

AESTHETICISM AND THE EROTICS OF PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2009

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Cornell University 2009

Informed by liberal political philosophy, aesthetic critics such as Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, and Oscar Wilde urged people to engage with art, arguing that because each individual had an unerring innate capacity to make aesthetic judgments, no one needed experts to validate their critical claims. However, when the emergent middle-classes began to judge art, they unexpectedly employed standards that the aesthetes deplored. In response, the aesthetes seemed to abandon their liberalism, gladly becoming authoritarian teachers whose textbooks sought to convert the vulgar to specific critical methods and tastes. This dissertation argues that the aesthetes actually regretted their prescriptive roles, and that their texts are structured by their ambivalence about teaching specific ways of reading texts. Even as aestheticist handbooks impart principles, they imagine scenes wherein tutors and textbooks would become unnecessary because the intended student has a repressed knowledge of aesthetic criticism. These forgotten tenets emerge into consciousness when the aspirant connoisseur has a deeply affecting erotic encounter with an uncannily animate art object. Through these queer fantasies, the aesthetes preserve the liberal ideal of individuals who judges solely through their own authorization. Reading Pater's *The Renaissance, Plato and Platonism*, and *Gaston de Latour*, I reveal his fear that modern educators can only withhold the love that succors students or desire them with an excessive ardor that threatens their autonomy by destroying the borders between subjects. Pater suggests would-be aesthetes should avoid dangerous professors by

seeking art's love. I then argue that in Lee's *Belcaro*, professional aestheticians are cast as prudish protectionists who teach abstract aesthetic theories in order to distract their audiences from the erotic immediacy of art's materiality. Lee appropriates the Gothic novel's plots of religious conversion in order to imagine a teacherless education in which statues at the Vatican Museum seduce a child and implant formalist aestheticist doctrines into its mind. Finally, I look to Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to examine Wilde's fancy that artworks enable critics to gain access to aestheticist knowledge they have biologically inherited.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Peter Antonio Ausubel Bailey was born on January 7, 1982 in Nassau, Bahamas. He grew up in the Bahamas and graduated from Queen's College High School in 1998. In 2002, he graduated *magna cum laude* from Princeton University, where he received the A. B. in English Literature. He entered Cornell University in 2003, where he concentrated on Victorian literature and gender and sexuality studies. He received the Ph. D. in 2009.

For Joey Notaro

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unlike some of the figures I write about in this dissertation, I can hardly say that I taught myself all that I know, or that I possess an innate knowledge of all things literary. This project was only made possible by the very many things I learned by interacting with a whole community of creative and intellectual people at Cornell University.

First, let me thank my advisers. Ellis Hanson has been the most supportive and enthusiastic of chairs, a perfect model of stylish intelligence. I am glad to have been taught by him and to have assisted him in teaching; he practices a pedagogy of which the aesthetes would have approved. A decade ago at Princeton, Doug Mao was one of three lecturers for the Department of English's literary survey course. My admiration for his wit and acuity began in that class; it has only grown as I have witnessed his diligence and benefitted from his conscientious and trenchant commentary on my work. Through his example, Paul Sawyer reminded me constantly of the value of clear expression, close reading, and scholarly generosity, and I am grateful to have taught alongside him.

I am especially grateful to all the members of the Victorian Reading Group, among them Ashly Bennett, Karen Bourrier, David Coombs, Mike Klotz, and Seph Murtagh. The texts we discussed, debated about, and laughed over have broadened my range as a Victorianist. Ashly, Karen, and David were tireless readers of my work. This dissertation is immensely better because of their astute observations, sharp criticism, and probing questions.

The members of the Gender and Sexuality Reading Group never ceased to amaze me with their insights into queer theory, their creative and brilliant methods of critical engagement. Chad Bennett, Caetlin Benson-Allot, Sarah Cote, Corinna Lee,

Jessica Metzler, and Anthony Reed were all wonderful interlocutors as I was writing this work, and I already miss our conversations over cocktails, and in cars, and at the gym.

For their sustaining friendships let me thank Lauren Alleyne, Heidi Arsenault, Richard Bownas, Christopher Brown, Cathy Chung, Sebastian Herrmann, Zachary Newton, and Daniel Wilson.

Finally, I must thank Joey Notaro. For the last three years he has inspired me to be a better thinker, to become more patient, and to want better things for my life. He has been invaluable to me, and my work is stronger because of his support.

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INTRODUCTION

Aestheticism and the Erotics of Pedagogy

In Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, the eponymous protagonist desires an education "directed especially to the expansion and refinement of the powers of reception; of those powers above all, which are immediately relative to fleeting phenomena, the powers of emotion and sense" (140). This education concerns the "things which affect us pleurably through sensation, art...including all the finer sorts of literature" and "comprehends all those matters over which the Muses of Greek mythology preside" (140). The aim of this training is to "conduct one to an exquisite appreciation of all the finer traits of nature and of man" (140). This, as Pater states, is an aesthetic education, conducted according to the tenets of aestheticism.¹ In *Marius*, Pater imagines that "the right education of oneself, or of another" is possible (140). "Aestheticism and the Erotics of Pedagogy" examines the conditions under which aestheticist texts pose the "right education of oneself" as a defensive alternative from the interpersonal processes of education. The etymology of the word "educate" is related to *educere*, to lead out. We might think of self-education as a leading out of knowledge or skills that lie latent within the individual. Defining teachers as those who instill knowledge, pedagogical aestheticist texts can declare them unnecessary. In the project, I analyze narratives of pedagogical intercourse that appear in texts by the aesthetes Pater, Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde. Each text specifies the dangers of

¹ When I use the term "aestheticism" in this study, I am primarily interested in aestheticism as a set of theories about the perception of art. The word "aesthetic" derives from the Greek *aisthanesthai*, "to perceive." When we first think of aestheticism, we are likely to think of slogans like "art for art's sake" or "style is more important than substance." But these are catchphrases that can only be understood in the context of what the aesthetes thought art could do for the senses of those who were engaging with it.

educational transmissions or relationships and ponders ways in which art objects can make pedagogical exchange superfluous.

In *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy*, Linda Dowling contextualizes British aestheticism within the aesthetic and political theory of the Earl of Shaftesbury. When Shaftesbury sought a transcendental foundation for the right of the liberal polity to set aside absolutist monarchical authority and govern itself, he argued that the people had an innate moral sense to guide their self-rule; they knew right from wrong in the same way that they immediately knew the beautiful from the ugly. At a stroke, Shaftesbury universalized the capacity to make legitimate aesthetic judgments, and associated the aesthetic realm with the individual's autonomy. His idea of the *sensus communis*, passing through Kant, gave the aesthetic critics great optimism. They saw all around them a world full of natural and man-made objects that could afford everyone great sensuous pleasure, if only people would pay greater attention to them. Aestheticism sought to orient people towards art, then, to extol its virtues and to promote disciplined observation, so that people could learn how to discern art more carefully, more intensely, thus maximizing the pleasure they could derive from art objects.

As the nineteenth century progressed in Britain, the evangelical middle-classes made their morality the normative standard for all society, and as they did so, the pleasures of the senses came under attack. In order to free "himself and his contemporaries from the brutal constraints of the Victorian cults of religion and respectability" (Dowling 80), Walter Pater wrote *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, the seminal text of critical British Aestheticism.² Through this collection

² I qualify the term "British Aestheticism" in recognition that there is not a monolithic British Aestheticism. Realizing that a masculine, literary, decadent tradition had become the dominant manifestation of aestheticism in scholarly accounts, critics have recently explored marginalized categories such as the "*Women's World* aestheticism" of female aesthetes, Arts and Crafts aestheticism, and the philanthropic "missionary aestheticism" based on Ruskin's work. Our definition of aestheticism

of essays, he hoped to help affect a “social transformation of Victorian life through an enlarged and embedded sensuousness” (76). He valued the Renaissance as a time when people were free to find joy in art—in his review of J. A. Symonds *Renaissance in Italy*, he described the period as “an assertion of liberty ...to see and feel those things the seeing and feeling of which generate. . .a sympathy with life everywhere” (Review, 196) Seeking to generate a Victorian Renaissance (or as Oscar Wilde would call it later, “our English Renaissance”) Pater promised his readers that the “love of art for its own sake” would give them a “quickened sense of life” (*Renaissance* 190). He then urged them to assert their liberty to judge art.

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality in life or book to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do...one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not at all. (xix – xx)

In response to the authorities and social codes that would force his readers to conform to the dull earnestness of the respectable and to deny the life of the senses, Pater urges them to seize the opportunity for sensuous pleasure and to assert an authority of their own: What are all these phenomena to me? What joys would I lose by giving them up? What impressions do I have of these art-objects? What do they mean to me? Indeed, in his conclusion, Pater gave a extreme solipsistic account of experience that suggested we could never be subject to other authorities, since their demands would never touch the core of our personality: “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

has become much more capacious and complex, although not without some categorical problems. For instance, as she attempts to envision a “more inclusive British aestheticism” Diana Maltz argues that “anyone who works towards art as transformation of everyday life is a practical aesthete,” an inclusive term that describes Ruskin as well as Wilde” (21). Ruskin is undoubtedly an important influence on many who would call themselves aesthetes, but it is not a name he would claim himself, and this raises the question of how we should respect the rights of the figures we study to define themselves.

voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without” (187).

In arguing that the first step of aesthetic criticism is that one should “know one’s own impression as it really is,” Pater seems to have made the judgment of art a zone of complete freedom for the critic, a private realm where all authority resided within the perceiver. But aestheticism has a privileged mode of reading art that undercuts that freedom. In 1888, Pater added “The School of Giorgione” to the third edition of *The Renaissance* and complained:

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words in poetry. (102)

For Pater, the problem with this type of criticism is that it makes the “sensuous element in art...a matter of indifference” (102). For him, “the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty” and accounting for the pleasure afforded by the specificity of the artistic medium and artistic form is “the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism” (102). Since aestheticism stressed the importance of directly engaging the art object, it privileged formalism as its method, assuming that interpretive mode brought the observer into closest contemplation of art’s sensuousness. In asserting that certain types of aesthetic judgments are correct and others are mistakes, Pater destroys the zone of privatized judgment he had granted to all spectators and places himself as an authority to be obeyed. Moreover, he associates aestheticism with an elite or elect; to make mistakes in reading art is the especial province of “popular criticism,” the vulgar criticism of the people.

Pater and his fellow-aesthetes had assumed that their own aesthetic preferences and critical standards were as universal as the capacity to judge art. They had believed their critical task lay in *orienting* the people towards art, in encouraging them to take it

seriously. Once people had a desire for the beautiful, their natural sense of how to judge art would operate. This optimism appears in the work of Pater's disciple Vernon Lee, who stressed in her aestheticist textbook *Belcaro*, "My object is not to teach others, but to show them how far I have taught myself, and how far they may teach themselves" (13). A similar positivity appears in the art-critic Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*:

I would have the reader discern [the universal and divine canons of loveliness] so quickly that, as he passes along a street, he may, by a glance of the eye, distinguish the noble from the noble work. He can do this, if he permit free play to his natural instinct; and all I have to do for him is to remove from those instincts the artificial restraints which prevent their action, and encourage them to an unaffected and unbiased choice between right and wrong. (*Works* 9:62)

To the aesthetes' dismay, when the working- and lower-middle-classes began to make art part of their lives, when they exercised their right to judge art as they wished, they had standards of taste the aesthetes deplored, not the unerring critical sense that Shaftesbury had associated with aesthetic democracy, or that Ruskin appeals to in the preceding passage. Worse, these thousands of new art-lovers were "newly endowed with leisure and money undreamt of by their predecessors" and were "in a position forcibly to impress their aesthetic preferences on the material world" (91). Focalizing her critical account through the aesthetes, Dowling describes the "crushing ugliness of late Victorian landscapes—and especially cityscapes—now hideously defaced with the consequences of millions of individual aesthetic choices, each the result of 'judging for yourself'" (90). Faced with the disappointing actions of the *demos*, the aesthetes became evermore authoritarian teachers, writing prescriptive texts that sought to convert the vulgar to their interpretive methods and critical assumptions. This explains Pater's "School of Giorgione" essay with its lesson on aesthetic formalism and its swipe at popular criticism.³ It also explains "Wilde's repeated

³ Dowling's study of *The Renaissance* focuses on its publication in 1873. She notes that at this time, it had "not yet become fully clear what the new middle-class audiences for art...might do with the

swerve away from his announced topics of art and beauty and towards those obsessively elaborated topics of the press and public” as he “repeatedly attempted to browbeat the public into acquiescence with his own standards of taste” (Dowling 92).

Dowling suggests that when the aesthetic critics realized they needed to discipline their audiences and lay out the tenets of aesthetic criticism, they abandoned the notion of freedom for all in aesthetic judgment and envisioned themselves as elite, aristocratic authorities who could speak in defense of, and on behalf of the aesthetic realm itself. This tendency flowered in Oscar Wilde, who was to “rediscover and reassert that alien principle of aristocratic spirit silently repressed by the Whig aesthetic tradition as a condition of its emergence two centuries before” (94). Wilde’s aristocratic characters, like Lord Henry or Lord Goring, work to instruct others about the virtues of art from an acknowledged, indeed boasted, position of superiority. They believe their students can aspire to their level, but their educational efforts do not presuppose their students’ innate sense of aesthetic right or wrong; students must submit to their masters’ authority. Hence Wilde’s aristocratic spokesman Gilbert expresses “an idea of aristocratic soul or spirit still potentially universalizable” and speaks as “an apostle of the realm of art and beauty returned to ordinary existence to tell others of its wonders” (95). Dowling’s rhetoric here clearly separates the critic from his student; the former is an emissary from the transcendental world of art, returned briefly to address the benighted subjects of this world.

abundant disposable income flowing into their pockets” (81). Associating Pater with “the early optimistic moments of the Victorian Renaissance of the 1870s” (81), she characterizes Wilde as Pater’s heir. In her account, when Wilde assumes “the mantle of Whig aesthetic tradition in the 1890s,” he, not Pater, becomes the ultimate witness to the “disturbing developments” that occurred when the aesthetes’ vulgar audiences began to “act on the aesthetic permission that had been so democratically endowed” upon them (81). Dowling’s narrative of succession forgets that Pater revised and expanded *The Renaissance* until 1893. Later editions of *The Renaissance* are marked by Pater’s pedagogical response to those audiences who were not following the aesthetic program he had envisioned for them in the 1870s, but because of her focus, Dowling does not realize this.

Dowling never suggests that aesthetes were concerned by their increasing critical earnestness and authoritarian stances. In this way, she echoes the critical narrative presented by Jonathan Freedman in *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*:

But, clearly, the texts of British aestheticism similarly work as a form of specialized, esoteric knowledge, which is not only gathered, analyzed, and ordered by aesthetic professionals in any number of fields but which also serves to mystify the authority of those professionals. Despite the overtly democratizing tendencies evident in the earlier phases of aestheticism, the result of aestheticism's endeavors was that the perception of the beautiful was no longer held to be a universal or communal experience (as it is, at least in theory in the aesthetics of Romanticism); rather it became one that...serves to define the expertise of the relevant authority, which that authority then imparts to an awed but appreciative public. Ruskin not only defines the importance of aesthetic experience, but tells the reader how to go about gathering such experience for himself—from this artist, this natural scene, and not from that one or that one. Pater can be read as performing a similar maneuver: it is not only that value inheres in one or another special moment of intense experience, but also that one can—and people did—read one's Pater in order to learn which moments of experience are most intense, which focus the greatest amount of aesthetic energy and which are simply a waste of time. (56)

Freedman's account, like Dowling's, associates aestheticism's "overtly democratizing tendencies" with its earlier phases, arguing that by the time aestheticism's doctrines are codified in its mature critical texts, aesthetes no longer deem "the perception of the beautiful" a universal possibility.⁴ Now, Freedman says that the "defining quality of 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). But his progressive critical narrative, like Dowling's, overlooks possible contradictions within the esoteric handbooks he describes by assuming that the democratizing tendencies of aestheticism

⁴ Freedman does not explicitly refer to the codified texts of aestheticism as "mature." However, he implicitly imposes a developmental narrative, for although he mentions the universalizing tendencies within aestheticism, tendencies that endow each individual with the authority for critical judgment, he describes *all* texts of British aestheticism as "a form of specialized esoteric knowledge...ordered by aesthetic professionals," a form which serves "to mystify the authority of those professionals." It is as if aestheticist texts only become true aestheticist texts when they "define the expertise" and authority of the aesthete.

are excluded from the aesthete's more authoritarian texts and confined to their earlier, more optimistic texts. In Freedman's account, without any inner conflict or sense of contradiction, "aesthetic professionals" who had once claimed the perception of the beautiful was a universal experience happily make themselves authoritative bestowers of aesthetic judgment. Moreover, in his description of "an awed but appreciative public" who eagerly read aestheticist criticism as a canonical list of wrong, right, or most intense aesthetic experiences, Freedman (unlike Dowling) does not state that the public ever resisted the aesthete's critical authority, a resistance that may well have reminded the aesthetic experts of the liberal, anti-authoritarian possibilities of the aestheticism they expounded. Dowling and Freedman's critical accounts seem a little too smooth, too calm. They provide a narrative that this dissertation complicates and nuances.

"Aestheticism and the Erotics of Pedagogy" argues that although aestheticist texts recognize the necessity of asserting authority to achieve their pedagogical aims, they regret this necessity, and disavow it at the same time they insist upon it. Because Dowling's brief text mostly concentrates on exposing the paradoxes within liberal political and aesthetic theory, it devotes only a little time to literary close-readings of the aesthetes' texts. Therefore, she neglects to emphasize that when aestheticist texts impart critical principles they do so within narratives about teacherly aesthetes: charismatic teachers, dangerously influential teachers, sadistic or pedantic teachers, teachers who make their students feel like slaves. These depictions are self-dramatizations, figures through which the aesthetes comment on their own pedagogical strategies. Even as aesthetic critics prescribe certain ways of understanding art, even as they set themselves up as experts to be obeyed, their texts construct narratives in which students resist experts. More importantly, aestheticist handbooks imagine a world wherein education is unnecessary because novice

aesthetes have a repressed, innate knowledge of aesthetic criticism and need no tutors or textbooks to instill aestheticist tenets. Instead, the would-be aesthete has a deeply affecting encounter with art itself, a direct engagement with art's sensuousness that brings the buried principles of criticism into consciousness. Through art's intercession, the process of learning ceases to be an interpersonal process and becomes a form of reminiscence, what Plato would term *anamnesis*. By dreaming that the transmission of knowledge might be an unnecessary aspect of education, at the level of fantasy, the aesthetes preserve the liberal ideal of the individual's authority to judge solely through her own authorization.

