes have naturally adapted to endure stimulation by shades of green, and we therefore prefer that flower arrangements are set against a background of green foliage. This evolutionary fact is directly connected to a neurological one: "Furthermore, the colors of the red end would seem to have assigned to them weaker or less numerous fibres than those of the violet... Accordingly they more rapidly fatigue the organs; and though admired in masses by coarse natures, children, and savages, they are only endurable by the refined in small amounts, properly relieved by other tints" (154). The degree of pleasure afforded by beauty is literally reducible to the proportion of nerve fibers dedicated to perceiving

various colors. This logic undergirds all of the numerous examples in *Physiological Aesthetics*: vocalized Italian song is more beautiful than guttural German because it stimulates the auditory nerve “within the normal limits” (113); also, “certain jerky and intermittent sounds...such as that produced by scraping a gritty pencil over a slate, have a more special and jarring effect. This is probably due to the fact that the nerve-centres, fibres, and terminals have short intervals of repair allowed them during the intermission of the stimulant; and it is known that nerves are most sensitive to new stimulations, any continuance of excitation soon deadening their sensibility. Accordingly in these cases, the very sensitive nerve-matter is assailed after each reparation by the violent stimulant just at the moment when its excitability is greatest” (111). Allen argues the converse in order to explain, at least partly, why poetry is pleasurable: “we may therefore conclude that the aesthetic pleasure of metre depends upon the existence of an expectant state, realized in the auditory apparatus as a recurrent organic rhythm of nascent stimulation: while the aesthetic discomfort of bad versification depends upon the breach of this expectation, and consequent upsetting of the organic rhythm” (116).

Allen’s reference to “bad versification” provides a clue about the implications of his enterprise for literary or artistic criticism. Perhaps surprisingly for an author who would later claim that audiences care about a compelling story far more than about high literary form, Allen’s early aesthetics tends toward a strict formalism that all but erases meaningful content in its consideration of the physiological impact of art.<sup>131</sup> It is not apparent, for example, that one needs to understand German or Italian in order to appreciate the superior beauty of the latter: if all that matters is the purity of the vowel sound, then the actual significance of the words becomes strictly secondary. Likewise, if all we hear in poetry is “rhythm”—or, to be more precise, if all our expectant nerves anticipate in the sounds of poetry is the contrast between stressed and unstressed sound—then it is by no means necessary to interpret or contemplate the meaning of a poem. Allen’s physiology of aesthetics results in an extreme kind of formalism: whether a poem is about religious sin or a chirping bird, aesthetic response is determined entirely by the arrangement and cadence of rhythmical stress, erasing differences of content, history, and biography. This is even more apparent in Allen’s second book, *The Colour-Sense*, which elaborates on a chapter in *Physiological Aesthetics* dealing with the aesthetic pleasures of colors. In an example of what physiological literary criticism might look like, Allen compares the frequency of occurrence of colors in British poetry: “I have counted up all the colour-epithets in Mr. Swinburne’s ‘Poems and Ballads’.... I find the results to be as follows:—The word *red* occurs in all 151 times, together with *rosy*, *crimson*, once each, and *sanguine*, *ruddy*, *scarlet*, twice each: total of the pure red epithets: 159.... For comparison with these results, I have also extracted the colour-words from Mr. Tennyson’s ‘Princess,’ and I find they stand in the following proportions;—*Red* occurs 10 times, *crimson* 3 ...” (264–265). From the comparatively few times that green and blue are mentioned (Allen also tabulates colors from anthologies of

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<sup>131</sup> Christine Ferguson quotes Allen in *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian fin-de-siècle*: “The purpose of fiction is to interest and amuse the reader; the art of fiction is the art of interesting and amusing him. ... Most novelists are bursting with ideas which they wish to impart to the world; but the world doesn’t want their ideas; it wants a good, rousing, rattling, sensational story” (72; original citation is Grant Richards, “Mr. Grant Allen and His Work,” *Novel Review* (1 June 1892): 261–8). On the other hand, however, one might interpret Allen’s early efforts to build an aesthetic program that is based on simple sensations rather than on high art as a justification of sorts for his career as a popular novelist. Allen has little patience for a person who will “regard with contempt every species of aesthetic emotion except those most elevated ones which are capable of gratifying his own fastidious and educated taste” (*Physiological Aesthetics* ix).

poetry and Greek classics), Allen concludes that humans have evolved in such a way as to find green less “aesthetic” than red.<sup>132</sup> It does not matter which Tennyson poems are being analyzed or even which Greek drama; the formal repetition of sounds and words can be entirely extracted from both content and context. Allen repeatedly makes this move throughout his book; Burke and Demosthenes and Cicero stand on equal ground, since all we listen for, if we are listening aesthetically, is “delicate modulation” and “sonorous periods” (113).

One could argue that this inability to account for the role of meaning in art is a rather major failing of Allen’s aesthetic program, which it certainly is. But it is less clearly a failing if we evaluate Allen’s work as a development of Spencer’s move away from the idea that individual consciousness provides the primary perspective from which we ought to understand works of art. For Allen—and from the perspective of the psychological aesthetician in general—it is simply not as interesting to think about what a work of art *means* as to think about what a work of art materially *does*. And to understand what a work of art does, it is necessary not to think in terms of the judgments that individuals make about works of art, since these are merely symptomatic of the underlying operations of nerves and muscles and of the vast forces of evolution and natural selection. What is really at stake in the study of beauty is how those nerves operate and how those forces manifest themselves. For this reason, Allen’s is a biological formalism, produced by his understanding of humans as at once animals in the world of nature and systems of nerves and muscles. There is, in other words, a direct link between a theory of literary criticism that absolutely privileges form over meaning and an understanding of the self as a fragmented biological entity.

This is especially clear in the first several chapters of Allen’s book, in which he defends the connection between neurology and aesthetics. In Allen’s writing, it is not so much a person who experiences a work of art as disembodied fibers, nerves, eyes, and heads. One effect of psychologizing aesthetic pleasure is to disintegrate the aesthetic subject into constituent parts that receive and perceive pleasures. The effort to break down aesthetic perception to its most basic components—color, sound, shape, line, cadence—has the related effect of breaking down the subject into physical parts not unified by any metaphysical conception of the self.<sup>133</sup> Allen defines pain as originating in fear of dismemberment: “If we take a rapid survey of the principal varieties of physical Pain, the first point which strikes us is that the greater part of them, and especially the most intense, are the concomitants of a violent dismemberment in some one of the tissues. Of all Pains with which we are acquainted, the strongest are those which accompany the severance of an actual sensible portion of the body, as in the amputation of a limb, the excision of an ulcer, or the removal of a scalp” (6). Aesthetic dissatisfaction, remarkably, originates with a fear of dismemberment. Conversely, aesthetic pleasure makes dismemberment harmonious (rather than healing it): “Pleasure is the concomitant of the healthy action of any or all of the organs or members supplied with afferent cerebrospinal nerves, to an extent not exceeding the

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<sup>132</sup> To be fair, Allen is here adopting a tool used by Gladstone of which he claims to be skeptical—but Allen ultimately does end up using these observations to justify his argument.

<sup>133</sup> Rick Rylance offers an alternative way of thinking about this phenomenon: Victorian psychology does not fragment the individual into particulars, but rather converts particularity into abstraction, perpetuating its own ideology: “Victorian psychology was also powerfully normative and, on the whole, sought a bland elimination of unruly subjectivity, suppressing the dense particularity of the self by tactics of relentless generalization and thematic emphases on the type rather than the person, the abstract process rather than the individual, the standard and not the aberrant” (*Victorian Psychology* 148).

ordinary powers of reparation possessed by the system.... Pleasure results...from the harmonious working of all the parts” (21). The definition of pleasure and pain in terms of the possibility of losing body parts may seem arbitrary. But in a way, “dismemberment” is the underlying principle of Allen’s aesthetics, which figurally dismembers the viewer into independent parts in order to show how aesthetic pleasure is the harmonious operation of those parts and aesthetic pain is their isolation. One of the most notable differences between philosophical and psychological aesthetics is the latter does not discuss a person who enjoys a painting, but rather an amalgamation of “organs,” “members,” or “nerves,” that are affected by stimuli. Allen’s aesthetic theory proceeds on the assumption that the individual is a biomechanical entity which must be analyzed as such; even if there are emotions, thoughts, intentions, and feelings, these are inextricably entwined with physical states. There is no abstract self separate from the body, so even a phenomenon as ephemeral as aesthetic pleasure must be explained in strictly material terms. If this is the case, then it becomes apparent why Allen (and Spencer) wish to revisit—and reject—philosophical aesthetics: according to Victorian psychologists, Kant’s exclusion of embodied “inclination” from true aesthetic judgment is not tenable if inclination forms the basis of *all* pleasures—including those that are aesthetic.<sup>134</sup>

It is at this point that we can begin to see the surprising sympathies between the positivist aesthetic program of psychologists and the decidedly unscientific principles underlying decadence and the aesthetic movement. Both divorce of art from social or moral issues. For the psychologist, pleasure is an objective phenomenon rather than an individual affect subject to moral scrutiny. If pleasure is, for example, the free coursing of an electrical current through a nerve, then it becomes much more difficult to subject it to moral judgment. This point is perhaps most successfully argued by Allen’s American colleague Henry Rutgers Marshall, an architect who took part in the debates over scientific approaches to aesthetics that followed the work of Bain and Spencer. Like Allen and Sully, Marshall views metaphysical aesthetics as outmoded, lamenting that the scientific student of aesthetics “finds his way blocked by the ruins of systems which obstruct and obscure his path” (359); To clear these ruins, Marshall wrote a book, *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics: An Essay Concerning the Psychology of Pain and Pleasure, with Special Reference to Aesthetics* (1894), which, as its repetitive title indicates, attempts to render aesthetic theory psychological. Almost twenty years after Allen’s *Physiological Aesthetics* and Sully’s first essays on the psychological aesthetics in *Mind*, this is still a field that “sadly needs illumination” (vi).

Marshall proposes that aesthetics is properly a branch of the scientific study of pleasure, which he christens “hedonics.” Directly opposing to Kant’s doctrine of disinterestedness, Marshall asserts that aesthetic enjoyment cannot be distinguished from other kinds of pleasure either at a psychological or physiological level. Instead, we ought to understand the sphere of art as nothing more than a sophisticated form of pleasure-seeking: “If one examine the work of art critics and the more or less philosophic and scientific writings which deal with the *facts* of Aesthetics rather than its theory, one will find little more than descriptions of pleasure-getting

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<sup>134</sup> Of course, Kant does not argue that there is no such thing as a material aesthetic pleasure based on inclination, only that it is not the kind of judgment that we strive to justify to one another in conceptual terms (in Kantian shorthand: reflective aesthetic judgments have subjective universal validity). Allen and Spencer sidestep questions about subjective universal validity by interpreting aesthetic judgments as symptoms of a universally shared nervous organization. Questions about why I find something beautiful and you do not are therefore resolved by empirically analyzing our nervous systems, not by discussing our reasoning and experience.

coupled with more or less thorough attempts to arrange this pleasure-getting in a logical way” (368). This distinctly anthropological (and unflattering) way of describing the practice of art criticism as a means of “pleasure-getting” speaks to the leveling power of psychologizing aesthetic pleasure. In keeping with Allen’s biological formalism, classical hierarchies of value are replaced by simple observation of the degree of aesthetic thrill that a particular artwork affords a particular person. But it is not only aesthetic value that is leveled. As Marshall points out, hedonistic aesthetics, based upon bodily response, stands outside the domain of ethics: “it cannot be shown that the delights reached by the man of high moral culture bring a better *quality* of pleasure to him than the gratifications of the barbarian bring to the savage mind”; this is because “Aesthetics is founded upon Hedonics. The man has gained new fields of pleasure-getting as his character has developed. . . . The majority of our pleasures have no ethical bearings; the mass of aesthetic effects are made up of elements entirely unmoral” (377).

From Marshall’s point of view, the “hedonism” of aesthetic pleasure is simply a fact, not a program or a creed. Furthermore, it does not inhere in the agency of a subject who decides to (or not to) pursue pleasure; it is located in the organ itself. Like Allen, Marshall reduces the self to its organs: “pleasure results from the use of surplus stored force in the organ whose activity determines the mental state or psychosis; and pain is determined by the reception of a stimulus to which the organ is incapable of reacting completely” (217). This suggests that whether they knew it or not, psychologists of aesthetic pleasure were successfully pursuing a decadent project. Not only does their work strive to divorce ethics and aesthetics; it elevates pleasures of the body to the level of aesthetic feeling. Marshall easily outdoes Pater in reacting against Arnold or Ruskin: not only does art lack any educative function, the kind of pleasure which it affords is not qualitatively different from base physical enjoyment.

Psychological aesthetics may have provided a useful response to those who accused Pater of unethical hedonism. As I argue in the first chapter of this dissertation, a primary concern about Pater and his followers is that their philosophy encourages untrammelled selfishness that constructs insurmountable barriers between self and society. Margaret Oliphant, for example, worries upon reading Pater’s work that the pursuit of beauty leads to a dangerously selfish obsession with “that Me who is the center of the *dilettante*’s world” (605). In his review of *The Renaissance*, John Symonds similarly observed that the quest for aesthetic pleasure leads to solipsistic isolation. Symonds describes critics of Pater’s “school” thus: “comparatively isolated, indifferent to common tastes and sympathies, careless of maintaining at any cost a vital connection with the universal instincts of humanity, they select what gives them the acutest pleasure” (“Art and Archaeology” 104). As Allen and Marshall show, however, the self-identity of that isolated “Me” is not something one can take for granted, as it is nothing more transcendent than the organs, fibers, tissues, and members that constitute it. Psychological aesthetics thus suggests the possibility of a hedonism that is entirely unselfish. If Paterian aestheticism is suspect for its solipsistic retreat into the self, psychological aesthetics suggests that there is no self into which the solipsist can retreat.

### **Human Science and the Science of Humanism**

A discourse that promises clarity, rationality, and dispassion—and above all the ability to operate entirely outside of the cultural biases of art critics—is undoubtedly not far from its own set of unacknowledged biases. What, then, are the stakes of claiming that the study of aesthetics can be pursued in a purely objective fashion? One answer has to do with what was perceived as



the Germanic nature of metaphysics itself. Psychological aesthetics, based on the evolutionary theory of Spencer and the physiological findings of Bain, could propose itself as an Anglo-American alternative to continental (especially German) philosophy. James Sully's review in *Mind* of Bernard Bosanquet's *History of Aesthetic* (1892) is a prime example. In tracing the intellectual history of aesthetics, Bosanquet describes "exact" or "formal" aesthetics (his term for the approach of Allen's cohort) as a misguided reaction against the popularity of Hegel: "It cannot indeed be reasonably maintained, in view of the elaborate treatment devoted by such a thinker as Hegel to mathematical, chromatic and musical beauty, that idealism as such neglects the plain fact that all beauty exists in and for sense-perception or fancy" (374). From the scarcity of pages devoted to it, it is apparent that Bosanquet does not find psychological aesthetics weighty enough to merit serious discussion or refutation. James Sully's review of Bosanquet's book illustrates the cultural struggle over the canon of aesthetics. According to Sully, Bosanquet is not only overly German—his book "cannot be accepted as a history of aesthetics for Englishmen" (116)—he also is stuck in the past. Sully writes, "Mr. Bosanquet does not appear to be altogether at his ease in the psychology of art... There is a contemptuous reference to Herbert Spencer's theory of musical emotion, but none to that of Darwin... [I]t is a pity that Mr. Bosanquet is not clearer as to the nature and result of Helmholtz's researches..." (114), especially given that "the ethnological and...the zoological treatment of colour-selection...are probably destined to throw more light on the aesthetics of colour than all the philosophies have yet succeeded in throwing" (116). What Sully's response to Bosanquet makes clear is that the stakes of making aesthetics a branch of scientific research have partly to do with promoting the idea of England as a frontrunner in European intellectual life. On Sully's view, to describe the history of aesthetics in terms of its German idealist tradition—which ought to be an uncontroversial move, given the extent to which Kant, Hegel, and Schiller were the touchstones of most contemporary British aesthetics—amounts to a suspect "dislike of things English" (115).

Perhaps the mere fact that psychological aesthetics merited the attention of Max Nordau is enough to highlight the way in which aesthetics had migrated from the sphere of abstract speculative philosophy to become a contentious topic. In an 1888, Nordau dismisses the entire tradition of philosophical aesthetics with an appeal to the facts of evolution: "The human mind...will gradually become accustomed to thinking in accordance with the principles of evolution.... When the intellect of man has attained to his point of view, few things will seem so absurd to it, as the ideas and attempts at explanation which constitute the whole science of aesthetics as professionally taught at the present day" (265). Nordau was not shy about damning contemporary intellectual and artistic movements on the grounds that they were mystical and unscientific; five years after he made this pronouncement about philosophical aesthetics, he indicted virtually all contemporary artists as degenerate, decadent, and diseased. Nordau claims that pleasure is the basis of aesthetic experience, and the feeling of pleasure is "aroused by impressions or ideas of impressions, which are in some way conducive to the preservation of the individual or of the race" ("Evolution in Aesthetics" 269). The phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure thus provides a clue into our adaptive behaviors.

Part of the objection to traditional approaches to aesthetics has to do with their tendency to overlook what scientists saw as anything but the most advanced evolutionary forms of aesthetic pleasure. If aesthetic pleasure is in fact an evolutionary byproduct, then shouldn't it be accounted for in terms of its long history rather than myopically isolated in the relatively short period of recorded human history? In keeping with scientists' discovery that geological time was

vastly more expansive than had previously been imagined, critics such as Allen looked for ways to situate the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure in a timeline of racial development. In an essay on the place of aesthetics in the process of evolution, Allen laments that “when professors of fine art discuss the principles of beauty, they are too fond of confining themselves to the very highest feelings of the most cultivated classes.... There mere childish love of colors, the mere savage taste for bone necklets and carved calabashes, seem beneath their exalted notice” (“Aesthetic Evolution in Man” 446). As a result, Allen claims, the abstract theories of Ruskin and Edward Poynter fail to apply to the vast majority of people who find things beautiful.

But biological approaches to aesthetics never really challenged the assertion that the creative products of a wealthy elite were of greater worth than the “primitive” aesthetic experiences that Ruskin and his colleagues neglected. Quite the opposite, scientists of aesthetics ultimately lent scientific credence to the idea that British cultural output represented the pinnacle of aesthetic progress. Consider, for example, the questions with which W. Proudfoot Begg begins his book, *The Development of Taste* (1887): “Where in the scale of creation does a taste for beauty begin to be shown? Is it confined to man, or do we share it with the lower animals? And if we do share it with them, with which of them do we share it?” Although it may seem to be odd to ask, in one’s treatise on aesthetics, whether dogs *also* are capable of appreciating a beautiful waterfall, the urgency of these questions becomes apparent as soon as one realizes that for Begg and his colleagues, the capacity for aesthetic feeling marks a moment in evolutionary progress. In a curious application of Haeckel’s theory of recapitulation, Begg argues that the development of taste in the individual—from the child who delights in gaudy colors to the adult who appreciates the “emotion of sublimity” (138)—reflects the evolution in human taste from a “savage” predilection for ornamentation (7) to, of course, Wordsworth and Shelley.

If the problematic implications of this approach to aesthetics are not already apparent, they become strikingly clear in an essay of Spencer’s called “Personal Beauty,” in which Spencer argues that inward character is essentially linked to outward beauty, and that outward beauty is essentially linked to evolutionary progress. Spencer argues that unattractive facial features—protruded jaws, laterally extended cheekbones, small heads—characterize lower races: “It will be admitted that the projecting jaw, characteristic of the lower human races, is a facial defect—is a trait which no sculptor would give to an ideal bust” (151). This, Spencer says, is essentially because lower races have to use utilize their bodies as tools more than do higher races, and Spencer ultimately imagines a “pure race” in which there would be a “constant connection” between “external appearance and internal structure” (157). This essay was one that Allen singled out for particular praise, claiming that it impressively anticipated Darwin’s doctrine of natural selection. Allen himself wrote in an essay that canons of human beauty derive from the appearance of healthfulness—rosy cheeks are attractive because healthful, but rosy noses are ugly because they suggest dyspepsia—and so that “the ordinary workman who selects his wife partly or wholly on the ground of beauty, thereby does something toward perpetuating and improving the beauty of the race” (“Aesthetic Feeling in Birds” 662). From our perspective, it is impossible not to hear strains of the eugenics that this kind of thinking eventually leads to.

The goal of explaining the physical origin of aesthetic pleasure thus becomes conflated with a description of an inevitable progress from simple to more complex upon which a cultural narrative is overlaid. In the moment that Allen, Begg, or Spencer places the “savage” as an intermediary term between nature and civilization it becomes extremely difficult to extricate their aesthetic programs from a larger project of legitimizing British imperial domination. This is

the structuring contradiction of Allen's book on *Physiological Aesthetics*. It claims the objective mantle of scientific observation, supposedly sweeping away the unfounded opinions and personal tastes of art critics with a modern, verifiable, experimental approach to beauty. At the same time, however, it uses this science to justify an almost reactionary approach to hierarchies of aesthetic value.