The primary argument of "Aestheticism and the Erotics of Pedagogy" deepens our historical understanding of aestheticist texts by nuancing our account of how those texts assert their authority. Additionally, this project argues that each of the aestheticist texts it examines investigates queer pedagogy. In other words, these texts analyze how sexuality and erotic desire affect learning and teaching, and they especially foreground ways in which transgressive or non-normative erotic desires enable the transmission of aesthetic knowledge.⁵ To demonstrate how Pater, Lee, and Wilde's texts are theorizing queer pedagogy, I examine the erotics of those scenes of art-inspired *anamnesis*, reading the desire that connoisseurs have for artworks as queer.

The analysis of art and the analysis of queer eroticism have long been associated with each other. Classifying deviant erotic desire as unnatural and hence artificial, many aesthetes valorized non-normative sexualities as artistic. Such

⁵ Queer pedagogy is fundamentally the analysis of how sexuality and erotic desire affect learning and teaching. Theorists build on this foundational definition to produce many competing versions of queer pedagogy. Susanne Luhmann foregrounds the myriad ways the term is understood and deployed when she asks, "Is a queer pedagogy about and for queer students or queer teachers? Is a queer pedagogy a question of queer curriculum? Or, is it about teaching methods adequate for queer content? Or, about queer learning and teaching—and what would that mean? Moreover, is a queer pedagogy to become the house pedagogy of queer studies or is it about the queering of pedagogical theory?" (141)

aesthetes might argue that to pursue one's homosexual or masochistic desires was to break free from the form in which nature had cast one and to re-fashion oneself anew as one might mold clay into a vase. Drawing on Platonic philosophy and the theories of Greek pederasty, some aesthetes also understood certain queer relationships as artistic matrices. For instance, although an erotic relationship between men might not produce children, it was an artistic institution in which one man's beauty might inspire his partner to produce great art or great criticism.

Aesthetes who viewed queer desire positively were well placed to consider how it could be harnessed to promote an aesthetic education. When aestheticist texts imagine education without interpersonal exchange, they are developing tenets of queer epistemology that had occurred in texts as ancient as Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Meno*. In the *Meno*, Socrates insists that he does not instill precepts into others; instead those who appear to absorb knowledge from teachers are merely recollecting facts that they knew before they were incarnated in their present life. This reminiscence is *anamnesis*. The remembered knowledge had been transmitted to the learners' souls, which had been privileged to behold the ultimate truths of the universe in the divine and ideal world of Forms. Those who aspire to become wise must train themselves so that they recall as much of the world of Forms as possible. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests that certain individuals are more capable of experiencing *anamnesis* than others. The philosopher, who is both the lover of wisdom and the lover of boys, heads the list of those who experience reminiscence. In Plato's erotic dialogues, non-normative sexual desire (specifically homoerotic desire) becomes an epistemological key, allowing the philosopher to access the knowledge that is stored within him.

Many of the aesthetes were also classicists, and when they read of Socrates in Plato's erotic dialogues they encountered an exemplary liberal intellectual who renounced his pedagogical authority and proclaimed the self-sufficiency of those who

wished to learn. The myth of *anamnesis* also provided them the basis upon which to build their own fantasies of an eroticized, teacher-free education. Because the foundational Platonic texts had focused upon pederastic desire's role in triggering *anamnesis*, and because many prominent aesthetes were apologists for male same sex desire, aestheticist pedagogical narratives often examine how homosexual desire can make people better connoisseurs of art. Yet male same sex desire was not the only, or even the most prominent form of eroticism that structured aestheticist pedagogy. Aestheticism was partially a liberal protest against how restrictive moral laws had proscribed certain sensuous possibilities for people. In curtailing certain types of aesthetic experience, these laws curtailed certain kinds of erotic experiences as well. In a world in which the freedom to enjoy the sight of a painting or a sunset is suspect because it may endear worldly things too much to the onlooker, the pleasure one takes in looking at or touching one's beloved is equally underappreciated. Pater knew this, which is why the series of aesthetic objects he lists that may "set the spirit free for a moment" includes "work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend" (*Renaissance* 189). As the aesthetes realized that the capacity for humans to flourish fully as sensate beings was tied to their ability to express or fulfill their erotic yearnings, they began to argue for a state of erotic liberalism in which myriad kinds of sexual propensity would be unconstrained by moral law. Hence aestheticist critical texts often revolve around a period of history that is romanticized as a time of wantonness, a time when adulterous sex, extramarital sex, same sex-desire and sadomasochism occur unchecked. For example, in *The Renaissance*, Pater praises the medieval chivalric poetry of Provence because it is written by those who experience "the liberty of the heart" and depicts "earthly passion, with its intimacy, its freedom, its variety" (3). As Stefano Evangelista aptly states:

Pater's model of aesthetic criticism not only opens a space in which sexual pleasure is allied with cultural refinement, but turns perversion into what, after

Bourdieu, we would call cultural capital. The Renaissance became central to aesthetic criticism precisely because it was seen as a culture, which, like aestheticism itself, opened up a gap between aesthetics and ethics in which aesthetic critics like Pater and Symonds locate the value of the sexually perverse. (“Vernon Lee” 96)

The form of sexual perversity that governs aestheticist pedagogical texts is fetishism. While the philosopher of the *Phaedrus* is able to achieve *anamnesis* because he is a lover of boys, novice aesthetes experience *anamnesis* because they fall in love with art objects. Each of the aesthetes in this study imagines that art objects can assume human characteristics, taking on an uncanny liveliness. In their animate states, these art objects become love-objects for aesthetic critics; they express, reciprocate and accept erotic desire in ways that humans do. This exchange of desire creates the conditions under which novice aesthetes discover the rules of connoisseurship. As we will see, both Pater and Vernon Lee imagine educational scenes that involve falling in love with animate statues, while Wilde considers the attractions of the living portrait. In analyzing desire’s educational role, contemporary queer pedagogical theory has focused on how teaching can be queer. It has explored the ethics of how teachers frustrate, intensify and celebrate students’ queer desires. It has investigated the specific learning styles of queer students. However, by attending mainly to the interaction between teachers and students, queer pedagogy has underanalyzed how non-normative desire that is not interpersonal can structure education. Fetishism is one such impersonal desire. My project is sympathetic to the goals of queer theory generally, and queer pedagogical theory specifically; my work seeks to expand the objects and practices queer pedagogy can claim as its rightful field of study.

In my first chapter, I examine Pater’s notoriously reserved pedagogical conduct. Students and colleagues pathologized him as abnormally shy, carelessly indifferent to undergraduates or morbidly fixated on art rather than life. At an Oxford that valorized homosocial intimacy, his lessons were denounced for making

engagements with texts, not teachers, most important; he triangulated his charisma through his instructive writings and the art objects about which he taught. Arguing that his reserve was ethical, purposeful and motivated by love, I show how he became concerned that a mentor's desire could damage a student's inchoate aesthetic sensibility. Ascribing the aesthetic critic's acuity to his amorousness, Pater's *Plato and Platonism* praises Greek pederasty as a disciplined educational system in which the student could experience love with a teacher who desired him neither too much, nor too little. In *The Renaissance* and *Gaston de Latour*, Pater argues that modern educators have abandoned Greek regulative codes of conduct. They either withhold the love that succors students, or threaten students' autonomy with an excessive desire that destroys intersubjective boundaries. Among Pater's examples of these deficient teachers are the "professional guardians" of learning who neglect the critic Winckelmann (*Renaissance* 143), and the *femme fatale* Queen Margaret, whose "consuming and essentially wolfish" love menaces Gaston (101). Pater proposes that if people are to avoid such dangerous professors, they must use texts and art objects to teach themselves. For him, this autodidactic process is safely erotic. Through the learner's imagination, the art object comes to life and acquires a solicitous and seductive personality. For example, when Gaston reads Ronsard's *Odes*, it seems to "take possession of [him] with the ready intimacy of one's equal in age" (26). It is such erotic contact that allows learners to derive the principles of aesthetic criticism. For example, feeling the "pulsation of sensuous life" in sculpture, Winckelmann suddenly perceives the rules that govern Greek art (146). To him, it seems as these rules were "forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in [his] mind itself" (155), rules the living art has helped him recall.

My second chapter turns to Lee's essay collection *Belcaro* to argue that she excoriates formal aesthetic training because it promotes a patronizing cult of

innocence. She claims that before the advent of modern aesthetic education, people knew innately how to appreciate art. Enjoying a direct connection with art, they appraised it by relating how the sensuousness of art's form affected them. She then argues that in modernity, to understand art, people no longer refer to the pleasure art's form produces. Instead they must mechanically interpret art through the insulating hermeneutics taught by aestheticians like Ruskin, who wish to shield the innocent from the sensuous and erotic immediacy of art objects. Opposing such professionals, Lee casts herself as a professor who has renounced the authority to teach, and imagines scenes in which art, not aestheticians would teach people how to appreciate art's sensuousness. By drawing on plots about forcible religious and intellectual conversion derived from the Gothic novel, Lee tells how the statues of Greek gods seduce an innocent child and implant the doctrine of art for art's sake into its mind. Because Lee imagines this rape as pleasurable and intellectually productive and because she identifies the child with her beloved companion, the poet Mary Robinson, *Belcaro* provides us an account of how fetishistic and lesbian desire might inflect aesthetic education, how a female aesthete might imagine the education of women and why that female-centered education might value an eroticized violence in pedagogical relations.

My final chapter examines Wilde's warning against "trying to educate others." In his view, those who attempt to teach impoverish themselves mentally; the "fatal habit of imparting opinions" to students causes the teacher's "ignorance." While Pater and Lee theorize pedagogy out of their concern for the student, Wilde worries about teachers. Believing that "every disciple takes something away from his master" and that teachers lose "what is most precious" when they exercise influence over students, Wilde proposes that such costly pedagogical transfers are needless because no one requires teaching; those who wish to be aesthetes know all they could ever need to

know about criticism because they have an innate, inherited trove of knowledge. Wilde imagines that because of the legacies of heredity” the “true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations.” He develops this idea in “The Critic as Artist” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, arguing that people inherit “strange legacies of thought and passion” from human ancestors and artistic ones; because people are the children of art, they are better able to understand it. I argue that although Wilde wants heredity to guarantee the critic’s intellectual self-sufficiency, the Gothic mode he unnecessarily uses to define heredity actually undermines critical autonomy. In “The Critic as Artist,” heredity is not an innocuous mechanism that brings us the knowledge of our forebears; it is “a terrible shadow” that makes us live “not our own life” but “the lives of the dead.” Dorian Gray wonders if he is merely a vehicle for his ancestors to realize the dreams they had not fulfilled in life and likens inherited traits to “strange poisonous germ[s]” that creep from body to body. While Lee employed the Gothic to ensure students’ independence, in Wilde’s texts, the Gothic reveals that man is not of “one essence” but a “complex multiform creature,” threatening the individualism that aesthetic critical choices rely upon.

CHAPTER 1
BETWEEN DEARTH & EXCESS: WALTER PATER AND THE
EXTREMES OF PEDAGOGICAL DESIRE

I – “Unalterably a Lover” – Aesthetic Susceptibility and Eros

As the audience was dispersing from his lecture, the Oxford don and aesthete Walter Pater inquired “I hope you heard me, Mr. Wilde.” “We overheard you,” replied Pater’s auditor. In Wilde’s view, by drowsily murmuring his talk, Pater had succeeded in making a public address into soliloquy. Rather than presenting himself forcefully to his listeners, he made them violate his privacy. This moment of failed address, instruction compromised by impersonality, is hardly singular in Pater’s career. A former student of his remarked that because of his “his habit of slouching past under a wall and never looking anyone fairly in the face, the undergraduates called him ‘Judas’” (Wright, 119). It is as if these young men see his failure to look them in the eyes as a betrayal, a treachery of which the professor is conscious, and which bends his frame with shame. It seems, as the novelist George Moore complained, that Pater had “no gift of intimacy” (527), an embarrassment at an Oxford that increasingly valorized loving pedagogical relationships.

In *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Linda Dowling tracks how the Oxonian college tutorial evolves, describing how in the 1820s, the Tractarians rejected an icy tradition of donnish “condescension, impersonality and sloth” to insist on the pastoral care of the tutor for his pupil. Under the lead of John Henry Newman and Hurrell Froude, the “college tutorial began to function at Oxford as a vehicle for

the intensifying reciprocal bonds of masculine interest, affection and obligation to which modern cultural theory has given the name ‘male homosociality’” (35). Later, in the 1860s, liberal reformers like Benjamin Jowett appropriated the tutorial to assist their project of university reform, part of which involved moving Greek studies to the center of the university curriculum. The tutorial, itself an institution directing masculine affection, became the structure in which tutors and pupils examined Plato’s philosophy and the pederasty he believed enabled all cultural production. As it drifted from the religious character the Tractarians had infused it with, the tutorial became governed by the principles and methods of the Hellenic pedagogy Oxford was studying. Dowling reports that “Jowett’s conduct as tutor was universally regarded as ‘Socratic’ in some degree” (76), and that fellow Mark Pattison praised the dialectical method of the tutorial as “the nearest approach...to the Socratic principle of education” (76). The combined effect of Christian and Greek cultures had made love central to an advanced education.

While Jowett’s paternal demeanor made him the object of many undergraduates’ “tutor worship” and caused him to be named the “beloved presence” by at least one student, Pater stirred no such wide-spread adoration (Dowling).⁶ As an Oxonian memoirist recalls, “Walter Pater, of Brasenose, the master of style, influenced only by means of his books. One can remember seeing him, in the narrow path leading to the Union, stop to stroke a cat, lost to the whole world and blocking the way” (Atkinson, qtd. in Mikhail, 19). Pater is an otherworldly figure here, oblivious to

⁶ That Pater *could* inspire and return affection to select undergraduates is proven by his romantic involvement with William Money Hardinge, an affair which cost the nineteen-year-old his place at the university and damaged Pater’s academic career, causing him to be rejected for a proctorship. But we have no proof that Pater tutored Hardinge, and I am referring to the pervasive view of how Pater related to *his* students and those who saw themselves as his followers. Billie Andrew Inman suggests that it is the disastrous outcome of the Hardinge scandal that chilled Pater’s view of the pedagogical *eros* permissible at Oxford, leading him to adapt his characterization of the philosopher Abelard in “protest against the type of persons who had judged [Pater]” (15). In defending Abelard, who was condemned for his affair with his student, Pater defends himself.

the surrounding students. His only means of directing them comes through his written words, not through any charisma that warms his conversation or lectures. Matthew Potolsky argues that Pater's esteem for textually mediated relationships is a recurring element in the "narratives of pedagogical danger" that his contemporaries and successive writers constructed around his texts (701). For his detractors, of whom William Butler Yeats is Potolsky's representative figure, "it is nearly always by means of reading, rather than by face-to-face interaction that Pater has his most threatening effect" (701). Potolsky argues that for Yeats, Pater's teaching replaces the "unique and personal impact of the teacher with the conventional and impersonal effect of art or learning" (703). This methodology is disastrous, because it "encourages a triangulation of personal intercourse, by which one related to others not directly but through learning and poetry" (703). The "presumably artificial distance Pater's teaching cultivates between student and teacher...yields its fatal fruit in the barriers it places between student and student. The affectation of learning he took from Pater's teaching, Yeats claims, prevented him from recognizing the disorder that marked the lives of his generation" (704). When he encounters Ernest Dowson, for example, the "ceremonious and polite" manner that Pater's impersonal pedagogy teaches only allows Yeats to notice Dowson's "dignity and reserve" but he lacks the familiarity with his fellow to notice how he is "breaking his heart for the daughter of the keeper of an Italian eating house, in dissipation and drink." Pater, to whom Yeats and his fellows "looked consciously for [their] philosophy" is to blame for the collapse of homosociality among his disciples. Because Yeats never considers why Pater routs his relationships with others through texts, he casts Pater as the besotted art-lover who thoughtlessly endangers his followers' sympathy simply to promote Art's agency and perfection.

Yeats overlooks the purposefulness of Pater's impersonality. By analyzing educational structures across Pater's entire oeuvre, we will discover that Pater's reserve cannot be solely attributed to his personal shyness, nor does it spring from an actual indifference towards students, or an exclusive affective attachment to art. Rather, Pater's textually mediated pedagogy results from a deeply ethical love for those placed in his care—the love of a teacher who assesses the detrimental effects that a mentor's desire can have on the student's inchoate sensibility and who emotionally withdraws just enough to catalyze the student's development optimally. As critics have tried to understand how desire plays a role in Pater's teaching philosophy, they have framed that desire mainly by thinking about how his texts promote homosocial and homoerotic relations between Oxford men or male aesthetes, and how masculine desire enhances learning.⁷ But what insights can we gain if we move away from casting the student and the teacher as a couple in a homoerotic romance? Does investigating the erotics of pedagogy not include considering how teachers create the conditions for their students' autodidacticism? What might we learn if we consider the erotic charge of teaching oneself by communing with art? Analyzing solitary learning is *also* vital to understanding Pater's pedagogy since his attempts to develop an erotics of self-education derive from the limits he detects in the dialectical pedagogical romance.

To comprehend Pater's thoughts on desire and pedagogy as well as the limitations of the pedagogical romance, we will consult his final complete text, *Plato and Platonism* (1893). Based on a series of lectures “written for delivery to some young students of philosophy”, it is the work in which Pater's thoughts on aesthetic education engage most with the practical, immediate demands of teaching embodied

⁷ For readings in this vein, see Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire* and Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality at Victorian Oxford*.

individuals—above all, youth. Although Pater’s novels and non-fictional prose often contain instructional scenes, because he never writes directly about his professional life, it is easy to forget that he was Fellow at Brasenose College, rather than simply a writer who distantly influenced an abstract readership of aesthetes through his books. His textbook reminds us that Pater earned his bread by educating young men, and that through contact with them, observing their transition to adulthood, he would have had many opportunities to think about the effects of love and desire on learning. Yet *Plato and Platonism*’s erotics have not been analyzed closely enough. For example, because Dowling believes Oxford dons work their most transformative intellectual and spiritual effects through the intimacy of the tutorial, she does not closely address how lecturing also promotes homosociality, and pays little attention to the textbook. Yet it is through lectures open to all undergraduates, not one-on-one conferences with students of his own college, that Pater’s university teaching reached its widest audience. Having captivated many young men drawn to his philosophy, he publishes his textbook “with the hope of interesting a larger number” of these enthusiasts, men beyond the reach of his voice. (Given Pater’s soft-spoken delivery, this was wise).

One issue *Plato and Platonism* investigates is how love enabled Greek aesthetic education, and how love could facilitate the education of nineteenth-century aesthetes. Prior to Plato, Pater writes, “there had been no theorising about the beautiful, its place in life, and the like; and as a matter of fact he is the earliest critic of the fine arts. He anticipates the modern notion that art as such has no end but its own perfection,—‘art for art’s sake’” (269). Not only the first aesthete, Plato is also the original theorist of aesthetic education: “Wherever people have been inclined to lay stress on the colouring, for instance, cheerful or otherwise, of the walls of the room where children learn to read, as though that had something to do with the colouring of their minds; on the possible moral effect of the beautiful ancient buildings of some of

our own schools and colleges; on the building of character, in any way, through the eye and ear; there the spirit of Plato has been understood to be” (270). As we imagine Pater delivering these words, the idea of him in an auditorium speaking to a body of students is particularly useful, for it reminds us that the term “aesthetic,” from the Greek *aisthesis*, primarily concerns not questions of what art is or how it functions, but questions of how a body perceives. As Terry Eagleton memorably sums up in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, aesthetic territory is “nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal biological insertion into the world” (13). Taking Eagleton’s statement into account, we are not surprised to find Pater attributing Plato’s aesthetic sensitivity to his amatory experience:

Now Plato is one for whom the visible world thus “really exists” because he is by nature and before all things, from first to last, unalterably a lover. In that, precisely, lies the secret of the susceptible and diligent eye, the so sensitive ear. The central interest of his own youth—of his profoundly impressible youth—as happens always with natures of real capacity, gives law and pattern to all that succeeds it. Τά ἐρωτικά, as he says, the experience, the discipline, of love, had been that for Plato; and, as love must of necessity deal above all with visible persons, this discipline involved an exquisite culture of the senses. (134)

Here, Pater grounds aesthetics in the erotic not for just any aesthetician’s benefit, but for an audience familiar with the key terms and codes of the Aesthetic Movement. Previously we saw him associating Plato’s aesthetics with the slogan “art for art’s sake” but here, through misquotation, we see him likening Plato to the man who popularized the phrase “*l’art pour l’art*” in France, the writer Theophile Gautier. Gautier intimated that his artistic and critical success lay in his close attention to the sights around him: “My critics and supporters praise and damn me without understanding one word of me. They have never spoken of the essence of my worth,

that I am a man for whom the visible world exists.” [my translation]⁸ Plato, like Gautier, is a master-critic because he attends the “visible world” closely, but for the student who wishes to know the origins of this Gallic and Greek affinity for what can be seen, Pater traces its foundation to desire. To be a good aesthete, one must love in youth. The Platonic love Pater describes foregrounds and ensures the role of the body’s response in aesthetic judgments. It cultures the senses to apprehend “visible persons” optimally—people within sight and hope of touch; mere representations of the beloved in thought or speech leave the senses starved, the lover disconsolate. Such sensuous love gives “law and pattern” to the aesthete’s critical activity because it alters his sensibility. Having loved, he strives to anchor himself in the materiality from which aesthetic practice is constantly in danger of being dislodged.

Although aesthetics is a branch of philosophy, Pater often presents it as a relation of which the other branches are ashamed. It has an embarrassing attachment to the physical and particular that other philosophical areas disown for the general and abstract. Thus it struggles against a disciplinary pressure to give up its foundation in the specific and sensuous, as Pater argues early in his career. In *The Renaissance* (1873), he warns: “Many attempts have been made by writers on art and poetry to define beauty in the abstract, to express in the most general terms, to find some universal formula for it...To define beauty not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics” (xix). The “abstract question of what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience” Pater dismisses as speculation “as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere” (xx). He returns to philosophy’s

⁸ Critiques et louanges me louent et m’abiment sans comprendre un mot de que je suis. Toute ma valeur, ils n’ont jamais parle de cela, c’est que je suis un homme pour qui le monde visible existe. (Gautier, as reported in the *Goncourt Journal* for 1 May 1857)

transcendentalism in *Plato and Platonism*, noting: “The great masters of philosophy have been for the most part its noticeably single-minded servants” (126). Devoted to obtaining knowledge, “they have served science, science *in vacuo*, as if nothing beside, faith, imagination, love, the bodily sense, could detach them from it for an hour.” This monomania has leached their substance, leading Pater to lament, “[W]e know nothing at all of their *temperaments*; of which, that one leading abstract or scientific force in them was in fact strictly exclusive. Little more than intellectual abstractions themselves, in them philosophy was wholly faithful to its colours, or its colourlessness; rendering not grey only, as Hegel said of it, but all colours alike, in grey” (126-7). To portray the damaging poverty of philosophical abstraction, Pater uses an artistic metaphor: abstraction is like a bad painter that misrepresents the tonal variety of the world in his work. In doing so he creates a wretchedly limited portrait of world, distorting and lessening the impressions an onlooker can draw from his images.

While this abstraction, so monotonous and impersonal, threatens to damage aesthetic inquiry, Pater finds reparative value in youthful love. Not only is it an embodied affect that asserts the importance of thinking about the concrete, it has a clarifying and purifying capacity to idealize the beloved object, to make the object’s essence more apparent to the senses. The Platonic lover’s amorous attention to the beloved person or thing is a crucible wherein “the material and the spiritual are blent and fused together. While, in that fire and heat, what is spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material, on the other hand will lose its earthiness and impurity” (121). Moreover, in the observational techniques it devises and perfects to appreciate the beloved’s charms, love provides the critic the first opportunities to develop the discerning attitude he will train on the artistic object. As Pater writes, “It is of the amorous temper, therefore, you must think in connexion with Plato’s youth—of this, amid all the strength of the genius in which it is so large a constituent,—

indulging, developing, refining, the sensuous capacities, the powers of eye and ear, of the fancy also which can re-fashion, of the speech which can best respond to and reproduce, their liveliest presentments” (135).

Pater idealized the institutions of Greek learning because he saw how they were specially adapted to channel pedagogical eros, and how they might provide a template for a modern erotics of education. If Plato’s success in aesthetics comes from the “discipline” of love, a Platonic aesthetic education must be that which encourages the student to love, which makes him more capable of love, which analyzes love seriously in order to better pursue it and which assesses the import of love within the student-teacher relationship. Why then, was there such a disjunction between Pater’s personal manner and the amatory substance of his tutorials, lectures and historical fictions? The divergence between his theory and his practice can be explained by his understanding of the cultural differences between ancient and modern societies. The Greeks possessed pederasty, the educational system that devoted a whole philosophical corpus to managing and promulgating the affairs of the heart. Pater eulogizes the Dorian mode of this erotic-educational relationship by describing the constellations of the Gemini, who represent its ideal:

Brothers, comrades, who could not live without each other, [Castor and Polydeuces] were the most fitting patrons of a place in which friendship, comradeship, like theirs, came to so much. Lovers of youth they remained, those enstarred types of it, arrested thus at that moment of miraculous good fortune as a consecration of the clean, youthful friendship, “passing even the love of woman,” which, by system...elaborated into a kind of art, became an elementary part of education. A part of [Dorian] duty and discipline, it was also [the Dorians’] great solace and encouragement. The beloved and the lover, side by side through their long days of eager labour, and above all on the battlefield, became respectively, ἄτης, the hearer, and εἰσπνήλας, the inspirer; the elder inspiring the younger with his own strength and noble taste in things. (231)

The erotically grounded aesthetic training is clear here in the image of the lover inspiring his beloved “with his own strength and noble taste in things.” But Pater

experiences difficulty in appropriating this Greek pagan ideal for his contemporary audience. His description of the pederastic affection as a “clean, youthful friendship, ‘passing even the love of woman,’” refers to the biblical friendship of David and Jonathan. For homophile apologists, the Old Testament account of this intense masculine love offered a way of sanctioning the homoerotic friendships of men; the sanitizing function of the word “clean” in Pater’s description is obvious.⁹ But instead of serving as an aid to understanding pederasty better, Pater’s attempt to translate Greek ways of life into more assimilable modes of affection is glaringly incongruous due to its anachronism and its disregard for cultural context. It mystifies his readers’ understanding of the erotic relations between men in ancient Greece and our understanding of how Plato and his compatriots loved, marring our understanding of how Platonic aesthetics relate to desire.

Pater’s bowdlerism here points to a general pessimism in his texts over whether pedagogical love can flourish outside of the disciplinary conditions of ancient Greek culture. It is true, as Dowling states, that Pater’s writing “is a daring texture of covert allusions working continuously and unmistakably” to demonstrate that a liberal political project of national regeneration is “unintelligible unless viewed within the context of a Socratic eros of men loving men in spiritual procreancy” (94). He clearly thought that studying pedagogical eros could benefit young Oxford men, and hence, the nation. However, whenever Pater *directly* attempts to envision erotic education

⁹ Some readers may find it difficult to see how, from a homophobic point of view, two men that share a love that exceeds their love for women, are any less troubling than a man and a boy joined in a pederastic relationship. That David and Jonathan have become modern gay icons would support their skepticism. To understand the Victorians’ comfort with the biblical pair, we might follow David Halperin, who differentiates relationships between equal men, such as David and Jonathan, from the hierarchically structured relations found in pederasty: “It is this very emphasis on identity, similarity and mutuality that distances the friendship tradition, in its original social and discursive context, from the world of sexual love. Sexual love, in the light of the male friendship tradition, actually sounds like a contradiction in terms: sexual penetration is not the sort of thing you would do to someone you really love” (121). On the other hand, Halperin avers, “hierarchy itself is *hot*; it is indissociably bound up with at least the potential for erotic signification” (118).

outside the historical conditions that nurtured Greek civilization, he emphasizes how harshly it is opposed, how easily it goes awry and how people struggle to define its character. In *The Renaissance*, he laments the persecution Abelard suffers for his relationship to his student Heloise. In his short story “Emerald Uthwart” he depicts how James Stokes, inspired by the beauty and comportment of his school-friend, the eponymous protagonist, becomes a better scholar. Yet James struggles to understand the nature of his relationship with Emerald. “He finds the Greek or the Latin model of their antique friendship or tries to find it, in the books they read together. None fits exactly” (185). The insistence on the “antique” nature of the boys’ friendship and James’ textual searches set the standard for pedagogical *eros* in the Greek past; it cannot be understood as a modern phenomenon, or redefined for whatever era experiences it.

As Pater’s constant references to the “discipline” of Greek love and life show, he associated Greek institutions with regulative principles. The “system” of the pederastic relationship demanded that the teacher manage his emotions and comportment towards his student to educate him optimally. We will discover, however, that under inopportune modern conditions, the “art” of friendship Pater describes in Sparta has been lost; the teacher can become a threatening source to the susceptible, fragile student, either withholding the foundational love that the student needs for support, or inundating the student with such intense desire that the student’s autonomy feels threatened. Despite the vagaries of the teacher’s love, Pater’s students need to feel and return some source of love to develop into proper aesthetes and intellectuals. If Pater points his students to texts as a way to teach his lessons, it is not to push them into a reserved, austere relation with unfeeling Art, but because he imagines the artwork may have a personality as seductive and warmly nurturing as any actual ideal teacher, a personality it acquires due to the imaginative investments of the

learner. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Eve Sedgwick associates “the hermeneutics of suspicion” that characterizes contemporary critical practice with paranoia. In the effort to uncover the insidious mechanisms by which oppressive systems operate in texts, the paranoid critic must become suspicious of every word he reads, incessantly searching to see how the text is mystifying his view of the hidden meanings and ideologies it seeks to support. Understood in Kleinian terms this critic “adopts a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of and ingests from the world around one” (128). We might argue that learning how to be a critic too inspires paranoia, for when we accept our teachers’ influence, some part of us is surely aware that they are fallible sources of knowledge or that their intentions in educating us may not be altruistic. One type of student may have an easy time disavowing the teacher’s faults, while another may adopt the paranoid position, hypervigilant and suspicious about the imagined and very real dangers posed by the educator. In response to the damaging demands of paranoid epistemology, Sedgwick poses a reparative impulse, whose “fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (149). We should value Pater’s pedagogical erotics as an example of Sedgwick’s reparative practices. In texts we will examine, from *The Renaissance* to *Gaston de Latour* to *Plato and Platonism*, he uses a variety of tropes and formal tricks to imagine a fetishistic scene in which an autodidactic student encounters a work of art that has all the corporeality and allure of a human lover. Animated, the text has the capacity to nurture the student, to give it a space to develop safely from unregulated passions of the threatening teacher.

II *The Tactile Poverty of the Professional Touch*

In the course of *Plato and Platonism*, Pater refers to the Sophists as the “professional rivals” of Socrates and the “professional teachers of the art of rhetoric” (101, 116). Plato, “inheriting, expanding, the preferences and antipathies of his master” defames the Sophist as the “professional enemy of Socrates” and ensures that the epithet Sophist is a “bad name” (99). Associated so insistently with the foes of philosophy, professionalism cannot escape the disrepute that tars rhetoric. We should not see Socrates and the Sophists as opposing factions within one intellectual fraternity—it is not in that sense that they are “professional rivals”—rather, it is the Sophists’ very professionalism that contributes to their ideological quarrel with Plato and his teacher. In championing Plato then, Pater criticizes professionalism. We should understand his ostinato on expertise in ancient Greece, not merely as a historical account of intellectual rivalry, but an oblique assessment of how professionalism coloured nineteenth-century conceptions of labour, especially the educator’s labour.

Pater had reason to dwell on how the process of becoming an expert affected his contemporaries. While the professions of “law, divinity and physic” were ancient by the start of Victoria’s reign, by the end of the nineteenth century that trio was joined by a host of nascent professions. This proliferation drew the attention of many intellectuals. As Ian Small reminds us in *Conditions for Criticism*, “the professions as we know them today were a Victorian product, brought into being to serve the needs of an increasingly complex industrial society” (20). Professionalization ensured the individual’s competence in dealing with informational excess produced by rapid scientific and technological advance. By focusing on a delimited field of enquiry, undergoing specialized training to handle that area and submitting to the profession’s

disciplinary norms, the individual developed into a reliably knowing subject; his credentials marked him as a trustworthy authority. Professionalism emerged not solely to manage abundant knowledge, but also as an economic effect. As Jonathan Freedman writes in *Professions of Taste*, “the emphasis on the rationalization of time and space wrought by a mature capitalist culture leads to the organization of life paths into distinct ‘careers,’ and thus to the further rationalization of the career into the self-defining, self-privileging shape of the profession” (52). Moreover, for a capitalism constantly seeking new wares to hawk, professionalization commoditized knowledge. One usually pays to be trained and accredited by the professional class one aspires to, and knowledge can then be judged not by the pleasure it brings or whether it is interesting or good to know, but how useful and valuable it is in shaping one’s career.

Mainly, the critical tradition on Pater sees him as anti-professional, uncomfortable with his roles as institutionalized educator and expert aesthete. This view begins with his biographer A.C. Benson, and can be traced down to the relatively recent arguments of Small and Freedman. Small argues that professionalization was accompanied by a shift in the kinds of authority that had to be invoked to make critical judgments. Noting that *The Renaissance* “eschewed most of the paraphernalia and devices of contemporary academic commentary” he traces how Pater, writing an paradisciplinary work, flouts the conventions of professional art historians and critics, attempting to “rehabilitate individual authority, and to disregard an institutional authority based on scholarly consensus” (93). Similarly, it is Pater’s refusal to obey the disciplinary standards of professional educators in philosophy that explains the critical fortunes of *Plato and Platonism*. As Small concludes, “In *Marius the Epicurean* and *Plato and Platonism* he was trying to write works in which and for which authority existed in the author alone....such a characterization explains the reception of *Plato and Platonism*; it could be welcomed as a work of art, because it

eschewed the rigour and paraphernalia of scholarship—it did not, that is announce itself as containing scholarly knowledge” (111). Taking another approach to anti-professionalism, Freedman notes that British professionals were particularly intent “to differentiate themselves from what they saw as the acquisitive ethos of the mercantile classes or orders” (52). He understands Pater’s “emphasis on the appreciation of fine or special moments of intense experience” as a leisurely, non-productive challenge to the bourgeois economy that fuels this work-oriented avarice. Freedman and Small’s arguments clarify our understanding of how Pater’s work reacted *generally* to the reality of professionalization and how that work contests the professional authority of his colleagues, but neither set of arguments helps us understand how Pater’s antipathy or anxiety towards professionalism affected his attitude towards educating others. Exemplifying the anti-mercantile feeling that Freedman identifies, Pater’s colleague and friend Mark Pattison complains that contemporary education has “sunk into a trade, and like trading Sophists, we have not cared to keep on hand a larger stock than we could dispose of in the season” (*Suggestions* 167). Employing similar rhetoric in his reports on examination reform, Archibald Sayce, professor of Assyriology at Oxford, despairs that students who “play the sophist best will gain the best place.” Such students come to the university “not to learn, but to traffic in learning; not to gain knowledge for its own sake, but for what it will fetch” (837). Sayce and Pattison’s condemnations of sophist commercialism among undergraduates and dons show how classical instruction provided its scholars with a special discourse to describe their anxieties over the professionalization of education. Searching in ancient Greek culture for analogues for contemporary life, Victorian Hellenists make the Sophist the prototype of the greedy professional.