This contradictory leap from the language of physiology and science to value-laden judgments about aesthetic quality is especially apparent in Allen's analysis of the nervous system of the individual. Allen writes, "Nor must we suppose, because Aesthetic Feelings are simply relative to the nervous organization of the individual that an absolute aesthetic standard is impossible, and that good and bad taste are mere matters of convention. On the contrary, it follows from what has been said above that bad taste is the concomitant of a coarse and indiscriminative nervous organization... a low emotional nature, and an imperfect intelligence; while good Taste is the progressive product of progressing fineness and discrimination in the nerves... high and noble emotional constitution, and increasing intellectual faculties" (48). The notion that the appreciation of beauty is explainable as a nervous response to stimuli threatens, of course, to make all aesthetic judgments relative: there is no "better" or "worse" piece of art; simply works of art that stimulate nerves in different ways. As we have seen, Allen's formalism fragments art into a set of basic shapes and sounds which can be simply evaluated as either pleasurable or painful. Although pleasure and pain are relevant to the individual who experiences them, they provide no inherent clue to the social value of a work of art or to the capacity for aesthetic judgment. In order to recuperate this possibility, Allen seeks to naturalize cultural assumptions about aesthetic quality. Allen continues by arguing that we cannot simply abandon the idea of an opposition between "high" and "low" aesthetic feelings, which he frames as an opposition between high and low intellectual and emotional constitution. A perfectly calibrated nervous mechanism actually serves to ratify contemporary standards of taste: "Though it is obviously impossible for us at our present point of development... to set up a final and absolute standard of Taste, we are yet bound to accept as a relative... standard, the judgment of the finest nurtured and most discriminative, the purest and most cultivated of our contemporaries, who have paid the greatest attention to aesthetic perceptions; assured that while it may fall far short of absolute perfection, it will at any rate be far truer and higher than that of the masses" (48). So, even though each person's nervous organization is different, some nervous systems are better than others, and we are bound to submit to the aesthetic judgments made by those who possess them.

There is undoubtedly a subtle (and sometimes overt) racial ideology that underpins Allen's purportedly objective approach to aesthetics. If aesthetic feelings originate partially in the phenomenon of sexual selection, then the encouragement of aesthetic appreciation would serve directly to advance the teleological progression of evolution that Spencer imagines. Allen argues, "Among many existing lowest races, the only sign of aesthetic feeling, beyond the sense of personal beauty and the very rudest songs or dances, is shown in the employment of dyes or ornaments for the person. Such are many of the Indian Hill tribes, the Andamanese, the Digger Indians of California, and the Botocudos of Brazil. The Bushmen, and to a less extent the Australians, generally ranked in the lowest order, reach a decidedly higher aesthetic level" (345–346). But aesthetics has a directly civilizing effect: "I may add that I am often struck by the extraordinary folly of missionaries, who habitually preach down the love of ornament on the part of savages or of emancipated slaves (especially the women), when in reality this love is the first

step in aesthetic progress, and the one possible civilizing element in their otherwise purely animal lives. It ought rather to be used as a lever, by first making them take a pride in their dress, and then passing on the feeling so acquired to their children, their huts, their gardens, and their other belongings. Such in fact has been, I believe, the actual course of our aesthetic evolution.... Art, however rude, has especially helped on this primitive progress” (346). Aestheticism, far from being antisocial or culturally dangerous is a civilizing force. In this sense, physiological aesthetics not only renders innocuous the notion that works of art are reducible to the pure sensations that they evoke; it makes that idea complicit in a standard narrative of racial hierarchy.

On a more subtle level, we can see this racial logic of aesthetics creeping into Allen’s work at the moment that he departs from Spencer’s and Bain’s neurological model of psychology and falls back on the earlier model of association: this allows for the importing of cultural values into the supposedly value-free model of the biological self. Consider, for example, Allen’s explanation in *Physiological Aesthetics* of the different capacities of white and black things to offer aesthetic satisfaction. They appear on the surface to be as purely physiological as his analysis of poetry: “Absolutely black and dull surfaces scatter no appreciable amount of light.... Consequently they give no stimulation to the optic nerve. Hence blackness is always unpleasant, unless relieved by polish.... White, on the other hand, though liable to become painful in an excessive light, is usually pleasing as a stimulant, but not so pungent as the analytic colours....” (151–152). It seems, at first, that the physiological responses to these colors directly determine social facts: “Black is almost the universal hue for mourning” (151–152), while white makes agreeable “freshly fallen snow, spotless linen, [and] white paper” (152). Later in the chapter, however, our aesthetic response to these colors is determined not so much by physiological reaction as by cultural association: “white by its physical purity suggests the poetical analogy of moral purity.... On the other hand, black” is associated with “devils, goblins, and evil spirits” (160).

Hence, one way of looking at Allen’s work on aesthetics is that it manifests the ideology that is perpetuated by aesthetic value. It naturalizes the distinction between high and low culture as the fundamental organization of our nervous system and the natural order of evolution. And it does so with extraordinary frankness. In so doing, one might argue, it gives us the ultimate validation of recent arguments that the aesthetic domain actively legitimates a distinction between high and low culture rather than isolates transcendent aesthetic creations from their social context. Another way of putting this is that what we call “art” is just a way of asserting cultural values. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction*, “through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to [aesthetic objects], are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (*habitus*) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions” (5–6). One’s response to a work of art defines and is defined by our socioeconomic status, and is not a “pure” aesthetic judgment. In many ways this is the argument that Allen makes, with the difference only that Allen is creating ideology where Bourdieu is unmasking it. In other words, Allen accepts the hierarchy of value that separates the masses from the elite and affirms that is based upon their relative sensitivity to aesthetic experience that Bourdieu exposes. Furthermore, Allen draws on the tools of positivist science to mask the cultural contingency and arbitrariness of this hierarchy where Bourdieu uses them, in a self-conscious fashion, to reveal the cultural

contingency of aesthetic taste as he tabulates the results of surveys and questionnaires about aesthetic responses using the positivist schemata of the social sciences.

However, I think this reading is too easy. It's simple to indict Allen for his problematic assumptions about racial capacities for aesthetic experience and Spencer for his claim that the white races are the most beautiful, but this argument does not strike me as particularly interesting. As Gillian Beer argues with regard to the ideological commitments of Victorian anthropology, "There is no doubt that a concentrated course of reading in anthropological and ethnological journals of the [mid-nineteenth-century] period... is both disheartening and exasperating because of the apparently impervious racism which underpins so many of the arguments. It is fruitless, however, simply to bunch together all Victorian anthropological writers as racists. That move flatters ourselves... An effort is necessary in order to register the broader range and the subtler nuances available then within terms that now sound simply offensive" (*Open Fields* 77). The same, I think, can be said about Victorian psychology. I would like to suggest that dismissing scientific approaches to aesthetics as inherently problematic for their racial narratives risks overlooking a germ of radical potential in the theories of Spencer and Allen.

The essay with which I begin this chapter—Grant Allen's "Aesthetic Feeling in Birds"—responds to a minor tiff among Darwinian theorists regarding the possibility that animals appreciate beauty. Darwin suggests as much in *The Descent of Man*, where he asks what happens when a bird looks in a mirror: "All male birds display the plumage and other ornaments with so much care before the females, it is obviously probable that these appreciate the beauty of their suitors. It is, however, difficult to obtain direct evidence of their capacity to appreciate beauty. When birds gaze at themselves in a looking glass (of which many instances have been recorded) we cannot feel sure that it is not from jealousy of a supposed rival.... Is it admiration or curiosity which leads... some... birds to steal and secrete bright objects, such as silver articles or jewels?" (123). More than a rhetorical question, this brief passage invited responses from naturalists and aestheticians alike. Proudfoot Begg notes that even if we do allow for an avian capacity for admiration, "we have still to settle the question whether any insect, bird, or beast has any appreciation of beauty as such and any interest in it *for its own sake*, which is characteristic of all aesthetic pleasure." (4). Begg wavers, but suggests that "judging from the beauty of some of them, and thinking of it as the result of sexual selection, they should have the very perfection of taste in colour" (6). The insertion of "for its own sake," which Begg italicizes, is especially significant because this is the phrase that Kant, Spencer and Pater had all used with reference to what distinguishes something as aesthetic. Begg thus implies by his question that animals may have an identical, and not just similar, capacity for aesthetic judgment.

But Allen's is the answer I find most interesting. He suggests that the human and avian modes of appreciating beauty are different not because one is superior to the other, but only because humans and birds are different species. Allen suggests, simply, that birds can make aesthetic judgments only about other birds, and humans only about other humans: "within their own species they may be capable of distinguishing between comparatively minute shades and degrees of beauty, just as we can distinguish between such minute points in human faces as would doubtless absolutely escape the notice of any other animal" (663). In other words, humans are animals (he implies as much in the wording of his claim that differences in human beauty would escape the notice of "any other animal") and so there is no reason that the capacity for aesthetic judgment should be available only to one kind of animal. Aesthetics thus becomes a

way of *leveling* conventional boundaries around the category of “the human” rather than a way of distinguishing humans from animals by their capacity for appreciating or creating beautiful objects. What Allen suggests is not that we ought to ask whether birds might have some small degree of the fully-fledged enjoyment of high art that we enjoy, but rather whether our enjoyment of high art might be nothing more than a complex manifestation of a natural, animalistic behavior.

This has the interesting implication that aesthetic judgment is not something we can easily extricate from our biological status. In judging something to be beautiful, we do not express our own individuality and uniqueness. Rather, we follow a script that, to some extent, has been written for us already. As Allen writes on the topic of “aesthetic education” in *Physiological Aesthetics*: “we cannot transmute our Tastes, we can only educate them” and even then, “the range of Education is comparatively limited. All that it can ever effect is to *educe* the existing faculties.... We can teach ourselves to observe every... delicate thrill of harmony... which our nervous organization renders us capable of perceiving, but we can never get beyond this natural barrier, or transcend our own organic capacities” (50). Here, Allen does appeal to a hierarchy of taste that can seem conservative in its assertion that there is no possibility of upward mobility when it comes to taste. But by suggesting that our sensitivity to beauty is fundamentally out of our own control, Allen implicitly shows that good taste can only index biological attributes, not social ones. If this is a conservative stance, then, the register of its conservatism is natural, not cultural. Taste is not an expression of refined self-culture; it is a contingent effect of our genetic makeup. This calls into question the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment, not because the latter adheres to a secret objective standard, but because it is fundamentally shaped by factors beyond our control. By turning to evolution as an explanatory basis for aesthetic feeling, Allen suggests that individual aesthetic judgment essentially lacks autonomy, since it is partially an expression of our genetic makeup.

It is at this point that the physiological theory of Bain, the evolutionary theory of Spencer, and the hybrid approach of Allen reveal their most interesting intersection: together they suggest that there is nothing inherently special about the human capacity to appreciate beauty. Humans are merely animals—but perhaps even the word “animal” implies too unified and discrete a phenomenon. Humans, *as* animals, are merely bundles of nerves and muscles that are responding to a given environment, and even complex emotional states such as religious adoration are reducible to (or, at least, originate in) either muscular activities or broader evolutionary forces. This sort of evolutionary materialism is a controversial stance to take about any register of experience, but it is perhaps especially so for aesthetic feelings. In its strongest form, physiological-evolutionary psychology suggests that the highest products of human culture are in their origin as well as their reception no more special than a beehive or a bird’s nest. It is upon this basis that a writer like Marshall is able to describe our enjoyment of paintings and novels as nothing more than a sophisticated form of “pleasure-getting.”

Such a conclusion is relevant to the debate about the disciplinary status of psychology with which I began this chapter. That debate, after all, is about the legitimacy of non-positivist approaches to knowledge in the face of scientific advances that encroach on territory previously allocated to philosophers and poets. In the moment that scientists suggest that the “human” is one of those metaphysical categories that can be explained away by enough empirical study, science itself begins to claim the ground of humanism. Anxiety over the implications of this challenge to a metaphysically unified individual is what motivates James Martineau’s rejection of Bain’s

neurological psychology as equivalent to an artist who strips the skin from his subjects—the assertion that there is nothing that holds us together besides “nerve force” is tantamount to taking away the skin that allows us to interact with one another as people rather than as biological systems. This anxiety is heightened when scientists encroach on the ground of aesthetics, attempting to rationalize a sphere of knowledge that (according to Kant) is defined by its resistance to rationality. It is for this reason that positivism often seems not so much to explain art as to explain it away—to submit aesthetic experience to a determinate set of rules is to render that experience unaesthetic. I would also suggest that just as psychology continues to be suspicious of metaphysical questions, many humanists continue to be suspicious of scientific attempts definitively to explain aesthetic experience by submitting readers to fMRI scans and literary artifacts to Darwinian criticism. Steven Pinker’s review of *The Literary Animal*, a collection of essays that attempt an evolutionary or quantitative study of literature, reveals that scientific approaches to literature are just as controversial—and just as novel—as they were for Allen over a hundred years ago: “Literary analysis would surely benefit from the latest scientific ideas on human thought, emotion, and social relations. Fiction has long been thought of as a means of exploring nature, and the current stagnation of literary scholarship can be attributed, in part, to its denial of that truism.... [I]ts distrust of science...has left it, according to many accounts, mired in faddism, obscurantism, and parochialism” (162). This is precisely the argument that James Sully made about the importance of psychology to metaphysical philosophy in 1876, and yet the idea that science might form the basis of literary criticism remains the topic of controversy and manifestos. This is why it is not possible simply to celebrate the interdisciplinarity of Victorian psychology while overlooking its rejection of metaphysics: that rejection entails a set of epistemological assumptions that are incompatible with our usual approaches to aesthetic criticism.

I would like to conclude, however, by suggesting that to the extent that there is an antagonism between scientific and philosophical approaches to the study of beauty (rather than a harmonious interdisciplinarity), perhaps it is productive rather than destructive. Perhaps, in other words, psychology does not so much demand the full rationalization of the aesthetic sphere as articulate a challenge to philosophers to develop an aesthetics that accounts for rather than excludes the physiological dimension of our reaction to beauty. The claim of the Victorian physiologist is that “inclination” is not something that can be bracketed as we get down to the real business of a priori thinking, since a priori thinking *is* physiological. As I have suggested, we might see Pater’s work as a response to precisely that challenge, even if he is not explicitly addressing psychologists.<sup>135</sup> In his effort to incorporate embodied sensation into a coherent set of aesthetic principles (one hesitates to call Pater’s aesthetics a “philosophy” or a “program”), Pater seeks to articulate the value of art without appealing to the abstractions that psychology makes seem empty. From this point of view it is precisely the radical disjuncture between the two epistemologies that enables new ways of thinking about aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, despite the racial ideology that infuses evolutionary approaches to aesthetics, the dislodging of the human as the measure of beauty may lead to a more democratic way of thinking about aesthetic value. One can see this possibility in the work of Gustav

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<sup>135</sup> I.C. Small argues that Pater unequivocally did rely on the work of Bain, Allen, Spencer, and Sully: “Pater’s famous language [in the Conclusion], his careful reiteration of the central vocabulary of recent psychology, especially *impression* and *discrimination*, seems to me to point to a considerable familiarity with works like Bain’s.... The actual dependence here on scientific sources is clear and unequivocal” (86–87)

Fechner, which on the surface appears to be the fullest possible realization of an attempt to rationalize the aesthetic sphere. In 1877, after becoming famous as the first psychologist to represent mathematically the relation between physical stimulus and the intensity of the sensation it produces, Gustav Fechner set out to discover whether aesthetic responses to artworks could be similarly explained. In his *Vorschule der Aesthetik (Pre-school of Aesthetics, 1878)*, Fechner attempts to discover mathematical rules that underlie human canons of beauty. For his data, Fechner scours nineteen major museum catalogs, records the measurements of 10,558 paintings, computes the proportions between their heights and widths, and sorts the results according to genre. This allows him to represent the ideal proportions of a painting as a mathematical expression. Other strategies he used in his work, which he called aesthetics “from beneath” to differentiate it from metaphysical aesthetics that proceed “from above,” included showing people variously proportioned rectangles and asking them which struck them as most beautiful, and surveying seventy-three others about which colors they associated with particular vowels. (With surprising consistency, A corresponds with white; E and I with yellow; O with red, and U with black.) One can dismiss Fechner’s project as at best amusing and at worst dangerously reductive: the work of art is entirely reducible to a set of pleasing proportions and natural associations.

However, Christian Allessch argues that Fechner’s work was important because it challenged the notion that aesthetics was a transcendental domain of truth, goodness, and beauty that existed independently of the reactions of often uneducated masses. He describes contemporary responses to Fechner: “Fechner’s experiment ... in *Vorschule*... seemed to be a sacrilege. It really seemed incomprehensible... that aesthetic principles... could be derived from the impressions of individuals determined by random phenomena and frequently inadequate education” (3). In other words, grand arbiters of taste are replaced by the average of viewers’ uninformed responses. If we think in broader terms, it becomes apparent that psychological aestheticians are more generally legitimating the individual response to artworks as valid regardless of what a Ruskin or an Arnold would say about them. If we find something beautiful, it is because it affects our body in a pleasing way. In this sense, what is provocative about the suggestion that we must not take the human as a privileged and distinct category when it comes to aesthetics is not that it denigrates the legitimacy of humanistic approaches to aesthetics. Rather, the provocation inheres in the fact that a science of aesthetic pleasure wrests authority over aesthetic value from its traditional sources—the institutional power of the established critic, the self-authorizing judgments of the man of taste, the conservative canons of the academy—and delivers it to a system of biological attributes and evolutionary forces, which, from our limited perspective, we can neither see nor control.



#### IV. The Ego: Vernon Lee and the Language of Empathy

In *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*, Vernon Lee imagines the experience of an “aesthetically contemplative” traveler who gazes upon a distant mountain:

The mountain is so far off that its detail is entirely lost; all we can see is a narrow and pointed cone, perhaps a little *toppling* to one side, of uniform hyacinth blue *detaching* itself from the clear evening sky, into which from the paler misty blue of the plain, it *rises*, a mere bodiless shape. It *rises*. There is at present no doubt about its *rising*. It rises and keeps on rising, never stopping unless *we* stop looking at it. It rises and never *has* risen. Its drama of two lines *striving* to *arrive* at a particular imaginary point in the sky, *arresting* each other’s *progress* as they *meet* in their endeavour, this simplest empathic action of an irregular and by no means rectilinear triangle, goes on repeating itself, like the parabola of a steady spiriting fountain: for ever accomplishing itself anew and for ever accompanied by the same effect on the feelings of the beholder.<sup>136</sup>

At first, this seems more like a geometry lesson than an aesthetic experience. Instead of the sublime infinitude of an Alpine mountain, we find a series of abstract figures: perhaps our traveler sees a “cone” or non-rectilinear “triangle,” or perhaps he sees a patch of hyacinth blue sandwiched between the light blue of the sky and the misty blue of the plain, or perhaps he simply sees two lines coming together at a point. Lee’s own simile for the dynamic process of looking likewise prefers geometry to aesthetics—our repeatedly up-sweeping vision is “like the parabola” of a fountain—not because fountains are beautiful, but because they obey the laws of physics.<sup>137</sup> On the whole, Lee’s main interest in the passage is to show how the language we use to describe beautiful things in fact describes our own processes of perception. The activities we metaphorically attribute to a mountain—“toppling,” “detaching,” “rising,” “arresting” “progressing,” and “meeting”—are actually, according to Lee, descriptions of our own dynamic activity of looking. A mountain, after all, does not literally “rise” from the ground; rather, our eyes sweep upward when we look at it. Just as we see the moving water as a static form, we see the static mountain as a moving form.

But what does this way of looking have to do with beauty? A hint lies in a word that Lee uses near the end of the passage, when she refers to the “empathic” movement produced by the lines of the mountain. For Lee, this story of the mountain illustrates a relation that is basic to aesthetic experience: a bodily mimicry of visual forms that occurs whenever we concentrate intensely on the aesthetically-pleasing qualities of an object. Following the lead of German psychologists, Lee called this experience “empathy” (from the German *Einfühlung*, “feeling into”), an idea that was central to her aesthetic theory in the late 1890s and early 1900s. In the early twentieth century, the idea that the appreciation of beauty begins with an empathic relation to an object was key to many studies of aesthetics: William Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), Herbert Sidney Langfield’s *The Aesthetic Attitude* (1920), Bernard Berenson’s *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1907), and Adolf von Hildebrand’s *The Problem of*

<sup>136</sup> *The Beautiful*, 72. Lee and the other authors I discuss in this chapter italicize liberally. Unless otherwise indicated, all italics are in the original texts.

<sup>137</sup> In the Introduction to Clementina Anstruther-Thomson’s *Art and Man*, Lee uses the same metaphor: “movements are going on in the work of art, going on not once only but over and over again, like the motion of a fountain, and in obedience to our constantly recurring output of attention and imagination” (94).

*Form in Painting and Sculpture* (1907) are only a few of the books that take empathy as their starting point.