Pater, like his colleagues, uses the Sophist to give a model of professional education a bad name. We might expect that forced to earn his bread as an educator,

he would identify partially with the Sophists, who in their conduct and careers bear similarities to Oxbridge dons. But he actually casts his lot with Socrates, who ironically regards himself as “something less than a wise man, a philosopher only, a mere seeker after such wisdom as he might after all never attain” (88). Refusing expertise, he is a student who helps his fellows to learn by displaying his own autodidactic courses and accompanying others on theirs. Not assuming the professional role of teacher, he can hardly profit from it; we are told he “never touched” the money of the rich men’s sons who followed him. Unworldly in the extreme, he is only invested in becoming wiser and helping others to also become wise. Pater writes: “If one, if Socrates, seemed to become the teacher of another, it was but by thinking aloud for a few moments over his own lesson, or leaning upon that other as he went along that difficult way which each one must really prosecute for himself... The Platonic Socrates, in fact, does not propose to teach anything” (160). By contrast, the Sophists embrace professional authority as “the experts—wise men, who proposed to make other people as wise as themselves, wise in that sort of wisdom regarding which we can really test others, and let them test us, not with the merely approximate results of the Socratic method” (88). And above all, these wise-men are all too aware of how their intellectual capital will be lucrative. Pater notes how they are ensconced in their “large fashionable expensive schools” (94) and remarks how devoted Greek parents “pay readily large sums” for their children’s “instruction in what it was found so useful to know” (89). The portrait here is not merely of parental sacrifice, but of exploitation and gullibility since the Sophists have no care for their student’s edification, have no philanthropic calling to do their teaching—Pater defines them primarily in economic terms as

the class of persons through whom, in the most effectual manner, supply met demand, the demand for education, asserted by that marvellously ready Greek people, when the youthful mind in them became suddenly aware of the coming of virile capacity, and they desired to be made by rules of art better speakers,

better writers and accountants, than any merely natural, unassisted gifts, however fortunate, could make them. (88)

In Pater's economic description of the Sophists, we detect how the demands of the market they attempt to exploit cynically actually undermine any capacity they have to educate their clients. Pater insists that as bad as the Sophists appear, "the chosen educators of the public" do "but fan and add fuel to the fire in which Greece...is flaming itself away" (94). That is, in the types of services they provide, they merely feed the consumerist desire of their paying public. These "ostensible or professional Sophists" were "not so much [the public's] intellectual directors as the pupils or followers of it. They did but make it...abound the more in its own sense, like to keeper...of some wild beast, which he knows how to command by a well considered-obedience to all its varying humours (95). Here, the rules of the market invert order and the teacher abdicates leadership to follow the public. Although the Athenian public has sought out the Sophists precisely because it is aware of some "virile capacity" in itself to be elevated by "rules of art," the Sophists are incapable of developing the public's latent masculinity. By submitting to the laws of economic determination they find themselves the caretakers—not even the trainers—of a beast whom they can only control through gratifying its animal drives. Pater does not speak kindly of this bestial public, and only overcomes his sense of its menacing, savage potential in the following description:

The great sophist was indeed the Athenian public itself, Athens, as the willing victim of its own gifts, its own flamboyancy, well nigh worn out now by the mutual friction of its own parts, given over completely to hazardous political experiment with the irresponsibility which is ever the great vice of democracy, ever ready to float away any whither, to misunderstand, or forget or discredit its own past. (94)

Without the guidance of teachers who conceive their students as more than their clients, and intervene to refine or check desire, the Athenian public, once aspiring to virility, becomes effete. Here when Pater invokes the foppish enervated masturbator to

characterize the agitations of competing elements in the polity, he draws on the rhetoric of classical republican theory, in which the *effeminatus* is “empty or negative symbol at once of civic enfeeblement and of the monstrous self-absorption that becomes visible in a society at just the moment at which...private interest has begun to prevail against those things that concern the public welfare” (Dowling 8). If we remember that Pater is writing at the end of an century in which a vastly expanded franchise, increasing buying power and developing consumer capitalism had given thousands an unprecedented power to realize their individual desires, we recognize that in portraying the “ruinous fluidity” of the Athenians (94), the “centrifugal, the irresponsible, the Ionian or Asiatic” tendency (91), he portrays late- nineteenth century Britain, in which capital enables people to gratify their desires just as easily as the masturbator satisfies himself. What such societies need to keep them from flying apart are agents, who like Plato regulate desire. Against Ionian fluidity, Plato urges “an effectual desire towards the Dorian order and *ascêsis*, asserts everywhere the principle of outline, in political and moral life; in the education which is to fit men for it (98). This is the “salutary, strictly European tendency” that asserts that the most precious thing in the world is “human reason, calm and sane” (93). The Hegelian synthesis of these opposing tendencies reveals the character of the ideal state.

Clearly then, Pater’s unease with the mercantile aspects of professional education is not merely a classist aversion to handling filthy lucre or laboring to make a living. But neither is it simply a reaction against the avarice associated with trafficking. He partially dislikes the commodification of education because of the model of human interaction it produces and the philosophy of handling persons and objects that it underpins. Freedman argues that professionals reassured themselves that they were not succumbing to the mercantile ethos through “a strategy of self-conscious delusion” (53). They told themselves that to be a professional was to be

governed by gentlemanly behavioral codes, not the laws of the market. Sheldon Rothblatt explains how according to this ideological recasting, while the business man was rewarded by profits, and was distanced from his clients by an “impersonal market situation,” the genteel professional was not paid, but given an *honorarium* to reward his attention to his clients, whom he attended with friendly interest, out of a sense of duty. While the acquisitive nature of the businessman was linked to brash and aggressive” behavior, the gentleman possessed a decorous and sensitive “self restraint.” Now as we have seen, Pater does not wish to recuperate the term “professional.” Therefore, he does not use the differentiation Rothblatt outlines to valorize the professional over the businessman. He accepts the collapse of the two concepts, binding the image of the sophist expert to financial transactions. But he is still capable of opposing the compromised term “professional” to another privileged category by appealing to codes of right conduct and decorum. He never explicitly names this category, but we might call it “amateur,” remembering that the amateur is a “lover.” While the Sophist professional is alienated and out of touch with his clients because he handles them solely through the cash nexus, the amateur, like Socrates, loves his clients, has close contact with them and as someone in touch with another person, must develop tact to avoid abusing the intimacy he enjoys.

The professional’s poor contact with his clients and his tactlessness is not a mere social matter, but an aesthetic one, for it leads him to mishandle people and their emotions as if they had no reality—the brusqueness of the professional betrays an insensitivity to souls that is linked to an insensitivity to statues and style. Pater writes, “The essential vice of sophistry, as Plato conceived it, was that for it no real things existed” (110). Yet we have seen how being lovingly convinced of the sensuous reality of things is exactly the first step to developing a refined aesthetic taste. As

Pater presents them, Sophist pedagogy and philosophy are contaminated by principles that make a virtue of the distant social relations associated with professionalism:

Art, the art of oratory...in this case, how one should write or speak really inflammatory discourses about love, write love-letters, so to speak, that shall really get at the heart they're meant for—that was a matter on which the Sophists had thought much professionally. And the debate introduced in the *Phaedrus* regarding the secret of success in proposals of love or friendship turns properly on this: whether it is necessary, or even advantageous, for one who would be a good orator, or writer, a poet, a good artist generally, to know, and consciously to keep himself in contact with, the truth of his subject as he *knows* or *feels* it; or only with what other people, perhaps quite indolently, *think*, or suppose others to think, about it. And here the charge of Socrates against those professional teachers of the art of rhetoric comes to be, that, with much superficial aptitude in the conduct of the matter, they neither reach, nor put others in the way of reaching, that intellectual ground of things (of the consciousness of love for instance, when they are to open their lips, and presumably their souls, about that) in true contact with which alone can there be a real mastery in dealing with them. (116)

Here Pater emphasizes how when the Sophists think “professionally” about how to treat the subject of love, they do not feel they must have any convictions or impassioned feelings towards the subject of love to “write love-letters”—they do not even have to know what other people quite earnestly feel about the subject. Now, the problem here is whether a good artist need “keep himself in contact with the truth of his subject as he knows or feels it” and that subject may be any besides love. But considering the perceptual powers that Pater associates with inamoration, that the subject *is* love is important. Investigating how to artfully pen love-letters that inflame their addressee’s heart is to inquire into the proper (and hence successful) way that the pederastic lover should go about wooing his beloved. Pater’s allusion to the *Phaedrus* alerts us that he is considering the erotic-educational relationship of the *eremenos* and *erastes*. But the man who follows the precepts of professional rhetoricians will find that his letters fail as oratorical art, and worse, his writing will fail to kindle his beloved’s desire. As Pater writes, the Sophist’s “superficial aptitude” cannot “reach, nor put others in the way of reaching” the “intellectual ground of things”— here the

“consciousness of love.” Neglecting to plumb the depths of his love to find its foundation, the lover can hardly make the beloved aware of his own desire for the lover, nor of the philosophical basis of love in general. Furthermore, Pater complains that with the Sophists “art began too precipitately, as mere form without matter; a thing of disconnected empiric rules, caught from the mere surface of other people’s productions, in congruity with a general method which everywhere ruthlessly severed branch and flower from its natural root—art from one’s own vivid sensation or belief”(105). Sophist aesthetic instruction is doomed for at least two reasons. First, its “general method” is fundamentally flawed since the Sophist derives artistic rules through the superficial empiric analysis of “other people’s productions” rather than theorizing according to how art sensuously touches him or those others. Thus he avoids the fundamental question the aesthetic critic must ask: “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book to me? What effect does it really produce on me?” (*Renaissance* xix) The Sophist overlooks how art affects our “vivid sensation or belief” by severing the connection of art from the sensate life—a connection Pater presents as natural through his metaphor of the severed blossom. Second, even if the Sophists understood the proper relation of form and matter, not deriving aesthetic principles through their “disconnected empiric rules” their methodology cannot anchor aesthetic inquiry, because it fails to inspire love and because it fails to envision love as an affect grounded in real, personal feelings and real objects.

Pater’s clearest argument that the professional has a touch that is poorly equipped to teach aesthetic tact and communicate love appears in *The Renaissance*, where he traces the education of the art critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

At twenty-one he enters the University of Halle, to study theology, as his friends desire; instead he becomes the enthusiastic translator of Herodotus. The condition of Greek learning in German schools and universities had fallen, and there were no professors at Halle who could satisfy his sharp intellectual

craving. Of his professional education he always speaks with scorn, claiming to have been his own teacher from first to last. His appointed teachers did not perceive that a new source of culture was within their hands. *Homo vagus et inconstans!*—one of them pedantically reports of the future pilgrim to Rome, unaware on which side his irony is whetted...But that Winckelmann, the votary of the gravest of intellectual traditions, should get nothing but an attempt at suppression from the professional guardians of learning is what may well surprise us. (143)

As in *Plato and Platonism*, here we find professional education criticized. Through his account of Winckelmann's "appointed teachers" Pater laments that "an attempt at suppression" should replace an opportunity for education, which is related to *procession*, a leading out, from the Latin *educere*. We might imagine here the hand of the ideal teacher wrapped around that of his student as they progress towards learning, the teacher helping the student to express what he believes and thinks about the world. But poor Winckelmann is mishandled by the professional guardians of learning, whose dealings with their student betray their aesthetic insensitivity. Winckelmann is destined to develop an innovative aesthetic criticism and is therefore a "new source of culture" much like the artistic objects that archaeology uncovers for his analysis. Yet although he rests within the hands of his professors and before their eyes like some Rosetta Stone, they cannot "perceive" him or his worth—though they have grasp of him, they do not have the tact to feel him and they let him elude them, taking his education into his own hands.

This failure to truly touch Winckelmann, to draw something out of him is not merely an aesthetic failure, but an erotic one. While *The Renaissance* closes by examining how Winckelmann initiates a "new sense" in artistic matters despite the fallen conditions of professionalized higher learning, the text's first essay, "Two Early French Stories", touches upon the more successful and celebrated education of the abbess Heloise by her lover, the medieval philosopher Abelard. What Pater finds most effective in their sexually charged relationship is emblemized by the image of their

hands touching. Abelard is introduced as “the great scholar and the great lover” (3). In him “earthly passion” connects “the liberty of the heart with the free play of human intelligence” (3). In noting the greatness of Abelard’s passion and intellect, Pater is not merely descriptive but is actually theorizing how being an intellectual and a paramour might be correlated; the parallelism in the phrase suggests that being a gifted scholar and lover are somehow equivalent. The reason for this becomes clear when we examine the pedagogical scene staged around Abelard and Heloise. Pater addresses us “You conceive the temptations of the scholar, who, in such dreamy tranquility, amid the bright and busy spectacle of the ‘Island,’ lived in a world of something like shadows; and that for one who knew so well how to assign the exact value to every abstract thought, those restraints which lie on the consciences of other men had been relaxed” (4). Interpellated as fellow scholars, we envision Abelard on the Île de la Cité, surrounded by the vivacity that springs from the religious and intellectual culture of Notre-Dame. Yet instead of benefitting optimally from this “bright and busy spectacle” Abelard is noctambulant in his “dreamy tranquility,” drowning over the “abstract thought” that so often merely shadows the real. In his “world of something like shadows” Abelard recalls Tennyson’s Lady of Shallot, who, alone on her isle, sees reality refracted through her magic glass, and who, shut up with her own thought grows “half-sick with shadows.” Now although Abelard’s traffic with abstract philosophy leads him away from the bright, real world, his exclusive engagement with abstraction is a disorder that allowed to work its way to the extreme, will effect its own cure. Because he learns to evaluate every abstract thought, he loses some discretion, making him more receptive to the transgressive desire that might ground him in the concrete. Thus, when Abelard and Heloise sit together at home to “refine a little further on the nature of abstract ideas, ‘Love made himself of the party with them’” (3). Pater’s personification here identifies desire with the uninvited guest who

makes a company into a crowd, but Pater welcomes this intrusion insofar as it brings the couple downwards from the rarefied atmosphere where they discuss.

Contemplating the correspondence that issues from Love's advent, Pater notes how Abelard and Heloise "write their letters—letters with a wonderful outpouring of soul—in medieval Latin" and how "Abelard . . . writes also in Latin those treatises in which he tries to find a ground of reality below the abstractions of philosophy, as one bent on trying all things by their congruity with human experience, who had felt the hand of Heloise, and looked into her eyes, and tested the resources of humanity in her great and energetic nature" (6). Even knowing the writing conventions that governed medieval intellectual interchange, we may find it remarkable that Abelard and Heloise write about their most intimate affairs in the dead language of church and university, as opposed to their native French. It is Pater's mild surprise at this fact that causes him to interrupt his own critical narrative to note the "wonderful outpouring of soul" the letters contain, even in Latin. Yet the point of foregrounding the language both treatises and correspondence are written in is to suggest how desire transforms the remote Latin that is used to express thoughts that are remote from quotidian experience. Inamorated, Abelard strives to find a "ground of reality below the abstractions of philosophy," intent on making abstruse matters respond to "human experience," because he has adoringly "felt the hand of Heloise." Unlike Winckelmann's teachers, Abelard is able to perceive his student, to attain contact with her, because he loves her. This loving touch sharpens his own perception of how reality relates to human experience. Heloise, also transfigured by the tactile nature of her education, gains deeper understanding. Men remark that she could "penetrate into the mysteries of the older world, she had become a sorceress, like the Celtic druidesses" (3). Winckelmann's struggle to understand antiquity is not so easily

won—deprived of a professorial touch by professional distance, he only understands ancient art through hard struggle.

History reveals how the consummated desire of Abelard and Heloise, once discovered, leads to their persecution, and disturbed the conditions of their intellectual intercourse. Taking leave of the lovers, Pater condemns the professional values and antagonistic narrow-mindedness that hounded them.

The opposition into which Abelard is thrown, which gives its colour to his career, which breaks his soul to pieces, is a no less subtle opposition than that between the merely professional, official, hireling ministers of that system, with their ignorant worship of system for its own sake, and the true child of light, the humanist, with reason and heart and senses quick, while theirs were almost dead. He reaches out towards, he attains, modes of ideal living, beyond the prescribed limits of that system, though in essential germ, it may be, contained within it. (5)

Abelard is a type for the aesthete here. Pater's admires him because he keeps his "reason and heart and senses quick" –alert to impressions. But while he "reaches out towards" a better way of life, raising again the metaphors of tact and manipulation that Pater associates with fruitful aesthetic experience, his opponents perceive nothing with their deadened senses. Pater correlates this anesthesia with a purview of life has dwindled to the "merely professional" and official. Once more Pater links professionalism to that greed that insulates an individual from contact with the world and its inhabitants. While the humanist Abelard is intimately concerned with his fellow man, the professionals, concerned primarily with finances, not fraternity, are "hireling." They have become obsessed with dogma that defines their spiritual system, and more importantly, that defines their professional roles within that system. In describing this "ignorant worship of system for its own sake" Pater's phrasing evokes "the love of art for its own sake" that he recommends, suggesting that absorbed in the former, Abelard's enemies miss out on the latter.

The austere professionalism that so violently disrupted the romance of Abelard and Heloise had one virtue: in separating the lovers, it provided the occasion for the Abelard's *Historia Calamitum* and Heloise's passionate responses to her former teacher and lover. In referring to their letters in *Plato and Platonism*, Pater suggests their texts possess the power to seduce readers into the fulfilling erotic relationship they lost. He likens the Sophists to lawyers who use words in whatever ways will achieve their ends although they "do not care very much about justice itself" (107), but opposing the Sophist's mechanical principles of action, so ungrounded in conviction, is the "principle on which Abelard and Heloise wrote their love letters" and which made Plato write "kindled and enkindling words on love and friendship in the *Symposium*" and which governed the way "a certain book discoursed of love to Paolo and Francesca, till they found themselves—well! in the *Inferno*; so potent it was" (107). This set of texts about love foster amorous relationships in a world where humans risk losing contact with each other.

III *The Femme Fatale's Pedagogy of Excess*

If in *The Renaissance* Pater is concerned with pedagogical situations in which there is not enough love to aid the student's progress, he investigates the effects of excessive desire on the learner and teacher in his late text, *Gaston de Latour* (1895). That unfinished novel traces the intellectual development of its eponymous protagonist during the 16th century. Gaston's aesthetic education is shaped by several influences, of which Queen Margaret of Navarre is merely one. But of all his mentors, Margaret concerns us most, because she is described most with the rhetoric of institutional education and because her portrayal shows most elegantly how critical

autonomy can be threatened by the teacher's desire within an erotically charged education.