If these works are unfamiliar, it is probably because empathy did not fare well as an aesthetic concept after the early 1900s.<sup>138</sup> In “The Affective Fallacy,” W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley criticize “the *Einfühlung* or empathy of Lipps and related pleasure theories” as outmoded forms of criticism that confuse the emotional effect of art with art itself, and therefore fail really to be criticism at all: “general affective theory at the literary level has...produced very little actual criticism.... [I]n applied criticism there would seem to be not much room for synaesthesia or for the touchy little attitudes of which it is composed” (32).<sup>139</sup> For New Critics who aspired to distill pure literary form, empathy, which focuses on readers rather than literature, was anathema. On the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, Walter Benjamin found empathy to be suspect for entirely different reasons, linking it to an emotional dimension of consumption under capitalism: “empathy with the commodity presents itself as empathy with inorganic matter.... Empathy with the commodity might well, in principle, be empathy with exchange value itself. In fact, it is difficult to take ‘consumption’ of exchange value to mean anything other than empathy with exchange value.... Empathy with the exchange value of guns would make them an even more desirable object of consumption than butter” (“Exchange with Adorno on ‘Paris of the Second Empire’” 111). Benjamin suggests that there is something inherently uncritical about the attitude of empathy: critique of economic conditions is replaced by an unreflective desire to inhabit the process of consumption.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps most famously, Bertolt Brecht equates empathy with the sort of trance that prevents an audience from thinking critically about theater: “In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with (*Einfühlung*) the characters which he plays” (“Short Organum” 193).<sup>141</sup> For each of these aesthetic theorists, empathy is problematic because it erases the critical distance upon which we trust responsible interpretation to be based.

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<sup>138</sup> The exception here is in phenomenology, where Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all debated the kind of empathy that Lee describes. See Michael F. Andrews, “Edmund Husserl: Empathy and the Transcendental Constitution of the World.”

<sup>139</sup> Empathy is perhaps doubly problematic, since it straddles the two modes of affective criticism they identify: “The theories just mentioned may be considered as belonging to one branch of affective criticism...., the emotive—unless the theory of empathy, with its transport of the self into the object, belongs rather with a parallel and equally ancient affective theory, the imaginative” (28–29).

<sup>140</sup> Theodor Adorno did not find Benjamin’s political theory here to be particularly coherent, writing to Benjamin that “it does not seem to me that the concept of empathy with inorganic matter yields anything decisive” (“Exchange with Adorno on ‘the Flâneur’” 205). As I will later show, empathy, as originally theorized, was in fact primarily a relation to inorganic matter. Annika Thiem describes the precise nature of Benjamin’s objection to empathy in historical method: “Through *Einfühlung*, as Benjamin discusses it in the context of historical study, the historian seeks to ‘feel herself’ into the object or age that she studies. *Einfühlung* as a modality of encountering objects of knowledge gives way to the thinker identifying herself with the object and eradicating the difference between the knowing subject and the known object. *Einfühlung* is a gesture of taking the place and occupying, absorbing, reliving, making our own the experience, emotions, and feelings of another. *Einfühlung* privileges the subject’s feelings as starting point and levels emotional differences by encouraging the subject to feel itself into its object of cognition. Even if such an approach remains cognitively aware of emotional differences and marks the impossibility of ever feeling on someone else’s behalf, *Einfühlung* tends to turn into an emotional imperialism that assimilates rather than encounters what is different and other” (598–599).

<sup>141</sup> “Um V-Effekte hervorzubringen, musste der Schauspieler alles unterlassen, was er gelernt hatte, um die *Einfühlung* des Publikums in seine Gestaltungen herbeiführen zu können” (“Kleines Organon” 152). Brecht’s opposition of alienation to empathy is the foundation of twentieth-century theories of aesthetic empathy. Suzanne

Although these criticisms were long effective in rendering aesthetic empathy unfashionable, the concept has recently been revived, especially within cognitive philosophy and cognitive approaches to literary criticism. Suzanne Keen has provided the most thorough account of the links between aesthetic and psychological theories of empathy, questioning C. Daniel Batson's "empathy-altruism hypothesis" that is largely responsible for empathy's return. Keen argues that the supposed propensity of novels to produce an empathic relation between reader and character has often been simplistically associated with an ethics based upon identifying with another; Keen criticizes the notion that such a connection justifies the reading of fiction ("Theory" 208). Against Keen, Mary-Catherine Harrison argues that one can historically examine the effects of particular works of fiction (specifically those of realism, and even more specifically those of Charles Dickens) in generating real-world displays of charity.<sup>142</sup> Other writers, such as John Tooby, Leda Cosmides, Brian Boyd, and Joseph Carroll have suggested that one of the evolutionary roles of literature is to teach us how to imagine ourselves in the place of others.<sup>143</sup> As in Lee's example, these new cognitive or evolutionary approaches often emphasize the way that aesthetic artifacts "exercise" innate human processes.<sup>144</sup>

Despite this scientific sheen, the notion that aesthetic empathy might be linked to altruism is not new. In her 1856 essay "The Natural History of German Life," George Eliot argues that moral and aesthetic feeling are closely related: "The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment" (30). Eliot's assertion has been the basis for a line of questioning regarding whether spontaneous aesthetic response can be the basis for moral sympathy, especially in Victorian realism; Jonathan Loesberg argues that Eliot's statement is important because it indicates—in contrast to Burke—an awareness that moral sympathy can be the result of specifically aesthetic representation, and not just any instance of human suffering.<sup>145</sup> But even if literature does encourage sympathy, it is not clear that sympathy itself is necessarily desirable. In a recent collection that interrogates the political uses of the concept of compassion (attending especially to the politically conservative use of the term), empathy comes up frequently as an equally problematic synonym. Marjorie Garber suggests that empathy is an inherently individualistic emotion: "*empathy* also seems to stress the matter of personal agency and

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Keen discusses Brecht's alienation effects at length in both *Empathy and the Novel* and "Towards a Theory of Narrative Empathy." See also David Krasner's "Empathy and Theater" for a historical account of Brecht's use of the term.

<sup>142</sup> See Mary-Catherine Harrison, "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism."

<sup>143</sup> Tooby and Cosmides argue, for example, that one explanation of the existence of fictional worlds is the ability to inhabit another's experience: "we can immerse ourselves in the comparatively rapid flow of vicarious, orchestrated, imagined, or fictional experience. A hunter-gatherer band might contain scores or even hundreds of lifetimes' worth of experience whose summary can be tapped into if it can be communicated. So, vicarious experience of especially interesting events... should be aesthetically rewarding" (23).

<sup>144</sup> Lisa Zunshine's *Why we Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* describes two such ways in which fictional narratives "endlessly experiment with... our evolved cognitive adaptations" (Zunshine 189): mind-reading and metarepresentationality ("keeping track of *who* thought, wanted, and felt what, and *when*" (191)).

<sup>145</sup> See Jonathan Loesberg, "Aesthetics, Ethics, and Unreadable Acts in George Eliot," 124.

individual emotion. A person who displays empathy is, it appears, to be congratulated for having fine feelings” (24). And Lauren Berlant worries that empathy implies or enables a passive relation to another’s suffering: “when sentimentality meets politics...the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy” (641).

Our contemporary ambivalence about the value of empathy in real life is matched by ambivalence about the value of empathy as a way to respond to literature. On the one hand, empathy seems to be the most basic, untutored response to narrative. Simple modes of reading value fictional narratives that offer characters in which readers can see themselves reflected. To the extent that the capacity for identifying with others is basic to ethical behavior, this seems like a good thing: literature allows us to see ourselves in the place of others whose experience we might otherwise have a difficult time conceptualizing. However, as any literary critic would be quick to point out, this sort of reading is problematic because it overlooks what makes literature literary—not storytelling, which takes place in many spheres (history, politics, film, advertising), but formal qualities and special uses of language. Perhaps even more dangerously, empathic reading entirely erases detachment and the appreciation of difference from criticism. In her exploration how we have arrived at modern ideal of critical detachment, Amanda Anderson has argued that the “cultivation of distance” is a “distinct topos within Victorian culture” (4); for Victorians, scientific knowledge could be attained only by suppressing and effacing the self.<sup>146</sup> At the same time that Victorians valued detachment for its promise of objective knowledge about the world, they also worried that it carried a “characterological” risk of impersonality becoming inhumanity. Even critics who do not take objectivity to be unproblematically good usually strive to recognize rather than to erase the foreignness of the object of critical analysis. So, even as Adorno criticizes the violent rationality of Enlightenment objectivity, he argues against an aesthetics of immediate empathic response: “Experience alone is in no position to legislate aesthetically because a boundary is prescribed to it by the philosophy of history. If experience crosses this limit it degenerates into empathic appreciation. Many artworks of the past...are no longer to be experienced in any immediate fashion and are failed by the fiction of such immediacy” (*Aesthetic Theory* 348–349). To make one’s immediate feelings about an artwork its truth is to destroy the historical distance—transgress the “boundary”—that gives it meaning. Empathy sometimes seems desirable because it humanizes, but it is problematic precisely because it may humanize *too much*, causing the viewer to see an artwork or another person as nothing more than a reflection of herself. Aesthetic empathy achieves its results at the cost of the recognition of difference.

As is probably apparent, these theories of aesthetic empathy stray rather far from Lee’s geometrical description of a mountain. Critiques of the ethical implications of empathy take empathy to be a feeling for another person as a matter of course. The interpersonal aspect of empathy is especially apparent in Keen’s definition: “Empathy: I feel what you feel. *I feel your pain*. Sympathy: I feel a supportive emotion about your feelings. *I feel pity for your pain*” (“Theory” 209). In both cases, empathy is directed at another individual. But the empathic

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<sup>146</sup> Anderson writes that “Active, vigilant self-suppression was fundamental to these procedures, which paradoxically required stringent personal practices on the part of individual scientists so as to efface all individuality. And scientists in part defined their vigilant practices of self-suppression against what they perceived as the indulgent individualism of the artist: ‘L’art, c’est moi; la science, c’est nous,’ in the words of Claude Bernard” (11). I will suggest that this division between science as self-suppression and art as individualism becomes complicated as soon as introspection is posited as a valid method for the study of aesthetic response.

experience Lee describes is directed at a material thing—the mountain—and throughout her work, empathic modes of aesthetic experience have more to do with appreciating an objects' form than with entering into the emotions of a person or character.

In this chapter, I explore the implications of this earlier understanding of empathy, which takes it to be a complex psychological experience in which one's consciousness literally inhabits a physical thing. Empathy, for its early theorists, is an intrasubjective bodily response to optical or spatial forms rather than an intersubjective emotional response to other persons. This rather technical version of empathy at first seems irrelevant to literature and separate from ethics, since it is about how we relate to things rather than to characters or people. However, I will argue that Vernon Lee's aesthetics is capable of reorienting contemporary approaches to the aesthetics and politics of empathy. First, Lee's version of empathy effectively avoids the accusation that it is an untutored or uncritical response to an artwork. This is especially apparent when one considers the importance of literary interpretation in her development of a theory of empathy: in order to understand our empathic relations to things we must pay careful attention to the way that we use words. As I will show, empathy thus encourages attention to rather than distracts from literary form. Second, Lee's theory of empathy imagines a complex set of relationships between self and world. Challenging contemporary psychology's tendency to assume that the "ego" is a unified phenomenon, Lee's work on empathy attends to how aesthetic experience reveals the fragmentation of a viewer or reader and exposes his inability to connect with his own past. As a result, aesthetic empathy produces a heightened mode of self-criticism, not—as Brecht, Benjamin, and Wimsatt assert—an expanded ego that erases alterity by inhabiting it. Ultimately, I argue that this theory of empathy has the potential to advance an aesthetics that is critical and formalist rather than uncritical and emotional because it demands that we attend to language as the medium in which we communicate our experience of art.

### **The Origins of Empathy**

The fate of empathy in the twentieth century is surprising when one considers the way the concept was originally formulated. In 1873, the German philosopher/psychologist Robert Vischer wrote a short book, which, keeping with a Herbartian psychology that located sensation and emotion throughout the body rather than exclusively in the mind, examined how bodies respond to visual forms. Many of his claims are familiar as elaborations of contemporary inquiries into psychological aesthetics (such as those of Alexander Bain or Grant Allen): "the horizontal line is pleasing," for example, "because our eyes are positioned horizontally, although without any other contrasting form it may verge on monotony. The vertical line, on the contrary, can be disturbing when perceived in isolation" (97). But Vischer's most original claim was that our optical perception of forms reverberates throughout the body so completely that we mimic unconsciously the things that we look at. Vischer makes this discovery when reading Karl Albert Scherner's *Das Leben des Traums (The Life of the Dream)*; Vischer writes that "the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously projects its own bodily form—and with this also the soul—into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call '*Einfühlung*' [literally, 'in-feeling']" (97). This is one of a number of neologisms that Vischer proposes throughout the essay in order to express the complex way that human bodies unconsciously respond to spatial forms (others include *Anföhlung* (attentive feeling), *Ausföhlung* (out-feeling), *Nachföhlung* (responsive feeling), *Zuföhlung* (immediate

feeling), and *Zusammenführung* (feeling-together)).<sup>147</sup> Vischer uses these terms to theorize a rational psychological basis for animism: “If we now inquire into the reason for this remarkable merger of subject and object... we will perhaps find no other explanation than that... such is the nature of feeling. This symbolizing activity can be based on nothing other than the pantheistic urge for union with the world, which can by no means be limited to our more easily understood kinship with the human species but must, consciously or unconsciously, be directed toward the universe” (109). As this (rather grand) conclusion suggests, for Vischer, *Einführung* is most interesting when it looks beyond other humans in order to discover a cosmic correspondence between our physiological structure and the organization of the universe we inhabit. “Feeling into” is originally about the expansion of the self to encompass the universe. In terms of aesthetic theory, Vischer uses this insight to arrive at conclusions that are more or less Hegelian and idealist: “art is as much an intensification of sensuousness as a higher form of natural physics.... [It] knows how to translate the indefinability... of mental life... into a magnificent objectivity, into a clear reflection of a free humanity” (116–117).

This notion that one feels oneself into an aesthetic object was made popular thirty years later by the influential psychologist Theodor Lipps (among whose followers were Ernst Bloch and Sigmund Freud).<sup>148</sup> In his *Raumästhetik und Geometrisch-Optische Täuschungen* (Spatial Aesthetics and Geometrical-Optical Illusions), Theodor Lipps turns to optical illusions in order to further explore the possibility that aesthetic pleasure results from our unconscious physical mimicry of the object we observe. Optical illusions illustrate an extreme form of a general principle: our perceptive apparatus mediates our experience of the world in such a way that what we really see is not always identical with what is actually in the world.<sup>149</sup> In an optical illusion, what we see is, to an extent, created by our optical apparatus. It is therefore important to understand the inner processes of perception in order to account for aesthetic experience. Lipps provides an example of the active role of perception in his discussion of a Doric column, which later became a touchstone in discussions of *Einführung*. When we enjoy looking at a column, our satisfaction is not of the general kind which applies to the universal idea of strength, effort, activity. Every mechanical event has its special character or its special manner of fulfillment.... All this reminds us of our own inner processes and evokes those, not indeed identical in character, but analogous. It presents to us an image of similar effort on our own part, and with it the peculiar personal sensations which accompany the act.... There results not, indeed, the entire aesthetic impression produced by a Doric column, but a considerable part of it. The vigorous curves and spring of such a pillar afford me joy by reminding me of those qualities in myself and of the pleasure I derive from seeing them

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<sup>147</sup> I owe the translations of these terms to Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou who describe the difficulty of translating Vischer’s essay in the Preface to *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*.

<sup>148</sup> For an overview of the German trajectory of *Einführung*, see the introduction to *Empathy, Form and Space* and Christian Allessch’s *Geschichte der Psychologischen Aesthetik*

<sup>149</sup> Although optical illusions may seem like an odd starting point for an aesthetic theory, Liliana Albertazzi notes that they were at the center of a heated debate at the turn of the century: “The importance of the topic rested on the fact that it involved questions not only of *visual perception* but also of *ontology*: What type of *object* is a perceptive illusion? ... What is its relationship with *sensory content* (*Gehalt*) and *aesthetic sentiment* (*Gefühl*)?” (180). Albertazzi’s is the most detailed English-language overview of Lipps’s theories of aesthetics and perception, which are so Byzantine, Albertazzi argues, that Lipps and his interlocutors often did not recognize whether they agreed or disagreed.

in another. I sympathize with the column's manner of holding itself and attribute to it qualities of life because I recognize in it proportions and other relations agreeable to me. Thus all enjoyment of form, and indeed all aesthetic enjoyment whatsoever, resolves itself into an agreeable feeling of sympathy. (Quoted in Groos 324)

If Grant Allen's aesthetics are "physiological," then Lipps's are mechanical: just as Allen interprets human aesthetic experience as an essentially animal reaction to the stimuli of the natural world, Lipps mechanizes the human body in order to show the continuity between it and the physics of the architectural column. In a later summation of his aesthetic theory, Lipps describes this by comparison to mechanical physics: "Mechanical aesthetics is certainly to be differentiated from mechanical physics. The latter shows how forms are really produced under the conditions of particular forces. Mechanical aesthetics, conversely, has nothing to do with such real production of forms, but rather with their production within our aesthetic contemplation and our aesthetic impressions. In any case, the aesthetic impression is an impression of the lawfulness of the mechanical forces which also constitute the object of our physical contemplation. It is a mechanical impression or a mechanical feeling (*Ästhetik* 408–409).<sup>150</sup> For Lipps, aesthetic pleasure originates with our mechanical response to the architectural and visual forms we see. Whether or not I am conscious of the fact, a column inspires in me feelings of uprightness and strength—the sensations, in other words, that I would have were I holding up the building myself.<sup>151</sup>

This aspect of Lipps's aesthetics highlights the fact that in its early formulations, empathy is a *mechanical* rather than a thing than an *emotional* relation to a person, although this has been somewhat debated. Gustav Jahoda argues that Lipps himself saw little distinction between sympathy and empathy, and that the apparent difference between the concepts depends mostly on how the term *Einfühlung* was translated into English.<sup>152</sup> But I would argue that taking Lipps at

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<sup>150</sup> This and following passages from the *Ästhetik* are my translation. "Diese ästhetische Mechanik ist nun wohl zu unterscheiden von der physikalischen Mechanik. Die letztere zeigt, wie Formen unter Voraussetzung bestimmter bewegender Kräfte tatsächlich entstehen. Die ästhetische Mechanik dagegen hat nichts zu tun mit solchem tatsächlichen Entstehen der Formen, sondern einzig mit dem Entstehen derselben für unsere ästhetische Betrachtung und unseren ästhetischen Eindruck. Immerhin ist dieser ästhetische Eindruck ein Eindruck von eben der Gesetzmässigkeit mechanischer Kräfte, die auch den Gegenstand der physikalischen Betrachtung ausmacht. Er ist ein mechanischer Eindruck oder ein mechanisches Gefühl."

<sup>151</sup> This understanding of empathy as a relation to an object was widespread, and most illustrations of the concept in the early twentieth century discuss feeling oneself into material things. Studies of aesthetics understood the term primarily as a "motor" process of the body: In chapters 6 and 7 of *The Aesthetic Attitude*, Langfeld discusses empathy as a "motor attitude to the object of our perception" (111). Similarly, Robert Session Woodworth's psychology textbook describes empathy as something we might feel for a kite: "As 'sympathy' means 'feeling with,' 'empathy' means 'feeling into,' and the idea is that the observer projects himself into the object observed, and gets some of the satisfaction from watching an object that he would get from *being* that object. Would it not be grand to be a kite, would it not be masterful? Here we stand, slaves of the force of gravity, sometimes toying with it for a moment when we take a dive or a coast, at other times having to struggle against it for our very lives, and all the time bound and limited by it—while the kite soars aloft in apparent defiance of all such laws and limitations" (491). An article in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* even wonders if the application of empathy to human situations is not a "greatly extended interpretation of the term *empathy*" (Southard 204)

<sup>152</sup> In "Theodor Lipps and the shift from 'Sympathy' to 'Empathy,'" Jahoda writes that "Lipps regarded it [*Einfühlung*] as the key to a problem that had long concerned philosophers and later psychologists—namely how we come to know other people's minds" (155). This is true, but for Lipps understanding other people's minds is a secondary process based upon a primary experience of *Einfühlung* toward another person's body. This is evident from the passages from Lipps that Jahoda himself quotes: "In the perception and comprehension of certain sensory

his word overlooks the fact that *Einfühlung* became an influential topic precisely because of its perceived differences from sympathy. Empathy was interesting because it posited a new way of thinking about the difference—or more precisely the *lack* of difference—between subjects and objects. This is illustrated in Lipps’s discussion of how we perceive a line: “I alone execute it [the line], I alone strive from point to point of the line. But even here again we are dealing not with what reflection tells me, but rather with what I, in the unmediated contemplation of the line, really live.... I feel my striving and my activity to be bound up with the line, to be given in it as its being; in short, I feel myself to be striving and acting *in* the line. This, as we know, is the meaning of *Einfühlung*” (*Ästhetik* 237).<sup>153</sup> This makes it clear what Lipps means by “mechanical”: it is not merely that the lines are not living, but that they also are not merely “geometric” (238): horizontal and vertical lines, according to Lipps have a directly mechanical effect on the perceptive apparatus of the human body, which is why we are able to “feel ourselves into” a line. This has clear resonances with physiological theories such as Bain’s, which looked to the movements of the body as a way of understanding emotional states (recall Bain’s argument, for example, that curved lines are more pleasant to look at because they allow the eye to trace a more natural sweep of motion than do angles). Lipps calls this the first principle of *Einfühlung*, and suggests that it is connected to a feeling of aesthetic freedom: “The first principle of *Einfühlung* is this: that I actually see myself in the form... As such I thus feel myself to be free in the form, and I live out my feeling of freedom in the form” (247).<sup>154</sup> According to Lipps, the “mechanical” sympathy between a geometrical form and a human body does more than merely reaffirm one’s sense of equilibrium: it can provide an experience of free existence.

The complex language with which German psychologists discuss *Einfühlung* reflects the conceptual difficulty of thinking about how the self might extend outside the body. *Sich einfühlen* is a reflexive verb as well as a reflexive relation to oneself: that one feels *oneself* into something implies a simultaneous division and expansion of identity. Furthermore, there often seems to be ambiguity about the location into which something is being felt. Though Lipps consistently talks about feeling oneself into a thing, one might argue that it is more accurate to say that one feels the object into oneself: *Einfühlung* involves an introjection of the material world into oneself as much as it does a projection of the self into an external object. One of the difficulties that psychologists confronted was how to describe this process without appealing to a vocabulary that seemed mystical and (worse, for many) metaphysical.

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objects, namely, those that we afterward represent as the body of another individual...is immediately grasped by us. This applies particularly to the perception and comprehension of occurrences or changes in this sensory appearance, which we name, for example, friendliness or sadness.... [but] that does not mean we see it or apprehend it by means of the senses. We cannot do that, since anger, friendliness, or sadness cannot be perceived through the senses” (156). Lipps describes our relation to other persons as originally a relation to sensory objects into which we feel ourselves (in much the same way we feel ourselves into a column) in order to apprehend the relation between their physical appearance and emotional state.

<sup>153</sup> “Ich allein vollziehe sie [the line], ich allein strebe von Punkt zu Punkt der Linie fort. Aber auch hier wiederum handelt es sich nicht darum, was mir der Reflexion sagt, sondern was ich in der unmittelbaren Betrachtung der Linie erlebe. Und dann bleibt es dabei: Ich fühle mein Streben und Tun an die Linie gebunden, in ihr gegeben, als ihre Sache; kurz, ich fühle mich fortstrebend und tätig *in* der Linie. Dies aber ist, wie wir wissen, der Sinn der *Einfühlung*.”

<sup>154</sup> “Das erste Fundament der *Einfühlung* ist dies, dass ich überhaupt betrachtend in der Form bin.... Als solches also fühle ich in der Form mich frei, und lebe in ihr frei mich aus.”



This difficulty of describing what happens to the self in the moment of aesthetic empathy is therefore a central problematic in discussions of Lipps's concept. On the one hand, Wilhelm Worringer argued that Lipps had undertheorized what happens to the self in the moment of aesthetic empathy, and had failed to take into account a primitive impulse to create strictly abstract, "crystalline" forms as an escape from the chaos of nature. In his argument against Lipps's version of empathy, Worringer has no qualms about delving into metaphysical myth-making, and the result is a dramatic illustration of the philosophical implications of what it means to "feel oneself into" an object: it is simultaneously self-loss, the creation of finite boundaries around the self, self-alienation, and self-objectivation: "In empathizing this will to activity into another object, however, we *are* in the other object. We are delivered from our individual being as long as we are absorbed into an external object, an external form, with our inner urge to experience. We feel, as it were, our individuality flow into fixed boundaries, in contrast to the boundless differentiation of the individual consciousness. In this self-objectivation lies a self-alienation. . . . Popular usage speaks with striking accuracy of 'losing oneself' in the contemplation of a work of art" (*Abstraction and Empathy* 24).<sup>155</sup> The psychologist Karl Groos, on the other hand, argued that Lipps was *too* theoretical. For Groos, Lipps's assertion that the experience of *Einfühlung* was essentially an imaginary projection of the self into an object was premised upon a suspiciously metaphysical model of the self. Groos, basing his own theory of *Einfühlung* on his study of the human and animal instincts to play, argued instead that one literally mimics the forms that one feels oneself into. He backs up these claims by appealing to processes of balance and breathing as evidence of aesthetic response: "[i]nquiry concerning the complex movements of inner imitation is not yet past its opening stages, but so much seems to be established—namely, that by it are called forth movement and postural sensations (especially those of equilibrium), light muscular innervations, together with visual and respiratory movement, all of which are of great importance" (*The Play of Man* 328). This means, by extension, that some people may, by dint of their physiological makeup, have naturally heightened aesthetic sensitivities: "[i]n concluding, we are confronted by the question whether this faculty of inner imitation belongs exclusively to a special group of individuals—namely, the distinctly motor type [*Motorischen*]. If this is so, then a very important part of the aesthetic satisfaction is confined to a fraction of the human race" (333). Groos, however, demurs, suggesting that perhaps some people are simply better at *noticing* their motor responses to visual forms: "There may be individuals with very strong inner imitative movements who are unable to separate the motor element from the *tout ensemble*. . . . There are probably many who deserve to be reckoned with the motors in aesthetic enjoyment who are yet unable to make their own movements a matter of observation" (333). In order to make this sort of distinction, Groos must claim that *Einfühlung* is not imaginary but is quite literal: what appears to be in Lipps a metaphorical projection of the self into something else becomes, for Groos, a literal embodied resonance between persons and forms.

Groos's metaphor of the "motor" and Lipps's discussion of aesthetic "mechanics" are significant because they highlight how *Einfühlung* provided Victorians with a different way of understanding how one develops a sense of individual autonomy and separation from the world, precisely through experiences in which the apparently stable barrier between ego and object

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<sup>155</sup> For an account of Worringer's role in making primitivism central to modernist aesthetics, see Mary Gluck, "Interpreting Primitivism."

breaks down. This is perhaps best illustrated by contrasting *Einfühlung* with sympathy. As Rachel Ablow argues in *The Marriage of Minds*, Victorian sympathy was not simply affective identification with an (often marginalized) other (as described by Martha Nussbaum), but a way of entering into another's feelings in order to develop one's own autonomous sense of self. Ablow argues that sympathy is not simply "pity" but is instead "a psychic structure through which the subject is produced, consolidated, or redefined"; sympathy is not a "feeling," but "a mode of relating to others and of defining a self" (2). As Groos's and Lipps's work shows, empathy, with its mechanical connotations, is an entirely different—though analogous—technology of self-constitution and self-reflection. It allows the subject to articulate his separateness from the material world and not just from other human beings, but without necessarily appealing to a metaphysical sense of self. One might even think of *Einfühlung* as a special kind of materialism that does not deny the possibility of a self that exceeds neurology or biology, but that nonetheless understands individuals primarily as material things.

The special nature of *Einfühlung* was readily apparent to those who studied it. Vernon Lee explicitly distinguishes *Einfühlung*, which is a spatial relation, from moral sympathy, which is an intersubjective relation: "This phenomenon of aesthetic *Einfühlung*, or, as Professor Titchener has translated it, *Empathy*, is therefore analogous to that of moral sympathy. Just as when we 'put ourselves in the place' or, more vulgarly, 'in the skin' of a fellow-creature, we are, in fact, attributing to him the feelings we should have in similar circumstances; so, in looking at the Doric column, for instance, and its entablature, we are attributing to the lines and surfaces, to the spatial forms, those dynamic experiences which we should have were we to put our bodies into similar conditions" (*Beauty and Ugliness* 20).<sup>156</sup> Although empathy is similar to moral sympathy, it is mostly significant for its differences: specifically, it depends upon lines, surfaces, and spatial forms, rather than on emotion or sentiment. Note here that Lee transitions from the pronoun "ourselves" to the noun "bodies": this in many senses encapsulates the distinction between sympathy and empathy—it is the "body" rather than the "self" that produces the complex of physical responses and adjustments that constitute the phenomenon of *Einfühlung*.

The distinction between "empathy" and "sympathy" was widely debated after Edward Titchener (who Lee references above) coined the former term as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*. British understandings of *Einfühlung* are, in fact, closer to those of the Germans before Titchener came up with an English word for the concept, suggesting that the introduction of the term into British intellectual culture complicated matters instead of clarifying them.<sup>157</sup> In 1905, Max Dessoir writes, "[C]omparatively many modern aestheticians admit the doctrine of *Einfühlung*. Its leading exponent, Theodor Lipps, sees the decisive characteristic of aesthetic enjoyment in the fusion of an alien experience with one's own: as soon as something objectively given furnishes us the possibility of freely living ourselves into it, we feel aesthetic pleasure. In the example of the Doric column, rearing itself and gathering itself up to our view, Lipps has sought to show how given space-forms are interpreted first dynamically, then

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<sup>156</sup> The newness of the term "empathy" is testified to by the fact that when Lee published this essay in the *Quarterly Review* eight years earlier, there was no English equivalent for *Einfühlung*: "The phenomenon of aesthetic 'Einfühlung' is therefore analogous to moral sympathy" (434).

<sup>157</sup> Conversely, one might argue as Jahoda does that by giving *Einfühlung* a name different from "sympathy," Titchener unwittingly produced a new concept where Lipps did not see one. Manifestly unaware that his neologism will eventually become a common term, Titchener coins it quite in passing: "This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*" (21).

anthropomorphically. We read into the geometrical figure not only the expression of energy, but also free purposiveness. In so far as we look at it in the light of our own activity, and sympathize with it accordingly, in so far do we feel it as beautiful” (439). James Mark Baldwin’s 1902 dictionary of philosophy provides a helpful perspective on how *Einfühlung* was understood prior to Titchener. He defines the term as “(a) aesthetic personification (as ‘The Gothic tower has an upward impulse’), and (b) inner sympathy (as ‘I am carried up with the Gothic tower’)” (679). As this example indicates, one does not feel empathy for other persons, but rather for other *things*: a tower, a column, a tree. Indeed, Baldwin sees *Einfühlung* as a way of thinking about symbolization in art rather than as an emotional response: “Recently, the psychology of symbolization has received special treatment. . . . Others have considered it as an investiture of the object with the observer’s own idea and feeling. . . and have sought for terms expressing this such as ‘mitfühlen,’ feeling with (Lotze), ‘einfühlen,’ feeling into (R. Vischer, Fr. Vischer), a lending or animating. . . .” (640).<sup>158</sup> When the term sympathy is used in order to explain empathy, its sense is explicitly restricted: “*Einfühlung*: see Sympathy (aesthetic). . . *Einfühlung* is not a happy term: (1) because it confuses two distinct things—(a) aesthetic personification (as ‘The Gothic tower has an upward impulse’), and (b) inner sympathy (as ‘I am carried up with the Gothic tower’)—and (2) because the term is too narrow, since the process involved is not confined to feeling” (679). Lee was likewise unhappy with the word *Einfühlung* (and its English counterpart), reflecting upon these debates a decade later that the similarity between *Einfühlung* and *Mitgefühl*—empathy and sympathy—is “a rather misleading verbal analogy which Professor Titchener [sic] has perpetuated by translating *Einfühlung* as *Empathy*. . . [N]either the German *Einfühlung* or the Graeco-American *Empathy* is a correct description of what really happens” (*Art and Man* 73).

I emphasize this point because recent discussions of aesthetic empathy often elide the difference between empathy and sympathy, or misinterpret the history of the former concept. Suzanne Keen notes the opticospatial definition of *Einfühlung*, but asserts that it is short-lived and not particularly significant: “Originally Lee’s aesthetic focused on bodily sensations and muscular adjustments made by beholders of works of art and architecture and downplayed emotional responsiveness. By the time she revised and expanded her ideas for presentation in book form, however, Lee had adapted Lipps’ understanding of empathy, a parallel development from common sources in German aesthetics” (“Theory” 210). Keen offers as evidence of Lee’s transition toward a more emotional interpretation of empathy the following passage, which, to my mind, illustrates that Lee continues to see a *distinction* between rather than an *identity* of empathy and sympathy: “Lee argues that empathy enters into ‘imagination, sympathy, and also into that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world’ (210). For Lee, empathy is an experience that enables sympathy because it exists prior to it as an unconscious response, but that is not identical with it. In a similar vein, Susan Lanzoni, in order to include *Einfühlung* in her discussion of early psychological treatments of

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<sup>158</sup> A 1902 article in *The American Journal of Psychology* corroborates the idea that *Einfühlung* was seen mostly as a sort of symbolization: “o the diseased mind, even the simple drawing of a line may have a symbolic meaning and an emotional content that is hard for us to understand, unless perhaps we get a hint from the *Einfühlung* (feeling in) theory of the aestheticians. According to this theory the psychology of symbolization cannot be explained by the ordinary laws of association, but we must consider it ‘an investiture of the object with the observers own idea and feeling.’ . . . Now if this is possible with the normal mind, on a normal emotional level, how much more possible is it for a disordered mind, which is hyper-responsive emotionally. . . .” (530)

sympathy, argues that it is more or less the same thing: “Sympathy also played an important role in aesthetics. . . . Prior to 1900, psychologists tended to translate the term *Einfühlung* as sympathy, and some argued that sympathy entailed a harmonious appreciation of the object, whereas negative *Einfühlung* connoted a feeling of discord with the object” (269). As Lanzoni’s own language suggests, *Einfühlung* remains for these authors a relation to an *object*, not a *subject*, and this distinction is precisely what makes it useful as a psychological concept. Through the 1920s, debates about empathy focused on whether the concept could be operative outside the sphere of aesthetic perception, and rarely, if ever, suggested that one might feel empathy for a person. In psychology textbooks, empathy was distinguished from sympathy as objective rather than subjective.<sup>159</sup> Finally, some Lee scholars have overstated her role in introducing the term empathy; Nicole Fluhr goes so far as to give Lee (dubious) credit for the translation of *Einfühlung* as “empathy,” a translation which Lee later deplored. Fluhr writes, “In 1913, novelist, literary critic, and aesthetic theorist Vernon Lee coined the term ‘empathy’” (287); Fluhr later references again “the German term from which she coined the English word” (289), and equates the term with “understanding another” (288), a distinctly modern definition of empathy that Lee would have seen as, at most, a secondary effect.<sup>160</sup>

There are several reasons that I believe it is important to recognize the difference between sympathy and empathy, especially as the latter was originally theorized.<sup>161</sup> First, aesthetic empathy opens the possibility for an affective identification with an object in non-narrative and even non-representational terms. The ability to feel what an aesthetic object might feel does not, in the case of empathy, depend upon the humanness of that object—rather, it is a purely geometrical and physiological relation, similar to the temporarily disorienting effect of Lipps’s optical illusions. Second, empathy complicates notions of agency that are central to the idea of sympathy. Overwhelmingly, theorists of empathy describe it as a process over which the subject exerts minimal control and which often occurs unconsciously. This contrasts with descriptions of sympathy that turn on the moral value of being willing or able to put oneself in the place of

<sup>159</sup> I have not been able to find any references before the 1930s that describe empathy primarily as an intersubjective relation. Robert Chenault Givler’s *Psychology: the Science of Human Behavior* is representative of psychology’s understanding of empathy in the early twentieth century: “A very handy and precise term for these imitative movements which aid in space perception has recently been coined. This term is *empathy*. *Sympathy* means the tendency to feel with, or to share the emotions and sentiments of, animate beings, while *empathy* means the tendency to imitate any attitude, posture, or design. All sympathy is empathy plus emotional response” (172). Brecht’s famous resistance *Einfühlung* (often translated into English as “identification”), which (mis)interpreted it as a sort of merging of one’s personality with that of a represented character (analogous to Aristotelian pity and fear) may in fact be the source of our present understanding that the term has to do with identification with other characters or individuals. If this is the case, then it is a remarkable instance of empathy being turned into its opposite since, as I will argue at the end of this chapter, *Einfühlung* is often described as an experience of formalist estrangement. The extent to which Brecht was aware of psychological theories of *Einfühlung* is unclear and probably deserves further study.

<sup>160</sup> To cite another example, Hillary Fraser more or less attributes Lipps’s famous Doric column example to Lee: “Lee promotes an aesthetic of empathy, which is articulated in strikingly corporeal terms: ‘[I]n looking at the Doric column, for instance. . . we are attributing to the lines and surfaces, to the spatial forms, those dynamic experiences we should have were we to put our bodies into similar conditions’ (Lee and Anstruther-Thomson 20)” (92). To cite this as the work of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson is quite misleading, since they are in this moment merely summarizing Lipps’s widely-known example from *Raumaesthetik und Geometrisch-Optische Täuschungen*.

<sup>161</sup> When I refer in this chapter to “empathy” or “aesthetic empathy,” I use the term as it was used by Lipps and Lee, not in the more familiar sense that Keen intends when she defines empathy as experiencing another person’s emotional state (“I feel what you feel”).

another. One wonders, as a result, whether it is possible to theorize an ethics of empathy, insofar as empathy is not a feeling that we control or even always know about. Third, because the nature of empathy might be called anti-subjective—that is, it is directed at things rather than at persons (and, we shall see shortly, viewers sometimes even treat persons *as* things in order to empathize with them)—it is uniquely able to describe aesthetic responses to non-representational art forms. One might sympathize, for example, with the characters of a realist Victorian novel (or even the figures of a nineteenth-century painting) to the extent that one can relate to those characters as representations of real people, but it is more difficult to imagine how one might sympathize with a vorticist painting or a modernist poem, which fragment and de-realize character. To the extent that we recognize empathy as an aesthetic identification with an object (rather than with a subject) it becomes possible to see how one might have a spontaneous affective relation to nonrepresentational art forms. The idea of feeling oneself to be (or to be one with) an object is productive in an art-critical sense because it theorizes a relation between human subjects and material things such as those that populate the world of artworks. Finally, compared with the psychological approaches to aesthetics I discuss in the previous chapter, *Einführung* provides a way of transitioning from a synthetic, biological account of what art is in general to an analytic, phenomenological account capable of interpreting individual artworks.

### “What Patterns Can Do to Us”

At the same time that Lipps and Groos were developing a new way of thinking about our interactions with visual forms, Vernon Lee and Clementina (“Kit”) Anstruther-Thomson were attempting to practice it. In the introduction to *Art and Man*, a collection of Anstruther-Thomson’s literary fragments, Lee narrates an aesthetic reawakening that occurs as a result of her relationship with Anstruther-Thomson. Anstruther-Thomson dates her own realization of a new mode of aesthetic experience quite precisely, to March, 1894: “About the middle of March, 1894, [...] I discovered what I take to be the physiological connection between Man and Art from noticing one day that my breathing involuntarily altered as I looked at different pictures.... In April, 1894, we went to Rome, where I made experiments with an analogous result upon sculptures... noticing that I saw the statue of the Apoxyomenos much better during the noise a stone-mason was making on the floor close by while filing a marble slab. The short, rapid strokes of the file affected my breathing, and as a result the statue looked animated” (35). This simple realization ultimately formed the basis for a complete theory of aesthetic empathy that Anstruther-Thomson and Lee together developed as an elaboration and correction of Lipps and Groos. As Lee recounts in the introduction, Anstruther-Thomson would perform intensely exhausting “experiments” involving introspection regarding her experience of artworks while Lee developed a theoretical framework within which those introspective accounts could become the data for an entirely new way of thinking about aesthetic experience. Lee remembers a perfect correspondence between her psychological research and Anstruther-Thomson’s lived experience of the museum: “The result of my readings was, however, that when Kit would come home after a morning in the galleries, saying, with ill-repressed excitement: ‘Do you know, I think I’ve found out something, after all’ I was often able to tell her that she really had done so, and even the other things which she must set about discovering” (47). This anecdote is instructive: Lee and Anstruther-Thomson consciously felt themselves to be “discovering” existing truths about aesthetic experience rather than abstractly theorizing their relation to artworks. One can hardly imagine a better illustration of an applied aesthetic theory—for both writers, aesthetic theory is

an intellectual tool that leads to greater appreciation of art rather than a mode of contemplative thinking that is more or less an end in itself.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, Lee, who was well-trained in philosophical aesthetics, reflected in many of her earlier essays that the field was dissatisfying because of tendency to think in abstractions rather than in terms of individual moments of aesthetic enjoyment.<sup>163</sup>

This new way of thinking about aesthetics consciously opposes a literary or speculative approach to the study of art. It is strongly biased toward painting, architecture, and especially sculpture, though it extends sometimes into the realm of music; it is not immediately clear how a theory of identification with shapes and images could extend to non-visual genres such as poetry or the novel. Throughout the introduction to *Art and Man*, Lee emphasizes that her reawakening results from a new awareness that her earlier literary discussions of beauty have failed to account for the lived experience of the aural and optical dimensions of art.<sup>164</sup> Lee writes, “It was only as a result of intimacy with Kit Anstruther-Thomson that I became aware that, much as I had written and even much as I had read about works of art, I did not really know them when they were in front of me.... Until then I really knew of works of art only that much which can be translated into literature; and most of the literary descriptions and analyses dealt in reality not with the picture or the statue itself, but with the subject it represented” (29). For Lee, what is revolutionary about the collaboration with Anstruther-Thomson is that it opens a non-literary, non-linguistic domain that is not available in the abstract, and resists translation into conceptual language. Specifically, Lee is interested in the combination of optical and aural effects that the accidental coincidence of the viewing of the statue and the sound of the file made apparent to Anstruther-Thomson: “the business of the *statue and the file* led to new experiments.... They all pointed to the fact that visible forms set up in the thoroughly absorbed—that is aesthetically, not scientifically or practically interested—beholder complex mental activities of the same kind as those by which we, as it is usually expressed, *follow a piece of music*” (38).

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<sup>162</sup> The idea that psychology rendered aesthetics an applied rather than a theoretical discipline was widely promoted at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a review of Lipps’s *Aesthetik*, James Tufts remarks that aesthetics is properly a subfield of psychology: “Aesthetics is defined as the science of the beautiful... As such a science, aesthetics is a discipline of applied psychology” (677).