Fully developed female characters are rare in Pater's writing. Margaret has the singular privilege of being a woman who interested him not because of maternal principles, nor piety, not solely for beauty, but also for her intellect. For this interest, only Heloise rivals Margaret in his work, but he does not celebrate the abbess in her own right, but solely in her collaboration with Abelard. Only a paragraph is devoted to her in *The Renaissance* along with some stray lines in *Plato and Platonism*, but Margaret is fleshed out in a full imaginary portrait. Although in his essay on "Style" Pater defines the "scholarly conscience" as the "male conscience" and dismisses the "female conscience" as that which "traverses so lightly, so amiably" over intellectual ground (8), with Margaret, he investigates the extent to which feminine traits and appetites might not hinder intellectual power, but might support it. To consider how Margaret might serve a productive or positive purpose for Pater is to read against most critical accounts of the character, which overlook that she is the most arresting character by far in *Gaston de Latour*, and see her as an unconscious product of Pater's fear of powerful women rather than a solution to a particular artistic or intellectual problem.¹⁰ Hence Billie Andrew Inman sees Margaret as an "approximate surrogate" for the decadent French novelist Rachilde, whom she believes to have stirred Pater's "fear and hatred" (98). She speculates that Pater knew Rachilde's novel *Monsieur Venus* and was offended because it chronicled how "such a highly intellectual young

¹⁰ For exhaustive discussion of this see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Dijkstra's sweeping sense of how misogynist themes inflect 19th century art can be linked to a feminist politics that polices how women are presented culturally, hoping to improve women's lot by critiquing bad representations and the politics they spawn. Though his approach may seem unnuanced or outdated to contemporary readers, with qualification, his interpretations and vast catalogue of visual and literary texts give a good foundation to build arguments about the *femme fatale*. For further critique of Dijkstra, see Martha Vicinus' "The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?"

woman with an excellent writing style” could conceive a character that was “a sadist, a vampire, and the destroyer of a beautiful young man” (98). Pater’s “revulsion was likely to find expression” and did so in Margaret (98). This logic, based on very thin evidence, is difficult to follow. Why would Pater express his distaste for a characterization by replicating it, especially when circulating the type might encourage other intellectual women to write about the *femme fatale*?¹¹ Furthermore, while Inman claims Pater harbors “hatred of Margaret of Valois” he more obviously is fascinated by her, critical where he must be, but far from repulsed.

Gaston de Latour can make productive use of Margaret because the novel is partially a study of how knowledge grows out of various forms of self-absorption and introspection, concepts misogynistically linked in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature to the image of the self-adoring femme-fatale. Early in the novel, Pater nominates Montaigne as the intellectual who best represents the spirit of the sixteenth century, tracing the thinker’s genius to an egotistical root: “But beyond and above all the various interests upon which the philosopher’s mind was for ever afloat, there was one subject always in prominence—himself” (54). If, as Montaigne claims, his own “egotism was but the pattern of the true intellectual life of every one” we must understand Queen Margaret as his female fellow-scholar who achieves a profound intellectual life through narcissistic contemplation. That is why Pater constantly connects Margaret’s intellect to her self-indulgent rituals. When, with Gaston, we find her at the Louvre, she is in her apartment which is both bedroom and “a student’s chamber as seriously arranged for its purpose as any monastic *scriptorium*: the tapestries...a security also against the intrusion upon this charmed area of any quite simple thoughts from the world without”

¹¹ One such woman would be Pater’s friend and disciple, Vernon Lee, whom we will meet in the next chapter. Pater’s portrait of the vampiric Mona Lisa, itself influenced by Swinburne’s poetry and art criticism, is arguably an influence on Lee’s collection of short stories, *Hauntings* (1890). The text features two wonderfully wicked *femmes fatales*.

(97). Described as a “place of strange worship” where its owner serves simultaneously as “idol and priestess” this sequestered vanity room recalls the “narrow chamber of the individual mind” Pater describes in the conclusion to the *Renaissance*, showing us how Margaret’s complex thoughts, distinguished from the simplistic philosophies of the world without, emerge only from her solipsism. It is not surprising then, that Pater displays her scholarly or “clerkly” abilities by portraying her writing her renowned memoirs. While Montaigne analyzes himself in his self-regarding *Essays*, she “takes all the world into her confidence about all her people and herself”, “writing, writing constantly with a sort of really classic instinct for the genius of her tongue” (97). Unlike bluestockings whose charm is ruined by their intellect, Margaret’s “clerkliness did but add the more to the impression of cunning and wizardry about her, again like that of Homer’s Circe—δεωή θεός” (97). Thus, her navel-gazing only serves to increase the grandeur and charm of her self, making it worthy of more narcissistic attention.

Margaret demands that others share her own great opinion of her self, a yearning that drives her to be “queen, empress, deity if it might be, of men’s hearts.” Therefore she studies love and cultivates that beauty which attracts it (102). She impresses Gaston with the “curious scholarship of love” in which she seems “a graduate, a doctor” (103) and so great is her knowledge that she might pen a “book on the physiology of love...with triumphant suitability” (103). She is no mere researcher, however, but also a teacher. Observing the “best way of presenting her personal gifts” (97), she also possesses a general knowledge of aesthetics and the ability to develop the aesthetic merits of others. She gathers “the virginal, the really white flowers of both sexes” to her salon, where under her direction, exposed to her beauty, they blossom, becoming her “willing, devoted, thirsty subjects” (102).

From forgotten old houses in remote corners of France, like choice furniture or untouched portraits, they had come on demand; and with the lapse of a month

or a year in this singular atmosphere, the exotic personality, the hand, the eye, the lip, the inflammable fancy within of which these were eloquent, had even surpassed the utmost imaginings of the exotic fine art which had discovered to others as to themselves their high aesthetic value...They filled a place made ready for them by the books, the pictures, the very fashions of the day—nay more than filled it, they superseded all this daringly. (102)

Margaret's refined sensibility makes everything she does of aesthetic moment. Here, her selection of adoring courtiers is both matriculation and a show of connoisseurship; those she desires come to Paris like so many freshmen, and so much "choice furniture." As if they were arriving at a university, all is outfitted for their comfortable edification as they fill "a place made ready for them by the books, the pictures, the very fashions of the day." So much bric-a-brac themselves, they are meant to complement these modish items, but those objects also are to instruct them. After a "month or a year in the singular atmosphere" of Margaret's care, they are transformed into artworks that surpass and supplement the *objets d'art* that inspire and edify them. Dwelling with Montaigne, Gaston ponders: "If Circe could turn men into swine, could she also release them again" (46)? In Paris, we see Margaret, whom Pater constantly compares to Circe, involved in the cultural work that elevates beasts into men. Her subjects' "inflammable fancy" shows the extent of their increased aesthetic receptivity—their imagination is primed to catch fire over this or that new sensation or idea. Balancing this inner transformation, the changes in hand, eye and lip tell of an outer refinement. The overall amelioration makes Margaret's students more worthy to be her subjects; her pride allows only the finest devotees to join her in her self-worship.

The preceding represents just one aspect of the aesthetic education Margaret offers, the practical side of artistic self-fashioning. Yet she enables theoretical speculation on aesthetics as well, showing us this side of her influence through Gaston. The Frenchman, "at home in this singular place like Circe's enchanted island"

(103), finds himself almost exclusively pondering “the religion of physical beauty...the ‘impassioned love of passion,’ love for love’s sake as a doctrine and a discipline, a science and a fine art all in one, its evocative power over what finely educated senses must straightaway declare delightful, desirable, in the sphere of imageries, colour, music, words refining the very lips that uttered them” (102). The syntax of this section is snarled, even more than usually for Pater, but he seems to mean that love has an analytical affinity for beauty. By considering or experiencing “love for love’s sake” one is able to picture what refined aesthetic sensibility must immediately experience as “delightful, desirable” in artistic matters—it is as if love would enable one to derive a law of the compellingly beautiful. For her own studies, Margaret investigates “the question (of a kind seductive for the thoughtful) in what exact proportions a cool, grave, self-possessed intelligence might coexist with the physical throb of youth, could conspire with it” (103). In what seems to be Pater’s idealized evocation of nerdy or scholarly chic, the queen is directed to this topic by gazing upon the fresh virility of Gaston, whose “clerkly distinction was in truth to the taste of Margaret, as the final expression of the taste of that day” (103). If Margaret suggests to Gaston that love’s carnality may reveal certain aesthetic laws to the philosopher, here she ponders and demonstrates how aesthetic and erotic gazing may further not only aesthetics, but thinking in general. Insofar as Gaston’s “clerkly distinction” expresses the tastes of the day, he is being read as an object that obeys general rules of art, fashion, culture. But Margaret also appreciates the “trim, discreet, almost priestly scholar correcting, annotating the great lady’s manuscripts” and the adjectives describing him seem suffused with Margaret’s *personal* desire rather than any widely recognizable cultural aesthetic. Noting that Gaston is “nominally a very proper secretary,” Pater’s phrasing suggests that Margaret’s relations with her scribe are potentially not so proper, at least in her mind. Appropriately, the erotic expectancy

in the air between the priestly scholar and the adulterous queen (a latter Faustina, Pater calls her) deepens her philosophical speculation on the very compatibility of intellectual labor and youthful passion.

Margaret's reflection on amatory matters establishes her as heir to the assumptions and methodology Pater associates with Plato in *Plato and Platonism*. For Margaret and Gaston, "both alike absorbed students, fellow-students, there was certainly a wonderful charm when, as with the poet of the *Vita Nuova*, with Petrarch, with sinful Abelard of old here in Paris, such grave thoughts as seem naturally alien from carnal love enter its service, put on its livery, become its accomplices" (103). Margaret investigates love as the intellectual foundation for matters that seem wholly unconcerned with love, too weighty and abstract to connect with desire. Thus she provides the foundation that moves Gaston to consider the specific connection of love and aesthetics. The figures Margaret and her fellow-student esteem link *Gaston de Latour* to the other works in which Pater formulates a theory of erotic aesthetics. Recall that Abelard, having lovingly held the hand of his student Heloise is able to resist the metaphysical tendencies that Pater believes impair aesthetic inquiry in *The Renaissance*. Recall too how the Plato of *Plato and Platonism* derives his analytical "power over the sensible world," because he is "a lover, a great lover, somewhat after the manner of Dante," author of the *Vita Nuova* (120, 121).

Given the treatment of love as a complement to intellectual growth and aesthetic sensibility, we might expect Pater to cast Margaret and Gaston as a new Abelard and Heloise, dramatizing the licentious behavior suggested by Margaret's thoughtful gaze at her "nominally very proper secretary" (103). Earlier in the novel, Pater writes that "Lodged in Abelard's quarter he [Gaston] all but repeats Abelard's typical experience" (64). But his Heloise is not Margaret, but his Huguenot wife, Colombe. The historical Abelard and Heloise share a passion that enables their

intellectual growth, but Gaston fails to nurture his “new Heloise, [who has] capacities doubtless, as he reflected afterwards regretfully, for a refined and serious happiness” (64). For him, their marriage “seemed to have but the transitoriness, as also the guilt of vagrant love” and a “connexion so light of motive, so inexpressive of...his character” that it might have been regarded finally as a mere mistake, or an unmeaning accident in his career” (65). In Pater’s scheme of erotic pedagogy, Gaston is guilty of being the teacher who loved too little. When his wife and child are killed in the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre while he is away from them, he becomes painfully and guiltily aware of his lost opportunity to develop her “rudimentary aptitude for the really high things himself had represented to her fancy” (67). It is partially Gaston’s mourning for his wife and child that commits him to the abstinence and indifference that helps him handle Margot.

Pater dismisses all erotic fulfillment between the queen and scholar, noting that to Gaston’s “good fortune,” as he comes and goes on his “learned business” with the poison-daisy of France, he and she share no sentiment but “a kind of mutual indifference” (103). Pater elaborates, “For, as with physical delicacies, if you wished to sip, as you might wine, to enjoy in veritable connoisseurship the singularly attempered character of the so gifted Margaret a calm though kindly indifference was, in fact, the proper condition for doing so—an indifference which would have formed, in truth, one of the three constituent chapters in that book on the physiology of love which she might have penned with triumphant suitability to the humour of her generation” (103). So important is affective neutrality in dealing with Margaret that Pater repeats his lament later: “With a kind of ultimate indifference on both sides, how pleasant could Margaret, Queen Margot be to those whom the fortune of the hour brought her. Only, if her heart moved at eye or hand, if that malediction of her love entered into the [...] it was equally fatal to slave or rebel” (*sic*) (129).

Now why does Margaret only benefit those with whom she reciprocates a feeling of indifference? And what does Pater mean by this term, so prevalent in *Gaston de Latour*? Here it is associated with aesthetic principles of judgment and taste that are vividly rendered through the oenophile's art. If you wish "to sip, as you might wine, to enjoy in veritable connoisseurship, the singularly attempered character of the so gifted Margaret" you must operate under a kindly "indifference." In the prescription to handle a personality indifferently, to experience such an encounter like a wine-tasting, we see the conditions for aesthetic criticism Pater outlined in as early a text as *The Renaissance*:

The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements. To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book, La Gioconda, the hills of Carrara, Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we say, in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure. (xx)

Kevin Ohi identifies indifference as a multivalent "key term in Pater's aesthetics" noting that it "sometimes indicates that for which the spectator aims—disinterested engagement—and sometimes that which, in a work of art, inspires fascination" (17). In raising the concept of "disinterested engagement" Ohi alludes to the emotional and mental ideal in a Kantian aesthetic encounter, an interaction that here provides the rules of engagement for Margaret's *social* encounters. In optimally interacting with those whom she improves and entertains with her gifts, Margaret adopts the merciful indifference of a critic, dispassionately involved with them, appreciating them as artworks. It is with an indifferent eye that she benignly views Gaston "as the final expression of the taste of that day, the hour, the moment" (103). Guided by similar principles, he espies in her "the cunning *Bella Donna* whose physiognomy haunts so much of the art-work of [his] time, the visible form or presentment of an unseen force

moulding and remoulding, after its pattern, all one saw”(99). But, when instead of merely *appreciating* with touch or sight, the queen’s “heart is moved at eye or hand,” she fails to be Kant’s disinterested aesthete, and the “malediction of her love” destroys her beloved. Why destruction? Margaret is not merely an embodiment of a love innocuously attached to the visual world, she incarnates what Pater terms “erotic pride” (101). Pater suggests that Margaret is beleaguered constantly in the political realm, married against her will by her brothers and mother, made queen of a “rude little mountainous dominion” and doomed “not to be Queen of France” (92, 93), fated for “long years of banishment or imprisonment” and made to wage wars constantly to guard her safety (93). Externally threatened in this way, at all costs she will maintain her self-regard, her self-rule, and her position as queen of hearts. Conscious of her own “inalienable, incommunicable personal distinction” she claims a narcissistic superiority over others. As a proof of their humble love, and to preserve and prove her unassailable autonomy, she demands the “voluntary yet so ruinous servility of others: their bodily or mental decrease—their suicide let us say!—as just one grain of incense consumed, wholly consumed, on the red coal” (100). Her love is the blaze that fascinates and finally incinerates the reluctant, flaring forth all the more fiercely to embrace her willing victim, urging him, moth-like, to sacrifice. Margaret’s lapse into love therefore does not merely result in an interested judgment, which is a failure of aesthetic response; it is linked with the destruction of a subject meant to be engaged aesthetically.

We might think of this unfortunate moment when Margaret fails to regulate her desires as Pater’s layered meditation on the manifold ways an aesthetic education can go awry. First, we see the teacher not properly approaching her student, a failure of both aesthetic and ethical conduct, because the right way, the “kindly” or humane manner, of handling another is represented in the rules of engagement that structure

artistic encounters. The damage wrought by the failed relation is complexly realized. The lapse in connoisseurship may threaten the student's belief in pedagogical authority because the teacher has been seen doing something "wrong," but more importantly for Pater, the flaring of desire gives a bad mimetic example and voids the opportunity to practice proper aesthetic principles. Recall that Margaret and Gaston *do* enjoy a fortunate relationship, that of mutual indifference. We might profitably say *mirrored* indifference, since in *Gaston de Latour* Pater is interested in how an individual reflects what it beholds and ponders and how it learns from self-speculation: "And glancing across his mirror (how that age doated on its mirrors!) Gaston saw himself also closely enough conformed to the aesthetic demand of the day, that he too had taken the impress and colour of his age, the hue (like the insect on the tree) of what he mentally fed on" (110); "If according to the Platonic doctrine people become like what they see, surely the omnipresences of fine art around one must re-touch, at least in the case of the sensitive, what is still mobile in a human countenance (90). The phrase "a kind of ultimate indifference on both sides" suggests an object and its reflection beyond the plane of the looking-glass, a symmetry in which one side mirrors the other to create the conditions necessary for disinterested aesthetic judgment. In imitating her affective state, Gaston is able to enjoy his queen in "veritable connoisseurship" as one of the "fairer forms of nature and human life" identified in *The Renaissance* (xx). Insofar as the novel tracks his impressions, we may understand him as the ideal aesthete explaining and exploring Margaret's "singularly attempered character" by "analysing it and reducing it to its elements" (*Renaissance*, xx). But Gaston's critical distance is not secure. We sense that one day he may look at Margaret's eyes to find no cool regard to return his regard. When Pater writes "Only, if her heart moved at eye or hand, if that malediction of her love entered into the[...] it was equally fatal to slave or rebel" he presents love's advent as a fairy-

tale curse whose effect may be realized any time, intruding unexpectedly. And what is worse, no one can resist desire's siren call, they must return it and be slain by it, submissive slave or resisting rebel. (Indeed, the term *rebel* suggests one resisting the force he is already ruled by, as if there is no free agent that exists before the advent of Margaret's love, as if desire always held sway). Criticism for both teacher and student becomes impossible when Margaret loves. Consider also that a disinterested criticism is hardly the gravest consequence of the *femme fatale*'s desire. Hers is a desire ferociously destructive—"the love or lust that will not be contented with anything less than the consumption, the destruction of its object" (101). Such destruction here is a symbolic and literal annihilation of an art object no less than it is an obliteration of the conditions for artistic criticism. The etiquette of responding to the other coolly—read aesthetically—is no empty form or fanciful projection of artistic attributes, but a performative gesture that allows the recognized individual to claim the success of his or her aesthetic education. Recall that Margaret's courtiers are represented as artistic subjects who labor to increase their aesthetic value—their time in Paris is spent in self-culture as they court the impressions offered by the books, the fashions, and the art that surrounds them. But according to the Kantian logic invoked, in the moment in which Margaret cannot judge them dispassionately, she fails to recognize how in their perfected self-fashioning they have "superseded" all the "exotic fine art which had discovered to others as to themselves their high aesthetic value." The education she has enabled and inspired she now ignores or ruins, and the students, not hailed as artistic, are set on the path to various forms of social death or even actual extinction. None she loves live through that love. One of her suitors "unfriendly, perhaps disappointed" (but lucky) remarks that Margaret's beauty has "the air of an instrument for men's perdition about it" (98). A "devoted friend of Margaret's own sex" also fears that her lady's tender deathbed ministrations threaten her soul with perdition;

“dying and desiring to die piously [she] must needs thrust her from the bedside:

Retirez-vous Madame, je vous prie, car il me faut prier et songer a mon Dieu, et vous ne me faites que rementevoir le monde, quand je vous regarde” (98).¹²

If some relic of Margaret’s beloved survives desire’s assault, it may return to the status of coldly admired object. Our example here is Jacques La Mole, who is caught up in Margot’s desire, albeit willingly : “the entire sheaf of his gifts and gaieties had kindled into fire, a pyramid of sweet aromatic flame moving to its end before her as she went onward” (104). Only as his death is imminent does Margaret recover the indifference she might have had in dealing with him before—though that disengagement as she watches his torture and execution is hardly so kindly then. In death, his head takes its place “among the best prized objects of the lady’s personal property, mounted in a kind of shine of pyx of good goldsmith’s work, and set with gems picked from milady’s own jewel-case” (104). But even if we view this as a desirable or effective transmutation into art, we should realize that Pater is theorizing a destructive desire so intense that there may often be no relic left to aestheticize, a consideration that frames his valedictory prayer “Ci-git [Jacques La Mole,] and [may God] have mercy on his soul or on what may still be left unconsumed of it” (105). In summary, we see how the prospect of Queen Margot’s arousal presents many horrific possibilities to Pater—nightmarish scenarios of aesthetic criticism that is impaired or fatal, and art and artistic subjects threatened with obliteration.

As we’ve noted, Margot’s aesthetic instruction inspires her students to fashion themselves and their lives into works of art through processes of self-culture.

Although initially the goal of an aesthetic *Bildung* seems to inhere in maintaining an artistic way of life for as long as possible, through a masochistic logic, it is possible to

¹² “Draw away, Madame, I beg you, for I must pray and meditate upon God, and you only make me recall this world when I look at you.”

imagine prizing one's painful death as the ultimate artistic production, especially if the spectacle of one's self-sacrifice, martyrdom or suicide were immortalized in great art, or if one's remains were aesthetically preserved. In thinking about *Gaston de Latour*, which Pater commenced publishing in 1888, we should remember the many *fin-de-siècle* imperial romances which, according to John Kucich, imagined colonial spaces as "opportunities for glorious suicide" and which "helped foster a fundamentally masochistic ethos of British masculinity, in which the ability to absorb pain stoically—or even ecstatically—was greatly prized" (9). Is Jacques La Mole kin to these ecstatic sufferers? If Pater's portrait of Margot had been published, would readers have compared it to Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) which "described the dangerous seductive power an exotic dominatrix could exercise over willingly subservient British men" (Kucich, 9)? According to Gilles Deleuze, "the masochist is essentially an educator" who teaches a female despot how to tyrannize over him (22). If we try to view her through the lens of masochism, might we discover that Margaret has two pedagogical modes, one instilled by her suffering lover? We have examined the first mode, which depends on emotive discipline as a kindly Kantian indifference. The second might capitalize on her devouring love and sadistic hauteur to provide the conditions under which a masochistic student, here Jacques La Mole, might immolate himself. Passing from Life to Art, he is transformed into a jeweled relic after showcasing the masculine discipline that enables him to use his execution to display forms of gracious conduct; chivalrously dandiacal to the end, he uses his "shattered arm... to fling his cap in air gallantly" (105).

Reading *Gaston de Latour* in this way is to suggest its place in the decadent canon of dark romanticism that, according to Ellis Hanson, "represents melancholia, self-sacrifice, suffering and suicide as various shades of martyrdom in the worship of love or beauty for its own sake" (104). Billie Andrew Inman errs when she first claims

“Pater clearly deplores a love a love like de la Mole’s” (97). As Pater imagines a masochistic aesthetics capable of turning a human body into the sacred art object, he ponders the ecstasies of the lover who wishes “to consume, to destroy himself by sacrifice, delightful surely in its degree to him” (103). He also naturalizes submissive desires by appealing to Aristotle’s *Politics*, which theorizes that there is an “elementary ground of slavery in human nature itself” (102). He even considers a biological basis for sadistic and masochistic desire, suggesting there may be a “seigneurial species of soul” and a “servile species” whose desire is the result of “some original, primitive, purely physical animal divergency in the cerebral molecule or germ” (107). These appeals to pleasure, philosophy, and science lay the groundwork for an apologia of sadomasochism, a topic that inflects Pater’s late reflections on pedagogy. Margot and Jacques may allow him to reflect upon the problem of coercion in teaching, how the power of the teacher is to be exercised and how far the submissive tendencies of the student may be indulged or exploited, all problems posed in classical philosophy. Consider, for example, the *Symposium*’s discussion of “voluntary slavery” in pederasty (16). Such slavery is not reprehensible when it “aims to produce virtue. Our view is that if someone is willing to put himself at someone else’s service in the belief that the other person will help him improve in wisdom or some other aspect of virtue, this willing slavery isn’t wrong or humiliating” (16). Although here Plato authorizes a slavery that leads to moral development, Pater often indicates that such slavery has its aesthetic effects as well. In *Plato and Platonism*, he idealizes Spartan slavery as a “relentlessly organized” system that fosters the “well-being which does come of organisation” (183). It is a “sort of slavery that makes [the slave] strong and beautiful” (185).

We should also be aware that in *Gaston de Latour* Pater is grappling with the aesthetic value of what appears to be evil, a philosophical undertaking he takes up by

referring to Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.¹³ If masochism can be attacked as a perversion or madness, or if we become too quick to denounce Margaret's cruel love as unethical, Pater's engagement with Baudelaire prompts us to suspend moralistic judgments and consider whether any artful thing, any valuable thing may come from these moments where Margaret's kindly indifference falters and her students suffer. Herself described as a "poison-daisy," her lessons make Gaston evaluate "the entanglement of beauty with evil,—to what extent one might succeed in disentangling them or, failing that, how far one may warm and water the dubious double root, watch for its flower, or retain the hope, or the memory, or the mere tokens of it in one's keeping"(104)?

Insofar as he does not judge or condemn voluntary suffering or pain—or even suicide—Pater is useful as a tentative apologist for masochistic eroticism, but here his rendering of the transformation that *aestheticizes* the masochist is not wholly convincing or approving. Jacques La Mole "emerges...to suffer in public, and as if voluntarily, by way of a slight offering, to fling his life" to Margaret (105). She watches his torture and execution with aesthetic indifference, showing no "effective or natural sympathy for the young man, with form already ruined" (105), then collects his head as her prize. Is it possible that in manifesting "that cruel weariness of a lover found too facile, which allowed, nay encouraged him to consume, to destroy himself by sacrifice" Margaret creates the conditions for his aesthetic transformation? Does she derive her stoicism from a practicality that allows her to ransom beauty from the wasteful execution of a man who had to die for his reckless involvement in political intrigue? Is she recognizing the grave sacredness of his sacrifice by revering his head

¹³ For extensive analysis of how Baudelaire influences Pater, and how Pater buries his engagement with the poet in his texts, see Patricia Clement's *Baudelaire and the English Tradition*. John Conlon's *Pater and the French Tradition* provides a useful overview of how Pater conduit through which French influences shape British literature.

as a fascinating “relic”? All this aestheticizing possibility is undercut when we consider the aesthetic judgment Pater passes on Jacques’s mummified head and the ethical conduct with which Pater associates aesthetic indifference in the rest of the novel.

Pater focalizes his description of Jacques’ head through “graceful Jasmin” another of Margaret’s lovers (105). For Jasmin, an aesthete whose house showcases “the most perfect fruits of art” assorted by “perfect scholarship” (86), Jacques’ head is “like the smirched moth upon the candle,” an “ugly brown face, made thus ugly for [Margaret’s] sake” (105). This judgment complicates our understanding of Jacques’ self-sacrifice by linking Margaret’s desire to the “pyramid of sweet aromatic flame” that does not merely consume, but that uglifies (104). The adjective “smirched” here is an exquisite choice, conveying the sense of an object sullied, disgraced and tortured. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb “smirch” derives from “‘esmorcher’ to torment, to torture (as by the application of hot metal).”

If Margaret’s consuming desire and cruel disdain were in service of transfiguring Jacques into a more beautiful artwork, the sacrificial logic necessary to valorize masochism as an aestheticizing proclivity would be convincing—such is the narrative of Christian martyrdom, which promises a new body in exchange for the ruination of the old, and which invests a great deal of erotic appeal in the body that suffers for God. (Kucich also argues that imperial martyrdom is sanctioned by sanctification fantasies that “transformed the pain and finality of death and defeat into pleasurable fantasies of ecstatic rebirth or resurrection” (5). Such moments of apotheosis were captured in glorious paintings (5).) Pater explores the logic of Christian martyrdom in *Marius the Epicurean*, but despite the quasi-religious veneration Margaret gives Jacques’ relic, the juxtaposition of his uglified face among the “good goldsmith’s work” of its pyx and with the “best prized objects” of

Margaret's chamber suggests that efforts to aestheticize his suffering are futile. Along with Jasmin, who "recoils instinctively" from the sight, we witness "the embalmed lips and eyes, so winning and eloquent once" and "so repulsive now" (105). The focalization of the narrative here encourages us to take these claims of horrifying ugliness as something like objective facts—because Margaret remains inscrutable, we cannot tell whether for her the head is exquisitely beautiful, or rather an object of horrid fascination, or whether she keeps it precisely for a repulsively singular ugliness. The narrative supplies no aesthetic judgments to compete with Jasmin's claims. Displayed among the other finely crafted objects, the most obvious aesthetic pleasure Jacques' desiccated head provides is the increased luster it adds to the gold and gems, contrasted with them, it may give what Pater called "the sense of death and the desire of beauty; the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death" ("Aesthetic" 89).

As we saw earlier, *Gaston de Latour* proposes what must be done when the "dubious double root" of beauty with evil is found inextricable, and ponders how we should "watch for [the root's] flower, or retain the hope, or the memory, or the mere tokens of it in one's keeping"(104). Margaret's care of Jacques' head may be an attempt to answer these issues. Preserved against decay and kept ever in her presence, the remnant of his tortured and ruined form promises a new ideal of decadent beauty that one need have no passing fascination with, but which may be kept forever. But if Pater is trying to portray the pleasures of a decadent aesthetic, he is unable to accept that this ideal is founded on the sacrifice of masculine beauty. There are plenty of dead youths in Pater's oeuvre, many of whom come to violent ends. But the corpses Pater loves are always "red with life" in the grave, retaining their beauty through death. By contrast, Jacques' head is repeatedly described as a "ghastly." Ultimately, it is Margaret's aesthetic attachment to the relic that Pater condemns through Jasmin. Just like his queen, who will drive him down the same destructive road taken by Jacques,

Jasmin is a cruel lover. He “does his part in crushing living sentient things” (105) and when he watches the execution of the manservant who has committed a crime for love of him, it is with “passing regret” and the same cruel indifference Margaret cultivates. But Pater differentiates the valences of Margaret and Jasmin’s cruel indifference by insisting that Jasmin could never attempt to aestheticize the event as she does. He “has no liking for ghastly relics in the pleasant chambers of his memory or his house” (105).

In the context of Pater’s larger oeuvre, Jasmin’s disdain is praiseworthy, because as *Marius the Epicurean* reminds us, “the object, or the experience, as it will be in memory, is really the chief thing to care for from first to last, in the conduct of our lives”(32). It is this precept that feeds Marius’ “innate and habitual longing for a world altogether fairer than that he saw” and causes him to abandon the gladiatorial executions that are staged as artistic entertainments (32). Although these shows are “so to speak, the novel reading of that age” Marius cannot enjoy them as art because they provide ugly things to store in the memory, evil things (171). “This, and this is what you may not look upon!” he thinks (171). Furthermore, Pater’s association of domestic interior decoration with a character’s interiority must be understood by reviewing the struggle between male and female aesthetes for creative authority in the household. As Talia Schaffer reminds us, “male aesthetes increasingly claimed to be the authorities on home decoration, fashion design, cookery and flowers” thus appropriating a realm that had, under the separate spheres doctrine, been largely left to women (73). And yet, even in this feminine sphere, women’s creative freedom was curtailed. It was not until 1882, six years before *Gaston* begins to appear in *Macmillan’s*, that the Married Women’s Property Act allowed a wife to own property fully in her own right. Previously, under the principle of coverture, she could only act as the agent of her husband, who truly owned the decorative commodities she bought and who could

prevent her from acquiring them. Women's constraints in practicing connoisseurship was not seen as especially problematic since until the 1870s, women decorated the home not by "choosing attractive furniture, wall treatments, and carpeting, but by creating attractive craft objects with which to cover the furniture walls and floor" (Schaffer 76). These domestically produced crafts were treasured for their sentimental worth, signifying the "female producer's thriftiness, creativity and personal care for her family (77). In the "aesthetic era, however, those mementos were systematically banned in the attempt to make the ideal home resemble a museum rather than a sentimental retreat" (79). As the male aesthetes turned home decoration into a professional activity that depended on trained expertise in artistic matters and tasteful acquisition of commodities "women often found themselves vilified as inept amateurs. Male aesthetes had embraced women's work and rejected women" (85). Now, in *Gaston de Latour*, Pater is clearly interested in the idea of a female connoisseur who has transcended the limitations of the domestic craftswoman. Childless, promiscuous, adulterous Margaret is not the kind of woman who adorns a domestic interior with doilies for familial comfort; as we have seen, she collects antiques from all over France. But we should recall that even as some women managed to enter the professional sphere of interior decorating that men had created, their entry was viewed with suspicion.¹⁴ Jasmin's disdain for a woman who has been instrumental in his education, his questioning of her taste for ghastly relics, may indicate Pater's skepticism towards women's ability to make aesthetic choices, especially if a woman's aesthetic judgment is susceptible to corruption by sentimentality. As we've noted already, we have no access to Margaret's interiority, and cannot know for what reasons she treasures the head of Jacques La Mole. But from Jasmin's point of view,

¹⁴ For extensive explication of how professional interior decoration came to be a feminist issue in the late nineteenth century, see Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods*.

one reason she may not be able to see the ghastliness of her prize is because she has become emotionally involved with it, seeing it not in its pure form, but as a memento of her affair with the dead man. Her judgment on the head is not a pure one, in Kantian terms. Jacques' death may have brought him erotic fulfillment, and may have gratified his queen in her erotic pride, but as an artistic success, his death does not seem worth the loss of his "entire sheaf of his gifts and gaieties" or the ruination of his living beauty, at least not in the way Pater frames it.

Pater's critics in training are often averse to the dominance of their teachers. In *Marius the Epicurean*, Flavian, Marius' tutor, most resembles Margaret: "Prince of the school, he had gained an easy dominion over the old Greek master by the fascination of his parts, and over his fellow-scholars by the figure he bore" (29). Again we see the imperious mesmerism of personal beauty, which Pater subsequently connects to the desire to govern others (36). Flavian becomes the "ardent, indefatigable student of words" in order to learn how oratory and literary art may "overawe or charm" others. His desire for charismatic, perfectly polished style springs from his craving for "predominance, for the satisfaction of which another might have relied on the acquisition and display of brilliant military qualities" (66). Accordingly, he makes Marius "virtually his servant in many things" (29). After Flavian's death, Marius reflects that although his teacher's beauty and love of beauty have taught him "reconciliation to the world of sense" his "feverish attachment" to Flavian "had made him at times feel like an uneasy slave" (166). Yet although both Flavian and Margot make others their slaves, Pater is much less horrified at the effects of this within the boyish pedagogical relationship. The submission Flavian demands or inspires in Marius never threatens to destroy him—and he retains the power to move away from Flavian's teachings and to critique his views, unlike Margot's victims. We may account for this difference between two modes of slavery as an effect of gender. The

late Pater relishes the submission of one man to another as he pays tribute to his better's superior skills, strength and beauty. All the late educational narratives, such as the account of Greek education at Sparta in *Plato and Platonism* and the short story "Emerald Uthwart" analyze male figures who give up their autonomy and individuality in allegiance to a powerful authority. Emerald Uthwart, for instance is said to have a submissiveness with "the force of genius" (188), and according to Pater "the sense of authority, of a large intellectual authority over us, impressed anew day after day, of some impenetrable glory round 'the masters of those who know,' is of course one of the effects we look for from a classical education" (188). But this authority, as harsh and oppressive as it may feel, need ultimately not be feared. Pater presumes that this force is ultimately held in restraint by institutional norms, he fetishizes masculine power held in reserve, and the force that bends the knee will not break the body ultimately.¹⁵ By contrast, the domineering desire he imagines through the *femme fatale* figure of Queen Margot is a power that will not or cannot be checked or regulated; it makes others bow before it and consumes them. The image of the desiring woman who cannot be satiated is common in late-Victorian literature; her most obvious guise is as the vampire seductress who endangers man by sucking away his vital fluids. Margaret is no bloodsucker, but Pater marks how her desire is dangerous to masculinity above all by making her prize the decapitated head of her lover; "[M]ade ugly" for her sake, his virile beauty lost, he has been symbolically emasculated. As Freud says, "To decapitate = to castrate" (202).