<sup>163</sup> Lee writes in *Belcaro*, “I read a great many books about all the arts, and about each art in particular, from Plato to Lessing, From Reynolds to Taine, from Hegel to Ruskin.... Any one reading my notes... would have sworn that I was destined to become an art philosopher. But it was not to be. Much as I read, copied, annotated, analysed, imitated, I could not really take in any of the things which I read.... As soon as I got back into the presence of art itself, all my carefully acquired artistic philosophy... was forgotten: My old original prosaic, matter-of-fact feeling about art... always persisted beneath all the metaphysics and all the lyrism with which I tried to crush it” (9–11).

<sup>164</sup> Lee’s discovery of psychological aesthetics likely produced so profound an effect upon her because there is ample evidence in her work from 1880–1896 that she had already been theorizing psychological aesthetics, only without giving it that name. In an 1880 article, Lee argues that the study of aesthetics is actually two related pursuits: one that investigates the origin of art; another which examines art’s effects on individuals. The type of aesthetics she describes as “absolute” is uncannily similar to the psychological aesthetics that became popular two decades later: “Absolute Aesthetics is that science which, starting from the work of art as an already existing entity, refuses to investigate into its origin, and devotes itself to determining its value, aims, and effects. We call it *absolute*... because it can isolate not only art in general, but one art in particular, and not only one art in particular, but one art as an individual in order to study its value and effects... we call it absolute because it deals solely with the relations between the work of art and the mind which perceives it (“Comparative Aesthetics” 301–302). Lee’s 1887 *Juvenilia* reveals that she is quite aware knowledge of physiological aesthetics; see especially the chapter “Apollo the Fiddler,” which directly addresses the question of whether science can explain art.

These experiments attempted to ascertain the physiological relations between a work of art and the viewer's body. Anstruther-Thomson's lecture "What Patterns Can Do to Us," included in *Art and Man*, is a remarkable close reading of three Greek vases that can only be described as aerobic in its exhortations to its audience. Anstruther-Thomson imagines the work of art to be just as active as the body that encounters it, and reads into the decorations on a Greek vase a complex mechanics of balance, tension, force, and weight, and even, at moments, a sort of quasi-subjectivity. Anstruther-Thomson enthusiastically asks of her listeners, "[t]o discover for ourselves what pattern is capable of doing in the way of altering shapes, let us examine these three pictures of vases and compare them with each other, so as to *catch the patterns at work!*" (138). As the lecture proceeds, Anstruther-Thomson leads her audience through a series of almost callisthenic activities: at one point she invites the listener to "stand quite still on tip toe, his feet close together and his head erect" (144) in order to experience the vitality that she believes that the artwork produces. I quote at length a passage from Anstruther-Thomson's lecture in order to illustrate what it would mean to empathize with an object rather than with a person. The vases Anstruther-Thomson discusses can be seen in Figure 1.



Three outlines of a Greek amphora, redrawn for experiment by C.A.-T.

Fig. 1. Anstruther-Thomson's sketch of three vases (from *Art and Man*, 138).

The vase in question is an Amphora; it was made not for ornament but for use... Its neck was narrow to prevent any of the contents from spilling over the brim.... The handles were only for lighter use.... All these practical requirements resulted in a vase which looks rather round-shouldered and which rests rather heavily on its base, as in No. 1.

But when the painter took it in hand, how rapidly he remedied these defects. Look at No. 2: how the rosettes round the neck lengthen it; how its round-shouldered look has disappeared under the influence of the pattern; then, looking lower down, how its spike-

like pattern makes it stand lightly on its base. The body is literally lifted upwards by this pattern....

But notice No. 3. *It* is not a bit too wide for its height now! for the widening action of the palm pattern is corrected by the addition of the picture of the warriors charging inward. We still feel the stretch outward of the palm pattern, but the movement inward of the warriors is far the more decided movement of the two, so it draws the whole composition together and tightens it; and then see how the warriors by their springing strides pick up the whole body of the vase, ‘draw it fine,’ make it tense and springy, and the handles, which up till now have been merely there for use, now look active and pull against the warriors, giving them their fine poise....

But I think that very possibly our eye would not play us these unexpected tricks if it were left to itself to give us all the information we get about shapes. It might then merely register the fact that the shape of Vase 1 remained its own shape even when various black lines and figures had been painted on it, as in Vases 2 and 3. But it is not left to itself to tell us its own story undisturbed. Other parts of our body will insist on telling us about the vase, too. In fact, they insist on helping our eye by doing the shapes in some rudimentary fashion inside us to an extent we may feel almost as an actual alteration of the shape of our own body. So the addition of a lifting pattern to the base of the vase comes to us as a very real modification in the shape of the vase, because it suddenly thrusts into our own body a feeling of lifting which we cannot help realizing. And every additional shape is hammered into us so energetically by our body that we have to believe its testimony rather than that of our eye.

It is this fact: that we have to feel in our body the shape of the things we see with our eye, that gives art such a hold over us!

In real life we do not stop and look at things intently for the pleasure of looking at them, and with no other object in view. It is only Art that holds us in this way, keeping us steady on one object so that we have time to *feel* about it, and we feel the ‘way of being’ of pattern just as keenly and acutely as we feel the way of being of figures of men and women; *moreover, our body is indifferent to the literary interest of the subject.* So pattern and human figures can become equally interesting and equally pleasant to look at. (139–140)

I would like to highlight three general principles that structure Anstruther-Thomson’s aesthetic theory. First, the encounter with the work of art is an *interactive event*. In order to understand the significance of the vase, it is necessary to think about it in terms of the moment of encounter between the viewer and the vase, which only becomes aesthetically legible when it is placed in relation to a person viewing it. Throughout the essay, Anstruther-Thomson argues that this relation is one in which the viewer must actively make an effort to create: “I use the words ‘turn our attention’ because by looking at a vase I do not mean merely laying our eye on it for an instant—for just long enough to seize a rapid notion of its shape, or of the subject of the picture painted on it, and then moving on; I mean something more deliberate, something closer. We must let our eye move all over the vase, rest on it—cover it, and re-cover it, till it has assimilated its shape on all its detail” (141). As the title of Anstruther-Thomson’s lecture suggests, at the same time that we actively devote our attention to the vase, its patterns “do” something to us. The activity of the viewer thus creates the possibility for the viewer to be acted upon—to be shaped—by the work of art itself. Furthermore, the kind of attention that Anstruther-Thomson demands is not an intellectualized contemplation of the culture of the Greeks, a consideration of



the historical significance of the vase, or even reflection upon how the aesthetic and literary heritage of Greek vases (in, for example, ekphrastic lyric poetry) affect our perception of it. Anstruther-Thomson dismisses in a few sentences the functional purpose of the vase in order to illustrate the complexity of aesthetic experience that is available by attending to the shape and design of vase itself.

This leads to the second important aspect of Anstruther-Thomson's theory: a *forceful formalism*. For Anstruther-Thomson, what differentiates art is precisely this ability to arrest and reward our attention, which is made possible not by the compelling nature of its subject matter, but by the literal power that visual form exercises over our mechanisms of perception. Hence the references to art "holding" us, "keeping us steady," by causing us to feel the "'way of being' of pattern," which renders "pattern and human figures...equally interesting" (140). The "holding" and "keeping steady" to which Anstruther-Thomson refers are less metaphorical than one might expect. This is evident from some of the strange syntactical constructions that Anstruther-Thomson uses in her analysis of the vases: "parts of our body...insist on helping our eye by doing the shapes in some rudimentary fashion inside us" (139). The awkwardness of the phrase "doing the shapes...inside us" speaks to the foreignness of the kind of experience that Anstruther-Thomson is trying to imagine. Anstruther-Thomson is thinking about "shape" as something that is inherently active, not because of an implied motion, but rather because of the literal motion that the shape leads different parts our body to enact. Anstruther-Thomson emphasizes our inability to control this action in order to attribute to the formal qualities of the vase the sort of agency that her title implies: the "addition of a lifting pattern to the base...suddenly *thrusts into our own body* a feeling of lifting *which we cannot help realizing...* [E]very additional shape is *hammered into us so energetically by our body* that we have to believe its testimony" (139, emphasis mine). (If this is truly how Anstruther-Thomson experiences art, it is not surprising that Lee became concerned about whether Anstruther-Thomson was constitutionally too weak to continue returning to the museum.)<sup>165</sup> Anstruther-Thomson's theory of aesthetic form suspends meaning rather than harmoniously blends with it; as Anstruther-Thomson points out, "*our body is indifferent to the literary interest of the subject*" (140). Indeed, it is precisely as a result of this formalism that it is not entirely important whether one is looking at a work of art if one wishes to feel the feelings aroused by forms; as Lee notes, Anstruther-Thomson seemed able to derive aesthetic pleasure from almost any object: "IT by no means always happened to be a work of art. How often has she not drawn up our cart at a weir, or where some thing, white Tuscan brook made a miniature waterfall, gazing at the curve of the water, at the outrigging drops as it toppled [...]? Motion as form; form as motion...It was beginning to dawn upon her" (31). In the place of meaning, one might understand from her prose, there is sheer physical force.

And yet, this is not a violent force. The final aspect of Anstruther-Thomson's theory I would like to point out is its emphasis on the feeling of *vitality* that all of this concentration,

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<sup>165</sup> Lee writes, "The more and more minute self-observation, which had become one half of Kit's work...would have been a frightful strain even on a person expressly trained as an *experimental subject*.... Whereas Kit Anstruther-Thomson was at once experimenter and experimental subject; and she went on observing her own mental and bodily responses for uncounted minutes on end.... And here I ought to say, less in self-excuse than in mere explanation, that, until she handed me her written notes to deal with, I did not guess at the intensity of the efforts which my friend was making.... I believe and hope to heaven that, when once her memoranda had suggested to me the true nature of her experiments, I warned her not to push them too far" (*Art and Man* 52).

hammering, thrusting, and holding ultimately produces. Anstruther-Thomson expresses the effect of the artwork in respiratory terms: it literally causes the body to lift up and inhale more deeply. Again speaking of the vase, Anstruther-Thomson writes, “As our eye takes in its rounded form, the ‘other part’ of us which rushes in with an urgent message to our consciousness is the whole of the upper part of our body, our spine and breast bone and ribs. They all lift upwards and all of a sudden we find ourselves breathing much more freely, for we have much more room in which to expand our lungs, and an unusual thing happens—as long as we go on looking at the vase *our ribs do not collapse down again!*” (142). As the vase literally inspires the body to lift upwards, it creates a feeling of expansion. This might seem like a rather localized insight, but for Anstruther-Thomson it ultimately becomes the justification for art. At the end of the lecture, Anstruther-Thomson invites her audience to reflect on how they feel after completing all of the breathing, lifting, and expansion that she has instructed them to perform: “We turn from the drawing and go back to the vase with a feeling of relief and expansion, with a feeling even of joy! And this is not an exaggerated statement, for, think of it! This clay vase, half a metre high, has the power of corroborating to ourselves the reality of our own existence, and in so complete a fashion that the very act of being alive, of living, becomes a wider, a keener, a more complex act, all the time we go on looking at it” (153). The salutary effect of art is literally salubrious: the form of the vase gives rise to a more “expansive” mode of living. In the most prosaic sense, it improves the viewer’s posture and causes him or her to breathe more deeply, but in a much broader sense it intensifies our experience by reversing aesthetic rapture: the vase intensifies our sensations rather than transports us into a metaphysical aesthetic domain.

Art, capable of “corroborating to ourselves the reality of our own existence” gives complexity to “the very act of being alive, of living” (153). Objects (like vases) and subjects (like Anstruther-Thomson) are not static and separate; rather, objects intensify the feeling of subjectivity. This is a dramatic claim about the role of art in producing a sense of self. By forcefully taking over the viewer’s body, the work of art ultimately teaches the viewer how to inhabit more fully her embodied reality. In their interpretation of Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love*, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson reduce the picture to an outline (figure 2) in order to apply to it the same analytical methods that Anstruther-Thomson uses to explain her Greek vases. Illustrating the idea that “aesthetic pleasure in art is due to the production of highly vitalizing, and therefore agreeable, adjustments of breathing and balance,” Anstruther-Thomson and Lee explain how the painting causes the viewer’s eyes to move from left to right and back, “compelling us to balance all the time while looking at it” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 225).<sup>166</sup> This is the very definition of aesthetic quality: “This balanced movement is, perhaps, the greatest quality a picture can have; for, in looking at it, we unconsciously *mime* the subtly subordinated complexity of movement” (235). Here, as with Anstruther-Thomson’s discussion of the vases, the form of the painting becomes one with the viewer’s body; as Lee puts it, “we...*make form*

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<sup>166</sup> Although the interpretation of art through recourse to the movements of a viewer’s eye gained some currency, it was later refuted. Guy Thomas Buswell used optical apparatus in 1935 to study empirically the eye-movements of thousands of people, debunking the idea that eyes actually trace forms in paintings: “The perceptual pattern for various types of repetitive designs showed clearly that the pattern of eye-movements does not resemble even remotely the general pattern of the design. The common assumption that the eye moves from motif to motif in the design is not supported by the facts .... Furthermore, the general assumptions in regard to the rapidity with which the eye is carried along certain types of designs were not supported by the evidence found in this investigation” (143).

*exist* in ourselves by alteration in our respiratory and equilibratory processes” (236). Aesthetic form thus forms the body. Notably, such an experience of this form depends upon a reduction of the Titian painting to a bare outline: Lee excises its flesh to produce a “skeleton” diagram. As with the vases, meaning is suspended in order to privilege shape and line; we empathize with human figures by seeing them as simple arrangements of lines in space—not by imagining ourselves to take their place.



Fig. 2. Lee's skeleton diagram of *Sacred and Profane Love* (from *Beauty and Ugliness*, 234).

Anstruther-Thomson's observations about how an aesthetic object could affect her sense of self inspired Lee to explore in great detail what happens to our bodies when we encounter works of art. As Lee developed her own theory of aesthetic empathy based upon gallery experiments such as these, she drew upon the theories of both Lipps and Groos. Her line of inquiry raises questions about the autonomy of both the individual and of the work of art in the moment of aesthetic experience. If speculative theories of aesthetics imagined a kind of sublime beauty in which the object seems momentarily to overpower the viewer, Anstruther-Thomson seems to experience overpowering aesthetic experience in an empirically observable fashion. This becomes one of the central questions that Lee addresses in her writing on psychological aesthetics: what happens to the viewer's sense of self in the presence of an object that enjoys an agency equal to (or even more powerful) than that of its viewer? The vase's patterns, after all, are capable of “hammering,” “thrusting,” and lifting the viewer's rib cage. In formulating her response to Lipps and Groos, Lee develops a way of speaking about the relation between self and other that takes into account the complex interactions between the projection of the self into an aesthetic object and the submission to the dominating aspects of lines and shapes.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>167</sup> Dennis Denisoff notes that Lee's accounts of empathy can sometimes be extremely erotic. This starkly contrasts the dry theoretical descriptions of Lipps and other psychologists: “The erotics of her notion of empathy are apparent from the sensuality of her descriptions of the experience, as well as from her focus on emotions, movement, and vitality. In *The Beautiful*, for example, she described a landscape as being made up of ‘keenly thrusting, delicately yielding lines, meeting as purposefully as if they had all been alive and executing *some* great, intricate dance.’ Elsewhere, she depicted her experience of empathy as an indescribable ‘kind of rapture’... Lee's empathy is nothing less than an orgasmic submersion into a flowing, throbbing rapture” (253).

In keeping with the widespread resistance to “metaphysical” approaches to art that I discuss in Chapter 3, Lee and her colleagues wished to counter any transcendent understanding of the self by demonstrating how aesthetic experience reveals the material nature of identity. It is on this ground that Lee criticizes Lipps: “But to speak of *projecting ourselves into external phenomena* is, first of all, to postulate the entity, the unity of an *ego*; it is moreover to formulate a psychological fact (the projection of ourselves) which does not agree with the data of introspection. One has a right to ask, to begin with, in what way the *ego*, granting its literal existence, could divest itself of the subjective, inner character which belongs to it, and clothe itself in the objective, external character of the *non-ego* into which it is supposed to have entered” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 56–57). This is the most obvious question one could possibly pose to a theorist of aesthetic empathy: what on earth does it mean to become one with an external thing? How, in literal terms, do we extend “ourselves” into something else? The stakes of these questions, as Lee suggests, have to do with whether it is possible for *Einfühlung* be a meaningful concept without telling a mythological stories about ghostly projections of the self into physical things.

At a purely historical level, one could say that Lee resolves this question by eventually dismissing the reality—or at least the generalizability—of Anstruther-Thomson’s remarkable experience of the vase or of the Titian painting. Already in “Beauty and Ugliness” (1896), the first essay Lee published on the topic, Lee conveys an awareness that Anstruther-Thomson’s experience might seem to be limited to the unique sensibility of a single person, and might not be a generalizable phenomenon: “we desire to remind the reader that we are fully prepared to find that our observations have been extremely rudimentary, imperfect, and partial. Moreover, that personal idiosyncrasies may have passed in our eyes as universally obtaining processes” (236). Indeed, Lipps was willing to imagine that the kind of intense aesthetic experience that Anstruther-Thomson experienced was, if not a psychological condition, at least characteristic of only a few individuals, to whom he referred as *Motoriker*, or “motor-types.” But for several years Lee argued against this idea that the literal miming Anstruther-Thomson describes was limited to a select few, and appealed to the notion of a basic human instinct of mimicry: shortly after the publication of “Beauty and Ugliness” she justifies her assertion that aesthetic response is based upon the embodied imitation of forms by asserting that “we all of us reproduce through our gesture, not merely the gestures of other creatures, but the forms, the lines of directions, the pressures and uplifting of inanimate objects” (*Beauty and Ugliness* 237).

Ultimately, however, Lee abandoned the idea that Anstruther-Thomson experienced a particularly intense version of what happens to all of us when we view an artwork. She appends to *Beauty and Ugliness*, a 1912 anthology of her writings on psychological aesthetics, a surprising disclaimer that seems to call into question the validity of the 350 pages that precede it: “at the time of collaborating in “Beauty and Ugliness” I had no standard of what constitutes psychological experimentation, neither did I discriminate sufficiently between fact and inference.... [A]lthough modesty made me throw in a saving clause about “Individual Idiosyncrasy,” the astounding application of the plural pronoun to experiments which only one of my two collaborators had attempted answered to my firm conviction that what was true of my collaborator must hold good of every other human being.... In short, the plural pronoun employed by me in *Beauty and Ugliness* meant not *we two collaborators*, but *we, all mankind*.... I really thought that everybody was ‘we’” (352–353). As Lee later theorized empathy, it did not involve the dramatic changes in respiration, balance, and posture that, for Anstruther-Thomson,

constitute the value of art; rather it involved much more abstract notions of movement (though truly felt) that likely called into play miniscule muscle adjustments of which we are barely conscious, or that might simply be mental “motor images.” One answer to the question, then, of how to explain the ego-projections that underlie the theory of *Einfühlung* is that “projection” is merely a term of art, which represents a set of minor bodily modifications. What we feel is not a literal mimicry of the object that we look at, but rather mental associations between certain shapes and certain respiratory or equilibratory feelings.

And yet, even after this transition to a less literal notion of aesthetic empathy, Lee’s theory of aesthetic response continues to imagine a complex way in which the subjectivity of the viewer is affected by the aesthetic object, and so continues to grapple with the questions that she poses to Lipps about how the viewer might “project” herself into an object. Lee’s writing on aesthetics elaborates on some of the difficulties of language experienced by Anstruther-Thomson as she described her own aesthetic experience. The difficulty of using familiar language to describe the nature of *Einfühlung* is evidenced by the awkwardness with which Anstruther-Thomson imagines the viewer of the vases. What does it mean for example, for parts of our bodies to “tell us” something about our reactions to works of art, as is implied when Anstruther-Thomson writes that “Other parts of our body will insist on telling us about the vase, too. In fact, they insist on helping our eye” (“What Patterns Can Do to Us” 140)? What is the nature of the split within the subject such that individual body parts are substantially separate from, and therefore able to speak to and “insist” upon “helping” the “I”? As Anstruther-Thomson narrates her own experience of the work of art, it is evident that her language implies a complex set of intrasubjective relationships that her enthusiastically didactic prose is not fully able to theorize. Lee does not so much deny the reality of her collaborator’s experience, but attempts to develop a vocabulary that is able to speak about the self in terms that do not assume for it a sort of metaphysical unity—in terms, that is, that allow for the sort of lack of autonomy that becomes evident as soon as one is in the presence of a work of art that seems to dominate and even to usurp some of the agency that ordinary language would tend to allot only to the viewer.

Lee’s reference to the “we” in her disclaimer at the end of *Beauty and Ugliness* is an important clue about how this language might function: Lee is evidently quite conscious of the effects that the language of aesthetic theory has upon the theory itself, as she ponders the meaning of the “we” that she uses throughout the essay that she and Anstruther-Thomson co-wrote: “the personal pronoun employed by me . . . meant not *we two collaborators*, but *we, all mankind*” (352). What Lee’s theory of *Einfühlung* tries to ascertain is not just what happens to the unity of the individual in the moment of aesthetic experience, but also how and whether that event can be generalized to others, and whether it implies a unity of a community of aesthetically sensitive individuals, or even of all humans. I would suggest that Lee’s sensitivity to these questions—which is far greater than that of, for example, Grant Allen or Herbert Spencer, who see their evolutionary-based aesthetics as axiomatically universally applicable—is enabled by her literary sensitivity to language itself, and especially to her nuanced awareness of the importance and complexity of pronouns. Although aesthetic empathy operates precisely by bracketing the meaningful dimension of art, it is Lee’s ability to attend to the linguistic basis of our discussion of aesthetics that enables her to formulate a complex theory of the kind of self that we inhabit in the moment of aesthetic empathy.