When we consider the educational figures that structure Pater's presentation of Queen Margot then, we discover him using the figure of the scholarly *femme fatale* to work out the pernicious effects of an excessive love in the pedagogical relation, a desire that disturbs the tranquil system of reserve and disinterestedness Kantian

¹⁵ On Pater and masculine reserve or ascêsis, see James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*.

aesthetics idealizes. I do not mean that this consuming desire need *only* or *necessarily* arise in female or feminized subjects, but for Pater the vehicle of this desire seems characteristically female. We see the virile, preferred alternative in *Plato and Platonism*. If in *Gaston de Latour* Margaret moves Gaston to think of the “impassioned love of passion” (110) “Plato, with a kind of *unimpassioned passion*, [my emphasis] was a lover in particular of temperance; of temperance too, as it may be *seen*, as a visible thing—seen in Charmides, say! in that subdued and grey-eyed loveliness, ‘clad in sober grey’; or in those youthful athletes which, in ancient marble, reproduce him and the like of him with sound, firm outlines, such as temperance secures” (122). Here temperance as “unimpassioned passion” and “subdued loveliness” is fetishized as the very foundation of masculine beauty, that which creates the body of the athlete-warrior. Plato is imagined as constantly in struggle with his own excessive delight in and desire for beautiful things: “Still, that some more luxurious sense of physical beauty had at one time greatly disturbed him, divided him against himself, we may judge from his own words in a famous passage of the *Phaedrus* concerning the management, the so difficult management, of those winged steeds of the body, which is the chariot of the soul” (122). This constant discipline, as well as the suspicion that “the beautiful would never come to seem strictly concentric with the good” (122) makes Plato “glad when in the mere natural course of years he was become at all events less ardent a lover” (123).

’Tis he is the authority for what Sophocles had said on the happy decay of the passions as age advanced: it was ‘like being set free from service to a band of madmen.’ His own distinguishing note is tranquil afterthought upon this conflict, with a kind of envy of the almost disembodied old age of Cephalus, who quotes that saying of Sophocles amid his placid sacrificial doings (123).

This passage is striking in its turn to *The Republic*’s “almost disembodied Cephalus.” As enamored of the body as he is, Plato, and Pater through him, feels equivocally relieved to consider the passionless existence of old age that senescence offers, if

youth means the experience of a mad, destructive love. Because Cephalus means “head,” Pater’s image here might emblemize a survival of rationality and the ego through the extreme sacrifice of the body, which here is almost—not quite—reduced to nothing. Of course, Pater’s larger project in his oeuvre to make sure this choice between rational and bodily senses never arises. In *Plato and Platonism* he attempts this through deconstructing Plato, reading him against himself: “Not to be pure from the body but to identify it, in its utmost fairness...became, from first to last, the aim of education as [Plato] conceived it. That the body is but ‘a hindrance to the attainment of philosophy, if one takes it along with one as a companion in one’s search’...can hardly have been the last thought of Plato himself on quitting it” (130). As we have seen here through Queen Margot, the finely educated aesthete develops an eye that can appreciate the body in all its beauty, and that artful appreciation may very well be of benefit to others, teaching them to espy the beauty of the body and indeed beauty generally. But we must look elsewhere in Pater’s body of work to find out how the lust of the eye that beauty may arouse can exist within an aesthetic education without ruining its student.

IV *Education in Equipose: the Nurturing Affection of the Artwork*

Pater’s portraits of Winckelmann’s teachers and Queen Margaret are both indictments of bad erotic pedagogy and teachers who fail their students. We might wonder then, how is it possible to obtain the proper kind of erotic tutelage from one’s teachers—how to place the teacher at the right distance from the student so that the educator’s affection can be felt, but so that it does not consume the student in its proximity. In response to situations in which the teacher’s comportment endangers the student’s autonomy or inhibits his potential, Pater examines processes by which the

student can be distanced from structures of formal education and the personal fallibility of “the professional guardians of learning.” Early in life Marius the Epicurean acquires the art of optimally enjoying the ideal “elements of distinction in our everyday life” (38), an ability to isolate and dwell upon choice impressions that Pater links with seeing “a revelation in colour and form” among quotidian affairs. He learns this visionary art from no teacher, but through Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. Pater writes: “If modern education, in its better efforts, really conveys to any of us that kind of idealizing power, it does so (though dealing mainly, as its professed instruments, with the most select and ideal remains of ancient literature) oftenest by truant reading; and thus it happened also, long ago, with Marius and his friend” (38). We might call Apuleius’ text merely extra-curricular—unprescribed reading—but in evoking truancy, Pater casts *The Golden Ass* as *proscribed* reading, a text that does not supplement or innocuously co-exist with curricular texts, but that detracts from pedagogical discipline and opposes institutional structure.¹⁶

Gaston de Latour too is inspired by an act of truant reading, winning his aesthetic awareness from Pierre de Ronsard’s *Odes*. These poems are “the key to a new world of seemingly boundless intellectual resources and yet with a special closeness to visible or sensuous things (26). They provide “a lesson, a doctrine, the communication of an art,—the art of placing the pleasantly aesthetic, the welcome, elements of life at an advantage in one’s view of it till they seemed to occupy the entire surface” (29). Yet although Pater uses this language of teaching, it is clear the evoked aesthetic education counters formal teaching. Jasmin, who gifts Gaston with

¹⁶ Truant texts are defined relative to the curricular standards of the time, of course. For us and the Victorians, *The Golden Ass* may be canonical literature, one of the “ideal remains of literature” education professes to deal with. For us to understand or enjoy it untranslated requires extensive classical training within institutional bounds. However, Pater’s characterization of Flavian’s yellow-wrapped book suggests that it serves the boys in the way a popular yellow-backed French novel might serve an Oxford undergraduate.

Ronsard's poetry, is introduced as part of a company that has "detached themselves by an irresistible natural effectiveness from the surface of that youthful scholastic world around the episcopal throne of Chartres (24). This detachment marks Jasmin as an absentee, happily escaped from ecclesiastical, scholarly authority. Insofar as the term "scholastic" is not used generally, but to describe a particular philosophical clerically-inspired pedagogy that flourished at Chartres, Pater shows Jasmin's revolt against a hegemonic intellectual tradition; he resists the training that would optimally make him a priest and aspires to become a poet. But we need not derive the anti-institutional nature of Jasmin's gift by associating it with his anti-scholastic nature. Pater directly links the *Odes* to escaping the classroom learning:

Just eighteen years old, and the work of the poet's own youth, it took possession of Gaston with the ready intimacy of one's equal in age, fresh at every point; and he experienced what it is the function of contemporary poetry to effect anew for sensitive youth in each succeeding generation. The truant and irregular poetry of his own nature, all in solution there, found an external and authorised mouth-piece, ranging itself rightfully, as the latest achievement of human soul in this matter, along with the consecrated poetic voice of the past (27).

In this account of how modern poetry, conceived and esteemed by youth, struggles to be valued alongside canonized, ancient poetry, the *Odes* are personified as a fellow who inspires Gaston to rebellion—who verbalizes his "truant and irregular" desires, to defy institutional bounds and canonical schools of taste.

Yet another of Pater's narratives, the imaginary portrait "Emerald Uthwart," valorizes the independent discovery of literature by youth, and disparages prescribed reading. Pater marvels:

In every generation of schoolboys there are a few who find out, almost for themselves, the beauty and power of good literature, even in the literature they must read perforce; and this, in turn, is but the handsel of a beauty and power still active in the actual world, should they have the good fortune, or rather, acquire the skill, to deal with it properly. It has something of the stir and unction—this intellectual awaking with a leap—of the coming of love. So it was with Uthwart about his seventeenth year. (219)

Once more, Pater prefers the truant text for aesthetic training, suggesting that the act of making texts mandatory reading—textbooks—is very good way to blind students to not only the strength and beauty of the proscribed reading, but literature generally. Yet even in a curriculum, select students, almost entirely unaided by teachers or schoolmates, still manage to discover the virtues of good literature. The aesthetic power contained in books then alerts these students to the bounty of “beauty and power” at work in life, a source of joy that awaits one who makes himself receptive to it. But what we should note here is how this act of reading has been eroticized. For Emerald Uthwart, this intellectual awakening to aesthetic influence is like a love-affair, a textually inspired inamoration. We might argue that in each of the sessions of Pater’s sessions of truant reading it is the text becomes the source, conduit and object of desire rather than the teacher who has been excluded from the scene of learning. Pater accomplishes this by personifying the text, lending it attributes from its author, or owner. In his analysis of *Marius the Epicurean*, Matthew Potolsky argues that when Marius is reading *The Golden Ass*, he is actually undergoing a team-taught lesson by Apuleius’ text and Flavian. According to Potolsky, we know the identity between the tenets that the book and Flavian offer to Marius because of the conflation that Pater makes between the text and the teacher.

The effects of his two teachers are nearly indistinguishable, their ‘attitude of mind’ identical. Marius’s relation to the ‘golden’ Flavian (from the Latin *flavus*, meaning ‘yellow-gold’) is increasingly assimilated to his reading of Apuleius’s ‘golden book.’ This assimilation becomes particularly clear in Pater’s description of the physical book that the boys read, which is covered with ‘yellow wrapper’ and inscribed, ‘after the title,’ with Flavian’s name” (715).

However, we might question the idea of a doubled lesson. Marius and Flavian both escape school precincts for this truant reading in the granary, a space we might see as a zone of truancy in which all normal roles and functions associated with formal learning are suspended for a different kind of education. If this is so, Flavian’s official

role as Marius' tutor has also been suspended, and the attendant dangers of that position are also laid aside in the reading of Apuleius' book. *The Golden Ass* instead takes up the work of education, assuming something of the identity and blond or bronzed beauty of Flavian, who has temporarily abdicated his tutorial role.

Pater not only personifies Ronsard's *Odes* as a schoolboy, but eroticizes the relationship between the text and its reader by having the truant poems take "possession" of Gaston with "ready intimacy." As the text provides Gaston with its doctrine, we see the potential erotic union between student and teacher displaced for an eroticized relation between the reader and the word. This relationship also offers a romanticized contact with the author, as Pater explains:

And yet the gifted poet seemed but to have spoken what was already in Gaston's own mind, what he had longed to say, had been just going to say: so near it came, that it had the charm of a discovery of one's own. Perhaps that was because the poet told one so much about himself, of his love-secrets especially, how love and nothing else filled his mind. He was in truth but "love's secretary," noting from hour to hour its minutely changing fortunes. Yes! That was the reason why visible, audible, sensible things glowed so brightly, why there was luxury in sounds, words, rhythms, of the new light come on the world, of that wonderful freshness. (26)

Still living, the "gifted poet" is a prematurely aged Prior, but for Gaston, Ronsard's poetry, "the work of [his] own youth," arrests the poet's persona in its springtide. That persona, as fresh as the eighteen year old text itself, is similarly capable of seizing the reader with "ready intimacy." Listening to the poet reveal himself, Gaston enjoys perfect sympathy with him. In Ronsard's poetry, he does not so much encounter another's thought as discover his own convictions anticipated and clearly expressed. This conceit, which evokes the trope *prolepsis*, minimizes Ronsard's role as one who instructs through his work, removing us once again from the dangerous zone of formal instruction; it is as if author and reader meld, share one mind. Pater explains this fanciful identification by reminding us that the *Odes* largely confess how Ronsard experiences youthful love. When he tells of "his love-secrets especially, how love and

nothing else filled his mind” he presents the innermost part of himself to Gaston, who equally consumed by love shows his romantic hunger as he yearns for “poetry, as intimately near, as corporeal, as the new faces of the hour” (27). While classical poetry can move him “with no more directness than the beautiful faces of antiquity which are not here for us to see and unaffectedly love,” Ronsard’s work, fresh and modern, fulfills his need for an art that touches him because he can touch it. It is the experience of this love that quickens Ronsard’s, then Gaston’s aesthetic sensibility, their awareness of how “visible, audible [and] sensible things” press on us.

Plato and Platonism provides a final example of strange textual embodiment. There Pater argues that for Plato “all knowledge was like knowing a *person*. The Dialogue itself, being, as it is, the special creation of his literary art, becomes in his hands, and by his masterly conduct of it, like a single living person; so comprehensive a sense does he bring to bear upon it of the slowly-developing physiognomy of the thing—its organic structure, its symmetry and expression” (115). To encounter the dialogue, Plato’s privileged pedagogical form, is to scrutinize a youthful face as its beauty waxes—we might recall Pater’s Mona Lisa, her beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh” deposited “little cell by cell.” By contrast, Pater associates the academic treatise, with its “ambitious array of premiss and conclusion” (157) and its confident “scholastic all-sufficiency” (157) with the morbidity of a “dogmatic system, the dry bones of which rattle in one’s ears” (156). His characterization rejects the formal lecture or “treatise in embryo” as well (158).

Now why does Pater fetishize these texts so? What makes him desire to turn the word to flesh, calling for a corporeal poetry that is like a new face, or an intimate friend? Why does he blur the boundary that separates art from life? His essay on Winckelmann suggests that personifying art allowed him to imagine a scene of aesthetic education wherein the dangers of learning from another are neutralized, and

the best aspects of autodidacticism are accentuated. The rapacious intensity of Queen Margot and the inattentive attitude of Winckelmann's professors represent extremes of pedagogical affect that imperil Pater's developing aesthetes, but Winckelmann's countenance, which blends "ardour and indifference" so that they are "by no means incompatible" promises that he might be a teacher in whom these extremes moderate each others effects. If Winckelmann achieves this affective equilibrium, however, it is only by learning or assuming the affective serenity of art—even as that art warms its indifferent, plastic chill by taking on some quality of human character.

V *The Educational Exemplarity of Winckelmann and Goethe*

When we last saw Winckelmann, he was taking his education into his own hands. Not understanding him as a "new source of culture" who will expound the aesthetics of newly discovered Greek art, his teachers neglect him. When the art-historian's independent investigations lead him to classical sculpture, Pater explains his methodology as a corrective to the undextrous suppression he suffered: he "apprehended the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner, not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch" (154). Deprived of the educative caress that fosters our development by drawing us out of ourselves [*e-ducere—to lead out*] Winckelmann gains the very knowledge he needs from the cupped hand of sculpture itself. Fingering the Greek marbles, he is in touch with the ancient world; "it penetrates him, and becomes part of his temperament. He remodels his writings with constant renewal of insight; he catches the thread of a whole new sequence of laws in some hollowing of the hand or dividing of the hair" (155).

At Halle, Winckelmann's professors fail to welcome him into their intellectual fraternity because they cannot recognize him as "the votary of the gravest of

intellectual traditions.” But by focusing on the tactile sources of Winckelmann’s knowledge, Pater situates him within a transhistorical brotherhood in which knowledge flows mystically from one initiate to another, rather than being validated by the (professional) teacher or communicated by his cumbersome didactic methods. The term “votary” marks the lineage Winckelmann joins as religious; as James Eli Adams notes in *Dandies and Desert Saints*, the art historian’s interaction with sculpture recalls the laying on of hands that Christian priests use to transmit pastoral authority during ordination. The ritual touching of hand to hand or hand on body is merely one point of contact in a vast chain—as Adams puts it, “a homosocial continuum across history, in which past and present are linked by a masculine relay of charismatic power, power that is communicated through...apostles of Christ or relics of Greek sculpture”(159). In handling art, Winckelmann imitates the gestures of all who have reverentially touched or created art; he memorializes their contact, touches them through the statues and assumes their authority. As Winckelmann “remodels” his writings after contact with art we see him taking on the role of a sculptor or clayshaper, those artists who may have had a hand in creating the very sculpture he touches. His knowledge becomes like the firsthand knowledge of the artist rather than that of the critic who understands aesthetic theory, but cannot realize it.

The manual rituals of apostolic succession offer Winckelmann one means of self-authorization through bypassing the teacher’s disseminatory methods, but Pater’s use of this image is not wholly Christian. Winckelmann’s fingertips give him aesthetic “insight” that he experiences as if it were the “reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself; as if the mind of one, lover and philosopher at once, were beginning its intellectual career over again, yet with a certain power of anticipating its results.” This concept of mentally stored knowledge, ready to be recovered rather than discovered or learned, is called *anamnesis*,

reminiscence. It appears in Platonic texts such as the *Meno* and *Phaedrus* where it is connected with the mystical idea of *metempsychosis*, transmigration of the soul. Because the soul has had many lives in different bodies, it has accumulated learning and experience that a person may recall fragmentarily. Thus did the ancients explain mental phenomena such as déjà vu and intuition. Pater's fascination with anamnesis appears in his earliest surviving text "Diaphaneité," wherein he outlines the characteristics of an ideal type who possesses a latent "magnificent intellectual force" "like the reminiscence of a forgotten culture that once adorned the mind; as if the mind...were beginning its spiritual progress over again, but with a certain power of anticipating its stages." *Anamnesis* is always connected with subverting the teacher's function in Pater's work. By situating knowledge in the student already, the theory of remembering rejects a pedagogical model in which the learned teacher fills the learner's empty mind. At best, the teacher's questioning serves only as a mnemonic aid for the student, but this role is not necessary in any pedagogical accounts that concern *anamnesis*—images, experiences and sensations can stir the memory. In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater explains how Socrates' understanding of reminiscence supports his claim that he does not teach:

Yes, certainly; the Pythagoreans are right in saying that what we call learning is in fact reminiscence—:νάμνησις famous word! and Socrates proceeds to show in what precise way it is impossible or possible to find out what you don't know: how that happens. In full use of the dialogue . . . Plato, dramatic always, brings in one of Meno's slaves, a boy who . . . knows nothing of geometry: introduces him, we may fancy, into a mathematical lecture-room where diagrams are to be seen on the walls, cubes and the like lying on the table--particular objects, the mere sight of which will rouse him when subjected to the dialectical treatment, to universal truths concerning them. The problem required of him is to describe a square of a particular size: to find the line which must be the side of such a square; and he is to find it for himself. Meno, carefully on his guard, is to watch whether the boy is taught by Socrates in any of his answers; whether he answers anything at any point otherwise than by way of reminiscence and really out of his own mind, as the reasonable questions of Socrates fall like water on the seed-ground, or like sunlight on the photographer's negative. (66)

When the boy, led by Socrates' questioning, does deduce the right answer, Pater notes "Those notions were *in* the boy, they and the like of them, in all boys and men; and he did not come by them in this life, a young slave in Athens. Ancient, half-obliterated inscriptions on the mental walls, the mental tablet, seeds of knowledge to come, shed by some flower of it long ago, it was in an earlier period of time they had been laid up in him, to blossom again now, so kindly, so firmly!" (66)

Anamnesis functions here by appealing to an originary scene of writing, where the mind becomes a textual surface. However, although the knowledge that powers reminiscence first appears as mentally inscribed writing, Pater jarringly alters his metaphor, representing it as a seed. How might we explain this metaphorical shift? To begin with, the blurred boundary between life and art that the shift from textual to organic metaphors expose is already present in the architectural metaphor that renders our interiority as if it were a chamber. Cancelling the necessity for a potentially traumatic moment of teaching "in this life", Pater imagines a long past moment when the mind became the artistic site of inscription, a tablet. Because the mind has been a space for art (as writing, as architecture) we need no education now. But this metaphor too risks being hijacked by the teacher, for who dictates or writes the words that adorn the walls? To avoid this question of human agency, knowledge must become like the seeds that flowers haphazardly shed. And yet, Pater does not fully escape imagining an agent who directs these germs. Syntactically, adverbs "kindly" and "firmly" may modify the manner of knowledge's blossoming, but the sense of the words make "laid" a possible verb that the words apply to. If this is so, although Pater insists that no teaching happens in this life he still flirts with the possibility that once, some resolute, well-meaning person was responsible for implanting the knowledge that now obviates a less kindly instruction. But the way Pater buries this agency in his grammar suggests that even if this is a possibility, it is a hope too wild or too unlikely to be fully

acknowledged. The image of knowledge shed freely as from an exploding seed-pod predominates here, rather than knowledge planted by the husbandman.