### Vernon Lee's "We"

Throughout her career, Lee's interest in aesthetics is closely intertwined with questions about the importance of the language that we use when speaking about the self. Lee begins her collection *Belcaro: Sundry Essays on Aesthetical Questions* (1881) by suggesting that the emphasis on individual personality when describing art is the only way to resist the crushing tendencies of philosophical metaphysics, which tends to replace actual artworks with abstractions about beauty: "instead of discovering new things in art, I discovered every day the absence in it of some of the strange properties with which I had learned to invest it; I perceived more and more distinctly that half of the ideas of aestheticians had merely served to hide the real nature of the art about which they wrote" (11). To counteract this tendency, Lee strives in her essays to speak from the most particularized point of view possible: "I have done as best I could, merely to satisfy my own strong feeling that art questions should always be discussed in the presence of some definite work of art, if art and its productions are not to become mere abstractions, logical counters wherewith to reckon" (8). Much like Pater, who commented favorably on *Belcaro*, Lee aims to describe "an art-philosophy entirely unabstract, unsystematic, essentially personal, because evolved unconsciously, under the pressure of personal circumstances, and to serve the requirements of personal tendencies" (9).<sup>168</sup> The idiosyncratic nature of Lee's criticism is not mere caprice; it is conscious resistance to metaphysical systems with which she is familiar. As Pater noted in a letter, Lee has "extensive knowledge" (26 March 1882) of philosophical aesthetics and is able to refer dexterously to Plato, Lessing, Hegel, and Ruskin. Indeed, it would seem that Lee's resistance to the metaphysical aspect of aesthetic theory is much better informed than that of the psychologists I discuss in the previous chapter. Trained in philosophical aesthetics, Lee's rejection of the idealist strain is based upon actual knowledge of the tradition rather than (as for Grant Allen or James Sully) an ideological opposition to any sort of thinking that is too metaphysically "German."

As a result of Lee's turn to "the personal" as the basis for her aesthetic theory, *Belcaro* is simultaneously an implicit theory of self-representation and an explicit theory of art. This is in keeping with the hybridity of Lee's forms, which has been widely commented upon, but I would like to focus on a more specific, related question: how does this experimentation with literary form allow Lee to develop ways of linguistically representing hybrid subjectivities? Each of her essays is as much the construction of the persona of the sensitive aesthete as an objective commentary about specific works of art.<sup>169</sup> She comments directly on this strategy: "I have

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<sup>168</sup> It is interesting to compare Lee's relationship with Pater to that of another of his followers, Arthur Symons; in a way the two writers suggest two possible directions of Paterian thought. As Arthur Symons writes in the "Conclusion" to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, (based upon Pater's more famous "Conclusion") life is interesting precisely *because* the mysteries of "religion, passion, and art" (328) are inexplicable, and pleasure consists of learning to dwell with that uncertainty. It is hard to imagine a kind of art criticism more opposed to symbolism than Lee's attempt to explain these mysteries as psychological events.

<sup>169</sup> Lee's *Baldwin* is perhaps the most remarkable example of the construction of a "borderline" personality that voices the words of her essays: "There is, in a hitherto unspecified part of this world, a borderland between fact and fancy; and in this borderland my friend has a very actual habitation. . . . To any over-inquisitive person I would make this answer: Tell me precisely how much of yourself is real or imaginary; and you shall have the corresponding information respecting my friend Baldwin" (4). As this passage suggests, Lee is quite playful with Baldwin's personality, and even, at one point uses the now-popular term "hybrid" in conjunction with the fictional (?) persona: "'I can't make out our friend Baldwin,' said Mrs. Blake; 'he is too strangely compounded of a scientific thinker, a moralist, and an aesthete. . . . now he suddenly tells us that, compared with art, literature is an ugly hybrid'" (205).

always, in putting together these notes, had a vision of pictures or statues or places... I have always thought, in arranging these discussions, of the real individuals with whom I should most willingly have them: I have always felt that some one else was by my side to whom I was showing, explaining, answering; hence the use of the second person plural, of which I have vainly tried to be rid: it is not the oracular *we* of the printed book, it is the *we* of myself and those with whom, for whom, I am speaking; it is the constantly felt dualism of myself and my companion" (8). The narrative "we" introduces a complication into Lee's assertion that aesthetics are personal, subjective and individualized: if art philosophy ought to be "essentially personal" (8), then what is the role of the second person, the "someone else" who Lee must imagine in order to successfully write her aesthetics? Lee suggests that beyond the narrative convention of "we," her "I" is also a sort of "we" that groups together disparate aesthetic viewpoints: "When, two summers since, I wrote the last pages of my first book, it was, in a way, as if I had been working out the plans of another dead individual. The myself who had, almost as a child, been insanely bewitched by the composers and singers... had already ceased to exist. Another myself had come instead, to whom this long accumulated 18<sup>th</sup> century lore had been bequeathed, but who would never have taken the pains, or had the patience to collect it... This new myself, this heir to the task of putting into shape the historical materials collected by an extinct individuality, is the myself by whom has been written the present book" (5). This is, to say the least, an extreme way of figuring an intellectual development: it is not gradual progression from one point of view to another, but the "death" of the self who espoused the previous view. It is not uncoincidental that the death Lee figures is that of a historically minded self, more interested in offering a full picture of the eighteenth century than in communicating the particulars of aesthetic experience: in order to render her present work fully ahistorical, Lee has to kill figurally her own history. In writing her book, then, Lee speaks simultaneously from the position of multiple individuals combined into one (the "we" of herself and her imagined reader) as well as from the position of a single individual who has decisively broken with her own history as well as with historicity itself.<sup>170</sup>

The idea that a past self is so foreign to us that it cannot be meaningfully included in one's sense of self at all is an idea that Lee returns to repeatedly in her essays. It is a concept that allows Lee to interrogate assumptions about the continuity of personality and to argue for a degree of contingency in our sense of self. In "The Child in the Vatican," modeled upon Pater's genre of the "imaginary portrait," Lee describes a child who grows up in the Vatican museums, surrounded by statues that afford him an aesthetic education such that he is later able to spontaneously and fully understand other forms of art. Where Pater sees "mind stuff," Lee sees "soul mass," describing the formation of self in terms whose materialist aesthetic strongly resembles that of Pater: "Out of pictures, out of the coarse blurs of colour in picture-books, out of the black, huddled, infinitely suggestive engravings in bible and book of travel... out of all of this, confused with haunting impressions... do we get our original, never really alterable ideas

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<sup>170</sup> Christa Zorn suggests that the complicated personal pronouns that characterize Lee's prose are merely a result of her male pseudonym: "Lee's theoretical texts deliver their messages in an interesting overlay of individual and general voice using the common 'we' or 'one,' by which she could pass as a male writer" (76). Indeed, most interpretations of the relation between Lee's authorial voice and subjectivity connect its hybridity to questions about gender: Patricia Pulham argues that Lee's representation of the castrato voice in several of her works is "simultaneously an alternative subjectivity and a maternal substitute... in which Lee 'plays' and explores hybrid identities that complicate her 'unsexed' artistic persona" (*Art and the Transitional Object* xx).

and feelings about art; for much as we may clip, trim, and bedizen our minds with borrowed things, we can never change, never even recast its solid material: a compact, and seemingly homogenous soul mass, made up of tightly-pressed, crushed odds and ends of impression, broken, confused, pounded bits of the sights and sounds and emotions of our childhood” (22). Lee’s metaphor is remarkable: the mind is not so much a hallowed repository of impressions as a tightly-compressed trash heap of broken experiences.

But in contrast to Pater’s “The Child in the House,” Lee describes an almost insurmountable difficulty in recovering past experience, as a result of the radical break between past and present that structures identity: “The recollection of ourselves when we were so different from ourselves, this tradition handed down from a dim, far-off creature of whom we know, without feeling it, that he, was our *ego*, this mysterious tradition remains to us only in fragments, has been printed into our memory only by desultory patches....we know as distinctly as the sensation and impressions of this very morning this or that sensation or impression of so many, many years ago; and we ask ourselves at the same time—‘how did such another thing affect our mind?’—with the utter hopelessness of answer with which we should try to look into the soul of a dog or cat” (19). This passage is a direct rebuke of Pater’s theory of aesthetic education. Rather than a process of “brain-building” in which sensations and experiences accumulate to form individuality, Lee describes “patches” and “fragments” that lack the sort of organized structural relationships that “building” implies. These figures speak to Lee’s larger point, which is that we are not the perfect sum of our past experiences, but, quite the opposite, we are generally unable either to connect with our past or to understand how experience has made us who we are. Lee agrees with Pater that material impressions and sensations crucially shape our personality, and she even frames aesthetic experience in these terms, as she describes the child’s formation of a sense of self as the product of his response to aesthetic forms. But Lee expresses extreme skepticism that we can ever transparently know how this operation takes place. Our earlier selves are radically foreign: not just in the sense that we can never know what it is like to be someone else, but in the even more extreme sense that we cannot know what it is like to be another species. When we try to discover how a given experience has shaped our identity, we encounter a project as hopeless as trying read a dog’s mind.

But perhaps the most interesting difference between Pater’s and Lee’s imaginary portraits is at the level of form. As I discuss in Chapter 1, one of the critical issues that is raised by “The Child in the House” has to do with the difficulty of distinguishing between Pater, the narrator of the story, and the child, Florian. Lee’s portrait is not so much a thinly-veiled autobiographical sketch as a lecture on aesthetics that is loosely framed by an allegory. The story of the imaginary child serves Lee’s larger argument in the piece, which is that the perfection of aesthetic form often demands that an artist discard historical fidelity to his subject. So, the child’s formal education prepares him to fully appreciate art, even without any awareness of the historical or literary contexts of the statues he appreciates. In making these claims, Lee transitions fluidly between narration of her own experience (she opens the essay by recalling a crowd of children she had seen in the museum that morning), the fictional narrative of the child, the abstract voice of philosophical reasoning, and an inclusive “we” that invites her reader to identify with all three (Lee, the child, and the philosophical claims). Where Pater’s story blurs the distinction between author and character, Lee’s essay aims to blur the distinction between the reader, author,



character, and concept.<sup>171</sup> The imaginary experiences of the child become generalized as a universal experience that explains the aesthetic sensitivity of both Lee and her readers. Ultimately, we are supposed to appreciate art exactly as does the child Lee describes. Referring to a model of the Niobe group in the Uffizi gallery, Lee enjoins her reader to “come and stand at a little distance from the table on which the wooden gable and statues are set” and to contemplate the figures. Calling attention to their form, Lee reflects that “there comes home to us, filling, expanding our mind, an almost ineffable sense of perfection of line and curve, and light and shade, perfection as of the sweeping wave of some great mountain, distant and deep blue against the pale sky; perfection as of the pearl edge of the tiny pink cyclamen...: perfection of visible form” (34). The formalism of the child thus becomes the formalism of both Lee and her audience. At the same time that Lee’s narrative suggests a radical impossibility of connecting past and present selves, her narrative style blends the identities of author, character and reader. In contrast to Pater, Lee’s narrative gesture is to generalize the experience of the aesthetically sensitive child rather than to present it as the unique personal history of an aesthete.

What this suggests is that Lee’s interest in the possibility of developing a psychology of aesthetic experience stems from a source that is similar to—if not identical with—Pater’s interest in how the self is constituted by affective experience of the material world. Psychology, for Lee, provides a conceptual framework that is able to account for the “brain-building” that Pater speculates about in his own essays. But Lee also develops in a different direction the possibility that Pater proposes. Where Pater is interested primarily in individuals who are unique in their aesthetic sensitivity—Marius, Florian, Gaston—Lee focuses on the collaborative nature of aesthetic experience, and on the possibility of speaking as two (or more) rather than as one. Indeed, Lee’s understanding of the self means that we are *always* speaking as a multiplicity of selves rather than as one unified individual—“I” really means “we.” Both in her early essays on aesthetics and her later essays on psychology, aesthetic experience can only be imagined in relational terms, whether that is a relation between a past and present self, between self and imaginary other, or between two lovers; as Emily Harrington argues, Lee’s is “an aestheticism based not on individual experience but on response and exchange” (81). In her writing, Lee often wonders about the way in which “we” is able to merge the individuals who constitute it. If “the personal” counteracts the abstractions that form the basis of metaphysical thinking about art, the “we,” within Lee’s prose, counteracts the possibility that “the personal” can become apotheosized into an abstract category. “We,” for Lee, calls into question the distinctiveness that a singular pronoun can imply.<sup>172</sup> As she notes in the biographical essay that introduces *Art and Man*, “[s]uch quotations are never, in the literal sense, personal: Kit’s name is oftenest hidden, taken for granted, in a mere ‘we.’ Indeed, even that ‘we’ may sometimes be lacking, and the only explicit reference between this or that work of art. But to those who knew Kit at that time, and especially to myself, these impersonal notes of places and objects evoke HER; and they surround

<sup>171</sup> This is not to say that there is a clear distinction between Lee and the child in the Vatican. Patricia Pulham argues, “[t]hat this child is Lee herself, there is little doubt” (“Art and the Transitional Object” 2); likewise, Peter Gunn claims that in the story Lee is “drawing on the memories of her own Roman childhood” (80).

<sup>172</sup> Richard Dellamora has noticed that Lee’s use of the second person pronoun serves a similar rhetorical function with regard to her relation to other aesthetes: “When Lee says that ‘we need only search our own souls for the queer comradeship of outlawed thought,’ she invites her readers to imagine a similar capability or soul within themselves. But the sentence also works in other ways...[U]nderstood performatively, the sentence works prophetically, calling in its very utterance a new ‘we’ into existence, who...[we] are forced to recognize ourselves as sharing another mode of thought, another mode of culture” (543).

her, once more, however imperfectly, with the prestige of the genius and beauty and of the unfading youth which were hers” (41). Thus, even places and material objects contain some of the personality of the individuals with which they are associated, suggesting that once one “feels oneself into” something, some part of oneself remains there. Diana Maltz has argued that this collaborative aspect of aesthetic experience is fully explainable in terms of the erotic relationship between Lee and Anstruther-Thomson: Maltz argues that “To tell the story of psychological aesthetics is to tell a love story” (212), because Lee’s espousal of psychological aesthetics was “bent on enabling others to revere Anstruther-Thomson’s sentient body as she did” (213). It seems to me, however, that this is somewhat of a reduction of the philosophical complexity of the questions with which Lee is engaged—one that leads Maltz to describe as “decadent high comedy” (213) the gallery experiments which were part of an expressly non-decadent scientific project of empirically studying aesthetics, from Würzburg laboratories where subjects offered introspective data about their experience of art to Gustav Fechner’s surveys about how people responded to differently-proportioned squares. Lee’s interest in what happens to the self in a moment of aesthetic empathy extends well beyond her relation with Anstruther-Thomson in both her personal intellectual trajectory and the international intellectual context of psychology.

### Empathy as Catachresis

I have discussed the extent to which aesthetic empathy is a theory of architectural, sculptural, and visual relationships with an artwork, and have suggested that this complicates any easy application of empathy to the practice of reading. I have also argued that to theorize aesthetic empathy demands an understanding of the self as a non-autonomous entity that blends both with other individuals and with the object that a subject contemplates. I will now argue for a different way of understanding the relationship between the empathic self and literary form, which stems from my analysis of narrative voice in Lee’s early writing on aesthetics. My claim is twofold. First: Lee’s reflections on aesthetic subjectivity, which coincide with an interest in how to speak coherently about a historically and experientially fragmented self, allow her to develop a nuanced language for articulating the process of aesthetic empathy. Second: aesthetic empathy is a relation to metaphor rather than to narrative; for Lee, what we empathize with is not the experience of a character but rather with the formal aspects of literary language.

Lee’s thinking about psychological aesthetics has not often been taken seriously because she is perceived as a literary figure who dabbled in psychology. This is ironic, since it is precisely her literary training that allows her to contribute meaningfully to the theory of *Einfühlung*. Lee writes in *Beauty and Ugliness*, “*Einfühlung*...is at the bottom of numberless words and expressions whose daily use has made us overlook this special peculiarity. We say, for instance, that hills *roll* and mountains *rise*, although we know as a geological fact that what they really do is to suffer denudation above and thickening below. Also that arches spring, cupolas soar, belfries point, although the material buildings merely obey the laws of gravitation. Nay, we attribute movement to motionless lines and surfaces; they *move*, *spread out*, *flow*, *bend*, *twist*, etc. They do, to quote M. Souriau’s ingenious formula, what we should feel ourselves doing if we were inside them. For we *are* inside them; we have felt ourselves, projected our own experience into them” (19). (Notably, Lee seems in this passage to be unconscious of the way she feels herself into the hills, by saying that mountains “suffer” denudation: even her instance of the literal scientific fact betrays an attribution to nature of human feeling.) In the passage, Lee suggests that *Einfühlung* has the structure of metaphor, presenting the “as if” as the actual. The

comparison of the self to a line (“if we were inside them”) becomes, in the next sentence, the identity of the self with the line (“we *are* inside them”). Where the German psychologists whose work she studies had mostly based their understanding of *Einfühlung* on either laboratory experiments, the study of optical illusions, or physiology, Lee bases her theory on language. It is daily “words and expressions” that give us insight into the way that *Einfühlung* operates, because those words and expressions, through their metaphorical dimension, illuminate unconscious physiological processes. This presupposition lays the groundwork for Lee to call upon the logic of tropes as a technical tool in theorizing the psychological concept of empathy. The projection of oneself into an object is simultaneously real and unreal, in precisely the same way that catachresis is simultaneously figural and literal.

One of the most overlooked aspects of Lee’s psychological theory the extent to which it relies upon rhetorical analysis. The essays in *Beauty and Ugliness* at first appear to be astonishingly dry compared with Lee’s previous books of essays, which are Paterian in both subject-matter and style. *Beauty and Ugliness*, on the other hand adopts a tone meant to convey Lee’s seriousness as a writer about psychology; her terminology is densely hyphenated (“formal-imaginative-dynamic principle of selection” (361), “mimetic-organic sensations” (354)), and the book’s structure is extremely repetitive, returning in essay after essay to the same examples and formulations. The book was criticized for its unreadability upon publication; *The Academy* wrote that “[i]t is not, perhaps, easy to express oneself in simple phraseology when dealing with such a subject, but Vernon Lee appears to us to court at times a quite unnecessary obscurity” (209). Lee herself sees the book more as a collection of data than as a coherent series of essays, probably to emphasize the difference between this project and her earlier stories and essays. But this does not mean that the work is non-literary. Lee pauses frequently to reflect on her own language: one of her preferred rhetorical devices is to respond to the imagined objection of a reader who asserts that Lee is describing a merely metaphorical way of thinking about architecture, paintings, or statues. Discussing Lipps’s Doric column, Lee writes, “The reader may object, all that is simply the description of the play of mechanical forces taking place in the Doric order.... But where does this play of forces really take place?... [T]he stone can neither *spread out*, nor *pull itself together vigorously*, nor *resist an activity*. Stone knows neither *thrust* nor *resistance*. In using these expressions we are yielding to the habit of applying the modes of our own existence in explanation of the outer world. Let us note, in passing, this tendency of our mind, for it serves as a clue to the often obscure windings of this question of *Einfühlung*” (49). For Lee, the tendency to use metaphorical language in this sense is neither arbitrary nor simply “false”; it is symptomatic of the psychological reality of *Einfühlung*.

Indeed, whenever Lee speaks about *Einfühlung*, she asks us to pay attention to the way we speak. In *The Beautiful*, Lee writes

Of course we all know that, objects the Reader, and of course nobody imagines that the rock and the earth of the mountain is rising, or that the mountain is getting up or growing taller! All we mean is that the mountain *looks* as if it were rising.

The mountain *looks*! Surely here is a case of putting the cart before the horse. No; we cannot explain the mountain *rising* by the mountain *looking*, for the only *looking* in the business is *our* looking *at* the mountain. And if the reader objects again that these are all *figures of speech*, I shall answer that *Empathy* is what explains why we employ figures of speech at all, and occasionally employ them, as in the case of this rising mountain, when

we know perfectly well that the figure we have chosen expresses the exact reverse of the objective truth. (61–62).

For Lee, at the same time that figural language provides the primary material from which it is possible to theorize empathy, empathy itself is a psychological phenomenon that stands at the origin of our capacity for figuration. It is precisely because we do not find figurative language such as “the mountain looks” to be strange that we know that empathic relations to physical objects are real. The relation between empathy and language thus comes full circle. At first, empathy appears to be entirely anti-linguistic: literature is the one branch of the arts that empathy, as an opticospatial relation, is entirely unqualified to address. In a poem, after all, there is no visual form for our body to mimic. Yet, as Lee here illustrates, the literary dimension of language—its metaphoricity—is produced by the original spatial relations to objects that can be articulated only through metaphors. To be even more precise, one should say that *Einfühlung* produces the logic of catachresis, since the figurative expression that the mountain “rises” has no literal equivalent, and for Lee this apparently metaphorical description is in fact the reality. As Lee points out, although it seems outlandish to apply such a dynamic metaphor to such an immobile object, there is no other way to describe accurately our aesthetic perception of the mountain.

This insight into the relation between spatial empathy and language is not one that Lee directly articulates anywhere in her writing; the closest she comes is in a moment when she is considering the different ways in which she and her colleagues have arrived at their theories. Groos, Lipps, and William James have all used observation, examination of aesthetic forms, or a personal feeling of “bodily resonance” (in the case of Groos). Lee, however, notes that to her “all three theories... were suggested, so far as *Einfühlung* went, by my own introspection and my observation of the vocabulary of movement universally applied to motionless visible shapes” (96–97). But Lee does not directly theorize the relation between metaphor and spatial empathy. Rather, it is implied through the way in which she makes her argument, and becomes especially apparent when she is attempting to describe the technicalities of empathy to an audience that is not already well-versed in the technical language of the psychologists who are her colleagues.

Lee’s understanding of the relation between the figural and the literal allows her to unravel some of the complications that had entangled other psychologists’ attempts to speak about the “projection” of the self in the moment of aesthetic empathy. Lee identifies Lipps’s unsophisticated use of metaphor as part of the problem that leads him to attribute to the self a metaphysical unity. Lee quotes Lipps, then offers her criticism:

‘The *ego* which remains in this aesthetic contemplation is a super-individual *ego*, in the same sense that the scientific and ethical *egos* are super-individual. The *ego* lives in the thing contemplated (*es lebt in der betrachteten Sache*.)’ Would it not be more in keeping with facts to say that the contemplated object lives in the mind which contemplates it? And does it not seem that one catches a glimpse in Professor Lipps’s thought of the vague entity of a homogeneous *ego*, separate, and almost material, leaving the realm of reality (imagined in some way as dimensional space) to take up its abode in ‘the work of art,’ to participate in its life and to detach itself from its own, after the fashion of the Lenten retreat of a Catholic escaping from the world and purifying himself in the life of a convent? This metaphor might be applied, but it would not make us forget that the *ego* is not an entity apart...but is a group of subjective phenomena, or rather a special kind of feeling intermittently present in consciousness. Moreover this metaphor would make us

forget also that ‘work of art’ is the name given sometimes to an object existing outside ourselves, and sometimes to the image of it which we make for ourselves” (59).

In her argument, Lee points out that in the moment that Lipps’s scientific prose reaches for metaphor in order to make its point (the ego “lives” in the artwork), Lipps begins to attribute homogeneity to the self, and to presume a distinction between one’s material body and spiritual being. Lee highlights the problem with Lipps’s metaphor by extending it: does the ego “live” in the artwork as does a monk in a cell? Just as metaphor provides clues about how *Einfühlung* operates, it can also surreptitiously import assumptions that run counter to the psychological framework within which the concept of *Einfühlung* is elaborated. Lee’s argument is that in order to understand the nature of the self that experiences aesthetic empathy, we have to attend to the extent to which even words such as “ego” or “work of art” function rhetorically, often in ways that present a false sense of unity or autonomy. These words demand careful analysis since their referents are not stable: the artwork, for example, is as much a phenomenon that takes place in the viewer as it is an object that exists in the world.

Passages such as this illustrate the extent to which Lee’s literary background enables rather than hinders a rigorous engagement with psychology. Many of Lee’s discussions of *Einfühlung* take an approach that anticipates later strategies of close reading. In a *Quarterly Review* article on recent books on aesthetics, for example, Lee writes: “[t]he first problem of aesthetics involves a definition of the adjective from which this study takes its name.... [I]t is important to decide whether the word [‘aesthetic’] ... should be considered as the adjective referring to art or the adjective referring to beauty; the alternation between the two meanings having, with most writers, contribute not a little to confuse these already rather intricate meanings” (422). In the two pages that follow, Lee discusses at length different interpretations of this single word. This counters the common view that Lee is merely dabbling in science or trying to prove herself to be a real psychologist.<sup>173</sup> Rather, Lee is able to use her sensitivity to language, which few fellow psychologists shared, in order to think more deeply about the phenomenon of *Einfühlung* (compare, for example, Grant Allen’s discussion of poetry in *The Colour-Sense*,

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<sup>173</sup> Jo Briggs writes a persuasive refutation of this tendency in “Plural Anomalies: Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee”: “Lee’s gender seems to have made it easier to talk about her sexual inclinations rather than her scholarship. Focusing on Lee’s sexuality, these readings often fail to evaluate the real intellectual achievement of her work.... This theoretical framework has led many critics to look for emotional or psychological reasons for what seem to be the peculiarities and contradictions in Lee’s writings at the expense of the intellectual content” (164). Towheed has also recently begun to argue that Lee’s views on science ought to be taken seriously: “Scientifically, she was one of the best informed non-scientists of her generation; the astonishing depth, breadth, and intellectual rigor of Vernon Lee’s reading in the social and natural sciences in four European languages is aptly demonstrated by her own private collection of books, all heavily annotated” (“Creative Evolution” 42). The lengths to which critics have gone in order to make Lee’s gender the content of her scientific writing are exemplified by Hillary Fraser’s argument that, essentially, because Ruskin feminizes the pathetic fallacy all forms of aesthetic empathy must have something to do with gender: “It seems to me that one way of reading this work as gendered is to view her articulation of the empathic imagination as a recuperation of Ruskin’s highly gendered account of the ‘pathetic fallacy.’ ... By contrast, Lee’s valorization of empathy may be conceived as a feminized imaginative strategy, designed to legitimate the specificity of the woman’s gaze” (94). The question that this claim of course raises is whether the work of Vischer, Lipps, Groos (and any number of other psychological aestheticians) was, by valorizing empathy, likewise “legitimizing” the woman’s gaze. It seems to me that the only evidence that Lee is doing so (as opposed to these other theorists) is the fact that she is a woman—a rather circular argument, and one that is complicated by the fact that she wrote under a male pseudonym partly in order to be taken seriously as a psychological theorist.

which counts the recurrence of color-terms in order to make assertions about the evolutionary development of humans: for Allen, language is only quantifiable data, not a bearer of meaning). It is this sensitivity that, in this passage, allows her to see the slippage between Lipps's metaphorical and literal references to the self, and which allows Lee to clearly distinguish the way that we talk about ourselves, and what we actually are.

But even to distinguish between the "literary" and "psychological" aspects of Lee's writing obscures the extent to which her literary writing depends on her psychological research and vice versa. Lee's writing on psychology is based primarily on personal narratives. In *The Beautiful*, she explains psychological aesthetics through an allegory of "[t]hree imaginary wayfarers" who take the attitudes of a pragmatist, a scientist, and an aesthete; her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* is framed by a story about her intellectual trajectory; her theories in *Beauty and Ugliness* come from Anstruther-Thomson's gallery diaries and surveys in which respondents describe their experience of artworks. The centrality of personal narratives (rather than, for example, abstract ideas or numerical data) to Lee's aesthetic theory makes it as difficult to generically categorize as her essays for non-specialist audiences. As Shafquat Towheed has argued, Lee's prose writing is characterized by its uneasy blending of didactic nonfiction and thin fictional frameworks, a phenomenon that he traces to the necessity of writing for a marketplace that demanded novels when what Lee actually wanted to write was criticism.<sup>174</sup>

Lee's treatment of these narratives suggests a way in which aesthetic empathy can function as an interpretive device that is both critical and reflective. Just as her essays articulate a sense of the impossibility of simply tracing a narrative about how one's past experiences shape one's present self (we have only a patchwork of experiences; our past identities are as foreign to us as are other individuals), her psychological aesthetics uses narrative in order to interrogate critically the experience of "feeling oneself" into an artwork. This suggests that just as *Einfühlung* encourages an awareness of the formal aspects of language, it also demands a critical engagement (rather than simple experience) with the idea that aesthetic experience may sometimes blend of self and other. Lee's own gallery diaries illustrate the importance of critical thought in the moment of aesthetic empathy as she explores difficulty of distinguishing between looking at the work of art and "looking" inward at herself: "After the first day I found that I was examining not only the work of art, but the consciousness in which this work of art was reconstituted" (254). Indeed, Lee's gallery diaries are as much about exploring how to articulate her own consciousness as about how to describe artworks; as Lee writes, "[t]his inquiry implied a study of what took place in myself in the presence of various statues, what associations of ideas, what feelings were awakened, and how I reacted psychologically both towards the visual form of the statue and towards the thing which the statue represented or the emotion it expressed" (253). For Lee, aesthetic empathy is not unreflective self-projection, but rather a way of increasing an awareness of one's psychological processes in the work of art. It does not lead to an ecstatic loss of self, but rather to a heightened sense of the complexity of the boundary between self and world.

If we see this sort of introspection as an extension of the kind of quasi-fictional writing Lee uses when introducing her essays and reflecting on her aesthetic experience, it becomes even

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<sup>174</sup> Towheed writes, "Vernon Lee's increasing awareness, even at the very start of her literary career, of the potential dichotomy between what she wanted to write and what most readers might want to read created in her work an inherent, generic hybridity and an implicit refusal, often entirely self-conscious...to accept the predetermined boundaries of literary genre" ("Determining 'Fluctuating Opinions' 213–214).

clearer that her version of aesthetic empathy is a form of self-analysis. Just as Lee uses fictional characters in her essays to express her points of view and construct an authorial voice consisting of many personalities, her analysis of narratives of aesthetic experience examines the variety of selves that come into play in a moment of aesthetic experience. It demands a self-reflexive awareness that requires the subject to ask questions about him or herself in a way that distances present consciousness from past experience. Hence, Lee's narratives about empathy are narratives about coming to know oneself. This is especially evident in a diary entry of one of Lee's assistants, "Mlle. C": "On all this, which is almost unconscious, there follows a period when I hold a sort of conversation with myself, when I reproduced in myself a psychological state parallel to that which the contemplated image tries to represent. I have even caught myself several times saying inwardly: 'Ah, yes,' or 'That is it'" (250). Much as Anstruther-Thomson encourages her audience to notice how different parts of their bodies insist on telling them things—thus creating a division between "them" and their "body parts"—Mademoiselle C.'s aesthetic experience produces an inner dialogue between conscious and unconscious selves.

*Einfühlung* paradoxically blends heightened self-consciousness with aspiration toward an unconscious mimicry of the work of art; at the same time that the introspective viewer focuses on her internal responses, that introspection is bound to fail, since the process of aesthetic empathy depends upon the artwork, and not the subject, being in control. Hence, Mademoiselle C notes a few sentences later, "I notice that sometimes I perceive the presence of people, but as if—so to speak—the people were not really alive, and they arouse in me no thought.... At the end of a little time I feel a certain *gêne*—a need to tear myself from a domination" (250). The empathic relation to the artwork produces a dyad of viewer and object that occludes rather than invites contemplation of one's relation to humanity. The "domination" carried out by the artwork effects a withdrawal inward, but this withdrawal is characterized by a second dyad, between conscious and unconscious self, which is so clearly present as to make possible a dialogue in which one part of the self addresses another ("Ah, yes"; "That is it"). Empathy, more often than not, seems to leave others out rather than include them: to cite a related instance, Anstruther-Thomson's capacity to empathize with visual forms is not fully shared by Lee, and ultimately leads to a division between them (Lee turning to the idea of "motor images"; Anstruther-Thomson continuing to believe that physical mimicry of visual forms is real). In this sense, empathy is an inward relation with the self rather than an outward relation with another. If this is the case, then it is difficult to turn to empathy as a basis for political communitarianism (as Christa Zorn suggests). Quite unlike sympathy, empathy privileges the relation with an object (and the inward dialogue that results) over relations with other persons. Despite its apparent mode of looking outward to the world, empathy is in fact a means of elucidating inner, subjective processes.

Thinking about *Einfühlung* in this way—as both a spatial relation to visible form and as an epistemological device for analyzing oneself—reveals that the idea has potential for interpreting Lee's hybrid forms, especially her travel writing. If we understand *Einfühlung* in its literary dimension not so much as the identification of a reader with a character, but rather as a spatial theory of metaphor, then it becomes clear that, as a theory of space, "empathy" is poised to explain the sort of relations to spaces that Lee explores in her travels.<sup>175</sup> Lee's description in

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<sup>175</sup> Indeed, the division between Lee's psychological writing and her travel writing may be less sharp than it at first seems: Lee, after all, develops her theory of *Einfühlung* in an international context, by visiting Italian and French galleries while corresponding with German psychologists, all the while writing to an English audience. *Einfühlung* is in this sense doubly a spatial relation, not just between Lee or Anstruther-Thomson and the statue that they describe,

*Genius Loci* of the way that she understands place suggests that the epistemological relation between traveler and city may be understood as a sort of aesthetic empathy. Lee writes, “To certain among us, undeniably, places, localities (I can find no reverent and tender enough expression for them in our practical personal language) become objects of intense and most intimate feeling. Quite irrespective of their inhabitants, and virtually of their written history, they can touch us like living creatures; and one can have with them friendship of the deepest and most satisfying sort” (4). Compare this to Lee’s discussion of a conversation with Anstruther-Thomson in *Art and Man*, which Lee cites as an early moment that signaled the later experiments they would make with sculptures in galleries. Lee describes one evening in which she and Kit are wandering the grounds of Kit’s family home, and remarks that what followed “has come to be symbolical to me of the essence of Kit’s teachings.... When the last red of sunset shone like enmeshed threads among the thin hill-side spinnies...she would point with her chin, as it were, and, without removing her eyes from it all, say in a hushed voice...: “Now we have become mere intruders. Now it is *They* who are in possession.’... I took for granted that the *They* thus alluded to must be some kind of elves or divinities...But with further intimacy...I came to understand that she was not speaking of anything besides the landscape; in fact, only of the landscape itself, its lines, planes and colours and the way it affected her” (13–14). Anstruther-Thomson’s attribution to the landscape of a sort of mystical subjectivity results from the dynamic that Lee saw as the source of *Einfühlung*: the capacity, that is, to be affected by the mere formal qualities of one’s surroundings in a way that effects a loss of self-possession. The idea that Lee would later turn to in *Genius Loci*, that places themselves has a sort of subjectivity, “irrespective of their inhabitants” rearticulates Anstruther-Thomson’s insight as a general principle according to which one relates to place, and implicitly relies upon the sort of non- or quasi-subjective spatial empathy that Lee understood to be the basis of aesthetic *Einfühlung*.

This suggests that the theory that underlies Lee’s travel writing—we can think of place in a spiritual sense, as a sort of other person—is less mystical than even her metaphor would have us believe, insofar as it draws upon her own understanding of psychological theory. Lee does not make this immediately clear; she claims in *Genius Loci* that her title refers to “a divinity, certainly, great or small.... But, for mercy’s sake, not a personification; not a man or woman with mural crown.... To think of a place or a country in human shape is, for all the practice of rhetoricians, not to think of it at all. No, no. The Genius Loci... [is] a spiritual reality” (5). It is tempting to read Lee’s travel writing as a return to her earlier, unscientific mode, less focused on scientific communication, and more focused on constructing beautiful, Paterian prose. In fact, however, Lee’s questioning of the way in which we can relate aesthetically to something *without* explicitly personifying it is precisely the question that her psychological aesthetics was trying to answer. Lee reflects in 1903, “I tried to disentangle the origins of art, its influence, the vicissitudes of schools....and for this I approached art with an absolutely objective attitude.... this purely scientific interest, for which most of my friends reproached me as a sort of apostasy, determined the direction of my aesthetic life” (quoted in Colby 167). If we read *Genius Loci* with reference to Lee’s theories of *Einfühlung*, it becomes clear that Lee’s idea that one can empathize with place, independent of personality, is not mystical or fanciful, but rather another instance of this “absolutely objective” or “purely scientific” attitude.

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but as an idea that is capable of bridging the geographical space between countries, and between England and the Continent. Lee’s psychological writing, her and Anstruther-Thomson’s gallery diaries therefore are already a sort of travel writing.



### Empathy as Criticism

I have argued that Vernon Lee's theory of empathy, in both its aesthetic and psychological senses, has little to do with the way that we understand the concept of empathy today. Most prominently, it is not an intersubjective relation, but rather an intrasubjective process. The nature of that process, however, is such that it calls into question the unity of the subject who experiences it either by imagining a dialogue between different parts of the self or by imagining that the viewer goes "outside" herself to enter "into" another object. The reason that it is so difficult to describe aesthetic empathy is that doing so demands a language that avoids abstractions such as "ego," "self," or "identity," since these are precisely the concepts that the experience of aesthetic empathy complicates. Lee, I have argued, is uniquely positioned among her contemporary psychologists to develop that language because to a large extent she had already done so in her earlier, more literary writing on aesthetics. Language, especially literary language, provides a basis for theorizing empathy (as understood by psychological aesthetics) because it allows us to refer meaningfully to the dynamic nature of static objects: it does not seem strange to say that mountains "rise," lines "meet," or hills "roll." Such formulations shows that spatial empathy is basic both to our relation to the world and to our use of metaphor. Finally, I have suggested that in addition to using her literary background to explain empathy, Lee uses the notion of empathy as the basis for some of her later, apparently non-psychological writing by articulating our relation to place in the terms that she learned from Anstruther-Thomson and adapted from Lipps and Groos. Despite its apparent inapplicability to literary forms, aesthetic empathy is first discovered through literary analysis and then reappropriated as a literary technique.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will evaluate the significance of Lee's theory of empathy for contemporary aesthetic and political uses of the concept. We do not usually think of empathy as a relation to a material thing (even Adorno had trouble imagining what this would mean when commenting on Benjamin's essay in 1938 (note 4 above)). Rather, we tend to describe empathic relationships to narrative or character, following upon Brecht's understanding of empathy as something quite similar to identificatory sympathy. As a result, it is hard to imagine a) that empathy is an embodied spatial relation to art or objects and even more difficult to understand b) how such a relationship could have any relevance for literary narrative or ethical existence. This is evident from the way in which Keen describes empathetic reading as focused primarily on plot and character rather than on form: "Limiting the effects of reading to those enjoyed by highly educated consumers of serious fiction shifts the emphasis to more rarified qualities of narrative such as defamiliarization. However, middlebrow readers tend to value novels offering opportunities for strong character identification. . . . They believe that novel reading opens their minds to experiences, dilemmas, time periods, places, and situations that would otherwise be closed to them. . . . Though these claims have bearing on matters of narrative technique and form, readers tend not to adopt the analytical language of academic literary criticism when they defend the novel and novel reading. Empathy shapes their recommendations and judgments about fiction" (*Empathy* ix).

But what are the literary-critical implications of forms of empathy that are not aimed at feeling what people feel, but rather are aimed at feeling what objects (would) feel? This sort of empathy is not a moment in which one person inhabits the position of another; instead it is an embodied relation to shape and form. In Keen's account, the resuscitation of empathy as a

critical concept turns on the notion that there might be some social value (or not) in simple kinds of reading in which we imagine ourselves having the experiences of a fictional character. Hence, modernism is largely a reaction against an aesthetics of empathy, since empathy seems to represent the precise form of unthinking affective absorption into the work of art that formalist estrangement intends to combat (though, as Keen points out, one can also argue that the formalist techniques of Woolf and Joyce aim to recreate with unprecedented directness the workings of another mind). I would not want to say that this line of reasoning misses the point, since the later, more common, and more familiar definition of empathy is obviously what we mean when we use the term. But I do think it fails to account for the particular significance of empathy for early twentieth century intellectuals and even may be challenged by research by neuroscientists (such as Vittorio Gallese) who argue that Lipps and his cohort were correct to see empathy as a physiological response.<sup>176</sup> This is important because ironically, the kind of empathy that Lee describes and that Anstruther-Thomson feels is quite similar to the kind of aesthetic response that many modernist writers and artists would strive to cultivate in their readers and viewers. Understanding *Einfühlung* in its original sense reveals links between a modernist aesthetic of estrangement and a Victorian aesthetic of feeling. I would like to describe briefly two imaginary intellectual trajectories of the notion of aesthetic empathy that highlight the ways in which the concept speaks to the resonances rather than the breaks between late-Victorians and early modernists. Contemplating these possibilities suggests that the revival of empathy as a critical concept need not be equated with reviving a conservative Victorian sort of sympathy as a method of reading.

First, empathy demands that an intense attention to form—both the form of language and the form of aesthetic objects—be the basis for aesthetic experience, rather than a positivist conception of beauty that inheres in the object (carnations, gems, ornamented turtles). Furthermore, it imagines a kind of aesthetic experience that is both painful and difficult. Although Lee's well-known ties with Pater make it tempting to view her interest in the embodied nature of aesthetic experience as symptomatic of her decadent tendencies, the embodied aesthetic she describes strives to estrange our familiar modes of perception in order to arrive at a new experience of aesthetic objects. Lee does not describe aesthetic empathy as the careful cultivation of sensibility such that one will be capable of experiencing ever-more-nuanced varieties of aesthetic pleasure; rather, it is the attempt to appreciate form in itself in ways that demand sustained and intense concentration on the object and which often leave the viewer exhausted and weakened. Commenting on Anstruther-Thomson's account of her aesthetic experience, one review of her work notes that "it would seem... that the pleasures of the aesthetic attitude are those of arduous physical effort rather than of quiet spiritual contemplation as was thought before" (Demos 666). Furthermore, to the extent that *Einfühlung* necessarily abstracts from things to shapes, from figures to lines, it seems that as an aesthetic theory it would be much better at accounting for non-representational or formalist painting than would an aesthetic in which beauty is at least partially tied to the object itself. So, from this perspective, empathy could well have become central to modernist sculptors and painters as a way of validating the aesthetic value of their formalist projects. Instead of speaking to a *démodé*, uninformed

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<sup>176</sup> For recent research into how our bodies produce empathic feeling, see Bavelas, et al., "Motor Mimicry as Primitive Empathy" and Gallese, "Being Like Me': Self-Other Identity, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy" and "The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity."

emotional response to art, empathy could have become the basis for theorizing the nature of our response to nonrepresentational painting and sculpture.<sup>177</sup>

At a literary level, Lee's version of aesthetic empathy is more about metaphor than about plot or narrative. Becoming aware of our experience of empathy for (or rather, into) material things prepares us for understanding the metaphoricity of language itself, and demands that we attend to the ways in which what we say is often quite different from what we literally mean. For Lee, we become aware of our capacity for empathy by first attending to our metaphorical language, and, conversely, empathy provides clues about how metaphorical language reveals truths about how we relate as subjects to objects. Just as spatial empathy is about the formal qualities of objects rather than about their substantive nature, empathy within literature is about the operations of language itself rather than the transparent or literal meanings that are distilled in plot. Empathy, then, rather than representing the problematic emotional identifications between audiences and characters, might have provided a way of showing how what seem like highly artificial literary forms in fact proceed from and challenge natural mechanisms of perception.<sup>178</sup>

These two imaginary futures of the notion of *Einfühlung* begin also to suggest a possible revision of the terms of our debate of the cultural and political implications of the notion of empathy. By shifting focus from simple emotional identification and to the perceptive apparatus of the viewer, Lee's version of empathy allows for an entirely different way of thinking about its political significance. The empathic response to an artwork is one in which the subject both becomes more aware of her mode of interacting with the world and is forced to take responsibility for her aesthetic judgments. This is different from the sort of universal community that some have gesture toward empathy as producing. Christa Zorn suggests that "Vernon Lee's 'aesthetic empathy proposed a form of fin-de-siècle communitarianism. Unlike Pater and Wilde, she did not fashion her aesthetics as a cult of the artistic individual but consistently redirected her view toward the audience" (xxv). It is true that Lee's aesthetics does not produce a cult of individualism in the sense that it describes an elite of aesthetically sensitive individuals, especially in its turn away from the *Motoriker* theorized by Lipps. However, it does remain focused on individual thought processes, motor images, and embodied responses—often explicitly at the expense of an awareness of other individuals. This suggests that it is perhaps not so much "communitarianism" as democracy that is the implicit political model in Lee's writing.

One way of characterizing the relation between empathy and politics, which I suggest in the previous chapter to be broadly characteristic of psychological approaches to aesthetic theory, is to say that aesthetic empathy authorizes individual aesthetic responses in a way that dislocates aesthetic authority from a cultural elite. The idea that *Einfühlung* is the foundation of aesthetic experience suggests that one's experience of art is inherently self-authorizing. It argues that the phenomenological account of aesthetic experience, based on introspection and actually standing

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<sup>177</sup> That it did not may be due partly to the popularity of Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* among expressionists. See Gluck, "Interpreting Primitivism."

<sup>178</sup> Despite the fact that empathy fell out of favor in later twentieth-century aesthetic theory, it was a topic that was taken up by phenomenology. As Michael F. Andrews describes in "Edmund Husserl: Empathy and the Transcendental Constitution of the World," Husserl interprets empathy as an intersubjective relation in which "I am motivated to constitute every real or imagined person whom I encounter by analogical apperception" (218), a position that Heidegger criticizes as presupposing an "ontological bridge from one's own subject... to the other subject" (quoted in Andrews 217).

in front of artworks, is more authoritative than the abstract theories of scholars trained in aesthetic philosophy. This is evident in the reflections of one of Lee's collaborators, Maria Waser-Krebs. Krebs writes, "Only in a comparatively small number of cases am I able to feel any aesthetic emotion, that is to say, really to enjoy a work of art, to enter into it.... It has never happened, for instance, that I have been ...moved...by all the important works in a museum. I have no experience of an aesthetic condition corresponding to works of art in general, but only to one or a few given works" (*Beauty and Ugliness* 245). On the one hand we could read this failure to experience a generalized "aesthetic condition" as a personal failure, the manifestation of a poorly developed aesthetic sensibility: if only Krebs would read some more Ruskin, perhaps she could learn how to respond appropriately to artworks. But this apparent failure to be aesthetically sensitive also speaks to a willingness to take one's experience of an individual artwork at a particular moment as entirely discrete than as an instance of judgment that is similar to (and thus ought to accord with) everyone else's experience of the same work. If this is the case than aesthetic empathy as a mode of responding to art shifts the terms of self-criticism in the moment of aesthetic experience. One does not wonder if one "gets" an artwork, because one's experience is self-validating. It does not need to reach outward to social canons of aesthetic value.

A theory of empathy thus aims to base aesthetic theory on our everyday, lived experience of works of art, rather than on abstract principles and a priori conditions. Vernon Lee's gallery diaries consistently presume that one's personal response to an artwork is self-justifying—that it is possible to have an aesthetic response to a work of art without knowing anything at all about its historical context or the biography of its author. As Lee writes in an introduction to psychological aesthetics, the field "makes no attempt to 'form the taste' of the public... It deals not with *ought* but with *is*" (1). Although some psychologists, such as James Sully, *are* looking for "general laws of mind" ("Art and Psychology" 478), these are descriptive laws of nature rather than prescriptive laws of aesthetic value. They are derived from common denominators of aesthetic experience rather than handed down by epicurean men of taste. Practiced in a certain way, psychological aesthetics takes our experience of artworks at face value rather than imagining an idealized experience toward which we strive—and often fail to achieve. Unlike the grand essayists of the nineteenth century who strive to legitimate the aesthetic domain by claiming for it a transcendent social purpose, Lipps, Anstruther-Thomson, and Lee understand the prosaic responses of particular individuals as the ground of aesthetic value.

In other words, to "be aesthetic" is not so much to idolize beauty, as did aesthetes; it is instead to attend to one's individual perceptions of material things, which are often perceptions of one's surprising lack of autonomy from them. If this is true, then the legitimacy of art does not lie in its beauty, but rather in how it forces us to recognize our habits of perception and to question the boundary between inner self and outer world. This means that the psychological aesthete occupies a role that is quite different from that of the dandy, the epicure, or the connoisseur: instead of surrounding herself with peacock feathers and Greek vases, she investigates how everyday perception is based upon our material response to visual form. Empathy aestheticizes not by taking pleasure in beauty at the expense of morality, but rather by taking pleasure in perception at the expense of autonomy.

Of course, the danger of this way of thinking is that it may lead to complacent relativism. As Adorno points out, it is problematic, especially with regards to history, to take one's subjective response to an artwork as that artwork's reality. If all responses are equal, then how

can there be any room for the critic whose role is to see what a casual viewer does not immediately see, and, often, to reveal the ideological commitments of the artwork? Does an aesthetics of empathy erase the possibility of political criticism of art? And if so, then is the kind of empathy that Lee espouses little more than a bad formalism that focuses less on estranging its audience and more on a complacent appreciation of interesting things, separate from their cultural or political significance? Even if the theory of empathy does not indiscriminately render suffering an object of aesthetic delight, it does suspend content for the sake of form. To the extent that the human figures on Anstruther-Thomson's vases or the figures in *Sacred and Profane Love* are reduced to shapes and lines, aesthetic empathy works at the expense of any ideational meaning of the artwork. On this view, what at first appears to be "democratization" of aesthetic authority may merely be a mask for an ideology of consumerism. Counter to Kristin Mahoney's argument that "Lee's attention to the degradation and decontextualization of objects involved in consumer practices like collecting illuminates the ethical implications of the exercise of taste, and her praxis of historicized consumption works to destabilize and unsettle the integrity of the perceiving subject" (59), one could easily suggest that there has hardly ever been a *more* dehistoricizing strategy of aesthetic evaluation than that of *Einfühlung*, a theory that begins to be developed at the moment that Lee breaks radically from the historicist mode of aesthetic criticism exemplified in *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*.<sup>179</sup>

I would argue, however, that understood in a certain way, empathy can indeed be the basis for a critical mode of thought, albeit a form of criticism that does not fully address Adorno's, Brecht's, or Benjamin's concerns about the effects of empathic relations to art, theater, or the past. Despite her apparent focus on personal, direct experiences of artworks, Lee consistently aspires in her later writing to contribute to an objective science of aesthetic experience. Lee trusts science, especially psychology, to develop the apparatus of an art criticism that would be based upon basic physiological truths rather than upon the dogma of philosophical systems. As she writes in *Laurus Nobilis*, she is "persuaded . . . that the scientific progress of our day will make short work of all the spurious aestheticism and all the shortsighted utilitarianism which have cast doubts upon the intimate and vital connection between beauty and every other noble object of our living" (11).<sup>180</sup> The scientific approach to art—which for Lee is the study of empathy—will ultimately serve to unite aesthetics and ethics. The theory of empathy becomes critical first through its capacity to resist ideology by appealing to rational objectivity (a point to which, of course, the members of the Frankfurt School would object), and second through its

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<sup>179</sup> Mahoney's argument that Lee's theory of empathy is the foundation of a critical relation to consumerism, is based upon the claim that unlike views of human subjectivity that absolutely privilege personal preference, "Lee's emphasis on the separateness of objects . . . circumvents this tendency to privilege the subject" (59); Mahoney asserts that "Lee's sensitivity to the alterity of objects is a symptom of her more general concern with fostering ethical behavior" (59). This, however, presumes a simple opposition between subject and other or between subject and object, that I show in this chapter to be quite fraught: the extent to which an object into which one "feels" oneself is "other" is precisely the question up for debate in theories of *Einfühlung*.

<sup>180</sup> In *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, Lee was kinder to aestheticism as she reflected on her friend Walter Pater's recent death, but even here she articulates the desire for science to unite ethics and aesthetics by explaining the connection that aestheticism had already sensed: "Some day, perhaps, a more scientific study of aesthetic phenomena will explain the connection which we all feel between physical sanity and purity and the moral qualities called by the same name; but even nowadays it might have been prophesied that the man [Pater] who harped upon the clearness and livingness of water . . . was bound to become . . . a teacher of self-discipline and self-harmony" (257–258).

ability to turn the critical eye of the viewer inward. Lee's method of introspection links her interest with personal experience and the aspiration toward objective validity, since its method converts experience into data that can be analyzed and debated. Lee describes her gallery diaries as an "examination of purely objective matters," a set of "introspective data," and asserts that she follows a "deliberate system of noting down...my aesthetic processes" (242). This is due, she writes, to "the supreme importance in psychological aesthetics of direct and varied individual evidence" (243). For Lee, the experience of empathy is not a subjective truth immune from debate, but rather one piece of data in the puzzle of aesthetic experience. Basic to the possibility of such a science—to the possibility of gathering evidence for it—is a rigorous practice of self-observation and self-criticism that begins in the gallery but extends to other forms of experience.<sup>181</sup>

It is in this hope that the study of empathy will be the first step in a rationalization of aesthetic experience that I think we can begin to see its social or political significance. The politics of aesthetic empathy do not have to do with feeling what someone else feels, but rather with seeing one's aesthetic response to an artwork as a scientific datum: in other words, *Einfühlung* represents the possibility of a non-ideological mode of objectively analyzing art. Although for writers such as Allen and Spencer, this assertion of objectivity masks the way in which aesthetic responses are already culturally determined, I think that this is less true for Lee.<sup>182</sup> First, Lee emphasizes introspection rather than generalization about species or mankind, usually avoiding the kinds of overt racial inflection that enter into Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics*. Second, Lee believes that the introspective data of aesthetic experience resist

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<sup>181</sup> This kind of distance from one's own aesthetic experience suggests that Lee's variety of aestheticism pursues a detachment that is more scientific than ironic. Anderson argues in *The Powers of Distance* that Wilde's understanding of radical individualism is part of a strategy of critical detachment that, to an extent, characterizes aestheticism: "On the one hand, art is appealed to as a force that can transform reality, of which human nature forms a part. On the other hand, art must exist at a remove from life and its intractable nature in order to freely express its individuality.... In expressing the second view, Wilde positions himself against the moral claims of realists like George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell, who believed that careful delineation of their fellow humans would prompt feelings of understanding, sympathy, and fellowship" (156). What Lee's work suggests is an entirely different relation between aestheticism and critical detachment. The psychological treatment of empathy accords neither with the sorts of sympathetic identification Anderson attributes to mainstream Victorians nor with the ironic distance she describes in Wilde's case: rather, *Einfühlung* speaks to an aspiration to understand the psychical processes whereby we mimic aesthetic objects seen in objective, scientific terms. It is thus at once detached, via processes of introspection that claim scientific validity and yet radically *attached* in the sense that there comes to be very little distinction between the viewer's body and that of the object he or she gazes upon.

<sup>182</sup> I do not wish to suggest that Lee is entirely immune from the tendency of Victorian psychological approaches to aesthetics to naturalize aesthetic responses as symptoms of race; in *Juvenilia*, Lee resists recent physiological approaches to aesthetic theory by arguing for association as the basis of both personality and aesthetic preference (she does not name Allen or Spencer by name, but she is clearly responding to them). This does not prevent her, however, from arguing that the aesthetic displeasure we experience when viewing a person of another race is an association so old that it has become, in effect inborn: "were we to seek the reasons why a strong and healthy human body of our own race gives us a general sense of beauty which we should not receive from a deformed negro, we should find that the single elements of line, curve, and tint, were probably not, in the one case, more agreeable to our nerves of sight in the other case; we should probably discover that the selfsame lines, curves, and tints were contained in a great number of other objects of which we should call some ugly and others beautiful" (57). Although Lee at this moment seems to be on the verge of saying that the aesthetic displeasure of looking upon an individual of another race is entirely contingent and cultural, she then claims that this response is an association that has become naturalized over the course of thousands of years: it is "the result of the act of association which took place in ancestors living perhaps before what we call Europe was turned into ice fields" (58).

transparent or easy interpretation, and so does not entirely erase the occupation of the critic. (Gustav Fechner, to cite a counterexample, sees his surveys of individual responses to art as self-evident facts that need only be quantified.) Although empathy probably will not reveal the ideological structures of the world, it may encourage a mode of reflective thought about the self—in particular, an awareness of the difficulty of fully tracing the experiences that have produced one's sense of an autonomous self as well as of the inadequacy of apparent self-unity that common language (including even pronouns such as "I" and "we") usually implies. Lee's metaphor of "desultory patches" and "fragments" is admittedly less extreme than Adorno's sublime shudder in the face of a challenging modernist artwork, but unlike contemporary versions of aesthetic empathy which tend towards a narcissistic mode of self-reflection, Lee's leads only to an awareness of the limitations of introspective thought: we are simultaneously obligated (as good readers or viewers) to reflect on the way we feel ourselves into forms and unable fully to recognize how all of those moments of empathy add up to something like a personality or identity. One might call this the structuring paradox of Lee's theory of aesthetic empathy: at the same time that it is an objective formalism that manifests as subjective feeling, it is also a scientific explanation of art that accepts art's resistance to scientific explanation.

Perhaps, however, Lee's theory of aesthetic empathy is most compelling not as a counterpoint to Frankfurt school aesthetics, but rather as a counterpoint to contemporary understandings of how empathy functions in a literary context. One could argue that the early formulations of aesthetic empathy that I have discussed in this chapter have little to do with our received understanding of empathy, which has strayed so far from its origins that Lipps and Lee are no longer relevant. Contemporary theories of empathy, one might say, simply deal with a different concept—a special sort of sympathy—that happens to go under the same name. I would not want to argue for a wholesale recovery of late-Victorian theories of empathy, nor do I think such a project would be possible. The suggestion that our bodies literally and unconsciously mimic physical forms of objects is certainly outdated science (though the resuscitation of interest in the neurological basis of empathy does make Lipps's theories about unconscious mimicry seem less far-fetched than they would have even a decade ago). However, I do think that pursuing a theory of aesthetic empathy that takes into account our affective response to things as well as to persons may allow us to imagine a more critically-oriented empathy that avoids some of the binaries that I identify at the outset of this chapter. Thing-oriented empathy may resolve the apparent opposition between critics such as Keen, who appeal to a universalizing dimension of empathic experience, and those such as Berlant and Garber, who criticize empathy for encouraging passive, self-congratulatory individualism. Critical empathy does not take "the human" for granted, since what is at stake in the first place is how we distinguish between humans and things. The aim of theories of *Einfühlung* is not to praise our fellow-feelings for one another but to ask whether the boundaries between the self and the object are less stable, especially in the moment of aesthetic experience, than we might generally assume. This would allow for universality but not a universalized humanity: that is, the capacity for empathy is not based upon some inherent humanness, but rather upon shared perceptive mechanisms.

The critical dimension of such an enterprise comes not from establishing distance between oneself and the object of inquiry but rather from establishing distance from one's immediate affective response. What the earlier version of empathy may tell us is that the verbal description of empathic experience is a crucial component of empathy itself. For Lee's cohort, the immediate moment of empathic experience is only the first step in a process of critical

reflection that strives scientifically to use introspection as initial data rather than an end in itself. In this model, history is a dividing line between past and present selves rather than between viewer and artwork. Lee offers a middle ground between extreme aestheticization ('I like this because it is pleasing to me') and stale objectification ('my pleasure is irrelevant to art itself'); the means for reaching this middle ground is the careful analysis of language. Perhaps empathy intersects with literature not when we read, but when we write; not when we feel but when we critique. Empathy, in other words, is not something that we experience for literature; it is a feeling that we are able to express only as literature.

### **Literature and Materialist Aesthetics**

This claim that human relationships with the material world are instinctively translated into a literary domain has implications that touch on issues that run throughout this dissertation. Within each of the registers of materialist aesthetics that I have discussed, literature presents a particularly difficult problem. For Grant Allen and his fellow psychologists, the "ideal" nature of the literary object—the fact that it is realized only within the reader's mind—renders it resistant to the physiological analysis of human responses to basic forms upon which Allen wishes to construct his aesthetic theory. Approaching the material dimension of art from the side of production rather than of reception, William Morris encounters a similar problem. If aesthetic pleasure is the enjoyment that we take in crafting physical things—in expressing our abstract individuality in a concrete, fungible shape—then one immediately must ask where this leaves the arts whose materials are immaterial: words, sounds, and ideas. (As I argue in chapter three, Morris solves this problem at least partially by imagining romance as a form rather than as a genre.) And the crux of Walter Pater's aesthetic theory lies in the attempt to resolve—or to explain the irresolvability of—this very opposition between sensuous pleasures that depend upon the physical appreciation of a thing and intellectual pleasures that one finds in abstract thought.

Lee's framing of the relation between literature and materiality is compelling because it does not imagine the two realms as fundamentally in opposition to one another: the physical world is not stubbornly resistant to our attempts to represent it in language; nor does language operate as a poor, faint substitute for the thing itself. Instead, metaphor, and our critical attention to it, become the means for increasing our ability to experience and reflect upon relations with objects; it operates in much the same way as a certain vase affects Anstruther-Thomson, when she claims that it "has the power of corroborating to ourselves the reality of our own existence, and in so complete a fashion that the very act of being alive, of living, becomes a wider, a keener, a more complex act" (153). But neither does Anstruther-Thomson or Lee (or Morris or Pater) neatly reconcile the literary and material arts: they recognize, in various contexts, that literature presents a problem for what I characterize in the Introduction as a materialist turn in Victorian aesthetic theory.

The literary domain plays a particularly suggestive role within Victorian aesthetic materialism: through Vernon Lee, for example, it would be possible to reconstruct a lineage in Victorian science and aesthetics of twentieth-century literary critical projects such as that of I.A. Richards; Pater's essays in *Appreciations* on Wordsworth and Coleridge reveal that his sense of modern material contingency is informed by the romantics. In short, this intersection is a site from which one can glimpse significant preoccupations of literary theory in the early twentieth century, and from which one can, with equal clarity, look backwards to the importance of



scientific and philosophical materialisms to late-eighteenth-century literature.<sup>183</sup> It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to follow either of these paths; here I wish only to suggest that the way in which late-Victorian aestheticians treat literature highlights one of the qualities that renders the aesthetic materialism of their period distinctive. Materialism is not, or not only, simply a theme in late-Victorian literature; it is a strategy for rethinking literary forms and our relation to them. Late Victorians confront equally the possibilities and limitations of materiality as an explanatory paradigm for the enjoyment of beauty, taking literature as a particularly difficult case and, perhaps, as a limit point. With reference to Grant Allen, I have argued that we should think of this less as a failure to deal persuasively with the kind of aesthetic experience that occurs when one reads a book or a poem and more as a challenge to think about that aesthetic experience in different terms—for example, as an interaction with a tale that has been crafted (Morris), or as the unconscious translation into metaphor of originally embodied experience (Lee). This challenge is bidirectional; it also requires thinking differently about “materialism” itself. As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, the term “materialism” is misleading insofar as it implies unity: not only because there are multiple, divergent strands of materialism that motivate the political project of Morris, the psychological project of Allen, or the philosophical project of Pater, but also because the ends of these materialisms are often competing and incompatible. Their shared aspect is not so much a program whose points could be listed, but a strategy. The turn to materialism is a way for these writers powerfully to target familiar constructs: the autonomous individual, the self-contained political subject, the omniscient sage. Their work suggests that attending to the apparently simple interactions between bodies and things can open possibilities that extend well beyond the purely conceptual domain of aesthetic theory, or rather, that reveal aesthetic theory rarely to be purely conceptual.

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<sup>183</sup> Noel Jackson pursues this topic in *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* as does Noah Heringman in *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*.

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