As Pater imagines “all boys and men”—and only boys and men—who nourish the knowledge that waits within to germinate, he echoes the generative imagery of Plato’s *Symposium*, which imagines education as a kind of procreation that men accomplish without women. Although Meno is not seeded by Socrates, a rhetorical move that would evoke a too didactic insertion of ideas and make the sexual charge of education all too explicit, his fertile mind, watered by Socrates questioning, is fruitful, thus analogizing the male parturition of the *Symposium*. “Winckelmann” also sexualizes the way memory is deployed by limiting the powerful knowledge offered by *anamnesis* to one who is both “lover and philosopher at once” (Renaissance, 155). This philosophizing lover identifies himself by the quality of his touch. Imagining sculptures unearthed at the Renaissance, Pater describes how the “buried fire of ancient art” erupts into the “frozen world.” This metaphor obviously likens the ascent of the unearthed sculptures to upwelling magma, but Pater is also trying to convey the burning sensuality with which classical art is associated, intensity deemed dangerous by the ascetic. We realize the latent danger posed by sculpture as we watch Winckelmann safely “fondle those pagan marbles with unsinged hands, with no sense of shame or loss.” Here, Pater gives a negative account of how to approach the art: to touch it safely is to be free of “shame or loss.” But closer reading of the text reveals the feeling Winckelmann must possess to approach art safely: “Enthusiasm,—that, in the broad Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*, was the secret of his divinatory Power over the Hellenic world. This enthusiasm, dependent as it is to a great degree on bodily temperament, has a power of re-enforcing the purer emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement.” No mere delight, it is a passion that “burns like lava.” In its original religious sense, enthusiasm is divine possession, *entheos*. Therefore, as

Linda Dowling notes, by invoking the “broad Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*” Pater alludes to the mania that text examines, “possession by the god of love, the paederastic Eros” (96). Winckelmann’s reminiscence becomes grounded in the homoerotic and fetishistic desire he feels towards Greek art; the representative type of which is masculine. Burning with his lava-like enthusiasm, Winckelmann’s body becomes akin to the molten stone of the art he appreciates; he is not harmed because his contact with the stony skin of sculpture is a meeting of like to like.

Dismayed by the ascetic inattention of Winckelmann’s professors, Pater imagines his self-education as a richly sensuous and erotic process that works outside the university, and without teachers. Imagining this type of education. Pater ensures that Winckelmann has the sensuous experience and aesthetic knowledge to actually provide the ideal education he himself lacks. While it provides the record of his autodidactic triumph, Pater’s essay also imagines Winckelmann mentoring many young men, and considers his instructive influence on Goethe in particular.

Certainly, of that beauty of living form which regulated Winckelmann’s friendships, it could not be said that it gave no pain. One notable friendship, the fortune of which we may trace through his letters, begins with an antique, chivalrous letter in French and ends noisily in a burst of angry fire. Far from reaching the quietism, the bland indifference of art, such attachments are nevertheless more susceptible than others of equal strength of a purely intellectual culture. Of passion or physical excitement, they contain only just so much as stimulates the eye to the finest delicacies of colour and form. These friendships, often the caprices of a moment, make Winckelmann’s letters, with their troubled colouring, an instructive but bizarre addition to the History of Art, that shrine of grave and mellow light around the mute Olympian family. (153)

The “passion and physical excitement” within Winckelmann’s relationships “stimulates the eye to the finest delicacies of colour and form,” marrying erotic experience to aesthetic perception. Thus it is that the art critic’s “antique, chivalrous” missives to young men—courtly love letters—serve as “instructive” supplements to his opus on art history. But even though the eroticism of these relationships surpasses

that of the other pedagogical relationships Winckelmann has experienced, they still hold cause for concern. Winckelmann's ardour, like Queen Margot's, risks running out of control. That is why Pater assures his reader that characteristically, "such attachments" hold only "just so much" eroticism, just enough to further aesthetic insight. Pater does not specify how much this measure" is, which leaves the range of desire and physicality of the friendship completely open, but he tries to give the impression that this desire falls under strict regulation. The feelings in Winckelmann's friendships, however, hardly seem contained; Pater notes the explosive argument between the critic and his friend that painfully ends intimacy "in a burst of angry fire." While the intensity of these friendships makes them susceptible "of a purely intellectual culture" the raging emotions involved endanger the learning they foster. In lamenting the doomed rendezvous of Goethe and Winckelmann, Pater observes:

Yet perhaps, it is not fanciful to regret that his proposed meeting with Goethe never took place. Goethe, then in all the pregnancy of his wonderful youth, still unruffled by the "press and storm" of his earlier manhood, was awaiting Winckelmann with a curiosity of the worthiest kind. As it was, Winckelmann became to him something like what Virgil was to Dante. And Winckelmann, with his fiery friendships, had reached that age and that period of culture at which emotions hitherto fitful, sometimes concentrate themselves in a vital unchangeable relationship. German literary history seems to have lost the chance of one of those famous friendships, the very tradition of which becomes a stimulus to culture, and exercises an imperishable influence. (157)

If Winckelmann and Goethe were to have had a celebrated friendship that would influence and stimulate culture, the precondition is that Winckelmann's fitful emotions settle down. Pater imagines a Goethe who, aloof to the passions of both *Sturm und Drang* and early manhood, could be both disciple and model of emotional stability for the older man. Paired with Goethe in Pater's fancy is an aged Winckelmann who reaches a stage in life where the fire of his fitful emotions burns less ardently and could settle into "a vital unchangeable relationship" with the right protégé. This mature calm resembles that "happy decay of the passions" Pater sees Plato yearning

for in *Plato and Platonism*. Yet Pater is aware that all this is speculative, merely a tale of what-ifs. “Perhaps it is not fanciful” to desire this impossible meeting. Perhaps Winckelmann’s emotions, as passions “sometimes” do, would have concentrated themselves into an everlasting desired friendship.

Given the unpredictability of romantic friendships, Pater might well long for “the quietism, the bland indifference” that a relationship with art promises, but that man’s impassioned fellowship with man always falls short of. As he reflects on the fiery pain caused by Winckelmann’s “romantic fervent friendships with young men”, men whose “beauty of living form” marks them as sentient sculptures, his imagery evokes and contrasts with his later description of how the art critic is harmlessly inflamed by the fire of Greek art. Winckelmann’s invulnerability may be read as Pater’s attempt to combine the intensity of our love for persons with the controlled innocuousness of our love for art. Art’s “quietism” offers a lesson on how to avoid the passionate outbursts that destroy pedagogical relationships in fire and noise.

In mirroring the “fire of ancient art” with the lava of Winckelmann’s enthusiasm, Pater clearly sees the moments when Winckelmann is in communion with art as moments when he achieves the status of art, or at least takes on its attributes. But in his relationship with his lovers and students, he clearly does not maintain that status. Pater, like Winckelmann, assigns art an essential harmlessness, an evenness of affect. But if he cannot attain the status of art in life, Pater grants it to him in death, through the imagination of his readers:

Goethe’s fragments of art-criticism contain a few pages of strange pregnancy on the character of Winckelmann. He speaks of the teacher who had made his career possible, but whom he had never seen, as of an abstract type of culture, consummate, tranquil, withdrawn already into the region of ideals, yet retaining colour from the incidents of a passionate intellectual life. He classes him with certain works of art, possessing an inexhaustible gift of suggestion to which criticism may return again and again with renewed freshness. “One learns nothing from him,” he says to Eckermann, “but one becomes something.” (141)

The metaphor that describes cultural production by imagining one man's impregnation by another is drawn from Plato's *Symposium*, in which Diotima explains to Socrates how pederastic relations help men to realize the ideas gestating in their minds. Diotima famously values the spirit over the body, and platonic over sexual love, but the corporeality of her metaphor for intellectual collaboration counters her asceticism, summoning the sensual to mind as we ponder by what intimacy men become pregnant, by which way Goethe attains "all the pregnancy of his wonderful youth." Although we know Goethe and Winckelmann never meet, for an instant we may imagine their union. But Pater then works to undo this closeness. Goethe never embraces Winckelmann as a lover; he only glimpses him as a specter. Separated by death from the young poet, manifest to him only through his words, Winckelmann, classed with "certain works of art" dwells in a Platonic heaven of ideals, where he is "consummate, tranquil, withdrawn." No longer immersed in passionate intellectual exertion, he only bears passion's traces, as the corpse retains spots of color amid a waxing pallor; the dangerous fire that would endanger Goethe's aesthetic education is gone. Canonized among other artistic masterpieces, Winckelmann enables Goethe to achieve the disciplined emotional state he himself lacks. "Through the tumultuous richness of Goethe's culture, the influence of Winckelmann is always discernible, as the strong regulative under-current of a clear, antique motive." The "tumultuous richness of Goethe's culture" is regulated by what is most artistic in Winckelmann, his Hellenic character. By invoking the terms "clear", "antique" and "under-current" Pater metamorphoses the art critic into an embodiment of classicism, the "absorbed underground" tradition characterized by "the clear ring, the eternal outline of the antique." The art-critic, through his texts, serves for the poet the same role that Greek art served for him. And yet, although Winckelmann's influence is so discernible in Goethe, Goethe does not see him as his teacher, as he states to Eckermann. We might

understand this as yet another rejection of the teacher as a figure who endangers because of his human unpredictability. While learning from someone raises the possibility that one's learning has been dictated by another's purpose, Winckelmann enables Goethe to become something. This process of becoming is not clearly directed, leaving Goethe more autonomy in his learning; Winckelmann's influence on the poet can be construed as catalysis of self-directed development rather than an influence that determines particular goals or paths to education.

VI *The Dialogue of the Mind with Itself: Paterian Pedagogy and Textual Form*

While the ideal of pedagogical intimacy fascinates Pater, eroticism between student and teacher presents dangers that encourage him to look beyond their troublesome amorous relations and to construe education as a loving, autodidactic encounter with an instructive artwork. What should be a relation between two people becomes communion with an object, either a human being transfigured into art, in the case of Goethe reflecting on Winckelmann, or an art-object that occupies a liminal space between life and art, cloaked with a humanity projected on it by the spectator. Understanding Pater's interest in this fetishistic, impersonal moment allows us to correct and complicate accounts of Pater's teaching style that cast him as an unfailingly optimistic about educational relationships.

In considering Paterian pedagogy, Matthew Kaiser contests the "retreat hypothesis" that informs criticism of *Marius the Epicurean*. As is well known, Pater removed his "Conclusion" from second edition of *The Renaissance*, lest it "possibly mislead" or seduce [*seducere* – to lead astray] its young male readers. Having written *Marius the Epicurean*, he restored the conclusion, noting that the novel dealt more fully with the concepts suggested in the shorter text. As Kaiser argues, some readers

understood these events as “a retreat, an attempt by Pater to temper his headiness, to reconcile with aestheticism with the ethical instruction, the moral forthrightness demanded of his profession” (189). Furthermore, these readers may have taken the “generic structure of *Marius* itself” as a corrective to the seductive pedagogical form of *The Renaissance*. *Marius* is a Victorian *Bildungsroman*, “the nineteenth century genre which...most enthusiastically promotes self-discipline and socialization” (189). Specifically, the *Bildungsroman* curbs the excessive individualism of the young—as Douglas Mao reminds us, its ideal ending is “one in which the protagonist comes to accommodation with a society that has thrown up obstacles to the desires and impulses of youth” (7). Drawing out what is implicit in Kaiser’s argument, we may argue that the essay form that comprises *The Renaissance* allows a writer (and challenges its young reader) to try [*essayer*: to attempt, to weigh] the depths of his subjectivity and to present himself in all the ways he differs from others and does not conform to society’s configurations. Pater’s writing repeatedly foregrounds how the essay challenges us to write ourselves into being and to realize our difference from others. In *Gaston de Latour*, he examines the quintessential essayist, Montaigne, noting his “undissembled egotism” (54) and how his *Essays* are a product and producer of this introspection (54). “I have no other end in writing but to discover *myself*” writes the philosopher (54). His self-scrutiny allows him to realize that the self is inherently divided and that a truly uniform society, with all settled in its fixed place, is impossible: “What are we but sedition? Like this poor France, faction against faction within ourselves...with as much difference between us and ourselves as between ourselves and others” (54-55).

For the retreat hypothesis to function, we must assume that “seduction and ethics are mutually exclusive” and that “the socializing mission of the *Bildungsroman* is incompatible with the seductive agenda” (190). By examining how Platonic

philosophy and Hellenic studies moved to the centre of the Oxford curriculum, Kaiser astutely shows how Greek philosophy proposed a “lost ethical dimension to seduction” (190), and how that seductive ethical system, both as a homoerotic practice and a process of intellectual wandering, is portrayed in *Marius*. He then discusses literary form to address the socializing function of the novel of development. While we have foregrounded the tensions between the essay and the *Bildungsroman*, we should recall that Pater says the Platonic dialogue is “essentially an essay” and it is dialogue that Kaiser opposes to the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that not only does *Marius* represent education as a conversation that occurs “in pairs, seductive couplings, sometimes even in larger parties, pedagogical assemblages” (198), it is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense, because it disrupts the unitary form of the traditional *Bildungsroman* with a “centrifugal army of subgenres, asides, professorial lectures, translation , and myriad fragments of texts” (199). For Kaiser, this dialogized heteroglossia allows Pater to show his own hand in the educational process. While the dialogue and the *Bildungsroman* both “aim to produce viable adult subjects, to present their youthful audiences with models of meritorious citizenship” the *Bildungsroman* “socializes by obfuscating the contradiction inherent to bourgeois individuality” that is, it first makes the subject experience the goals of socialization, self-discovery and self-determination as unproblematically identical, and then it hides that the process of individuation is not managed independently, but is directed by mentors who guide the subject into socialization and who are nevertheless dependent on the subject for their power, which is not inherent, but arises relationally (194). By contrast, the dialogue foregrounds the fact that the individual’s socialization (and self-discovery) is “the by-product of reciprocity between a susceptible youth and an inherently needy authority” (196).

Kaiser’s reading allows us to understand how the dialogic ideal that drove the Oxford tutorial made its mark on the Victorian novel. He also enables us to assess how

Pater eroticizes the political work of demystifying liberal ideology since it is in the process of seducing the student into his proper social space that Pater's pedagogical narrator calls attention to his loving manipulation. But in his zeal to show how Pater presents "his reader with an alternative to bourgeois individuality: an ethical subjectivity rooted in reciprocity" he makes an overreaching general statement about Paterian subjectivity:

The Paterian subject is dialogic, one could say, rather than soliloquistic. Individuation is marked not by involution, a turning-inward, introversion, but by exchange, a passing-between, communication. For Pater, the fantasy of an unified autonomous subject belies the contradictory and multiplicitous—indeed, historicist—nature of subjectivity. *Bildung* therefore is never experienced in Marius as soliloquy, as conversation with oneself, but rather as dialogue, as influence by another. (197)

Even if we accept that this is a true portrait of *Bildung* in *Marius*, we cannot state that the Paterian subject is universally dialogic. Because he does not turn to Pater's later dialectical theories, Kaiser does not appreciate the ways in which Pater's dialogism is constantly collapsing into soliloquy, and how what seems to be intersubjective communication among his characters is often introversion.

Bolstering Kaiser's case, in *Plato and Platonism*, Pater does claim dialogue is "the instrument most fit...of whatever what we call teaching and learning may really be" (54). But we might immediately be suspicious of this claim, for Pater, unlike many of his disciples, wrote no pedagogical dialogues. Despite his equation of the essay and the dialogue, might he have not been moved to write at least one dialogue in classic form? His reluctance to do so might alert us to his unusual conception of what the dialogue is. While dialogue may provide the best means for a teacher to influence a student, that mode of influence is not necessarily designed to foster awareness of others and exchange with them. Hence Pater is able to explain Socratic pedagogy in this way: "To make Meno, Poles, Charmides, really interested in himself, to help him to the discovery of that wonderful world here at home—in this effort, even more than

in making him interested in other people or things (it is no sophistical paradox) lay and still lies the central business of education” (80). Here, the unexplored richness of one’s interiority is figured as an entire world that fits within the domestic space of the mind. Just as Pater describes in *The Renaissance*, within the “inward world of thought and feeling” the “whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind” (187). Although it is the teacher’s task to make the student chart this space, here Pater does not require the teacher to foreground his role in helping the student turn inward; because the commitment to exploring that interiority outweighs any interest in other people or things, there is no need for the teacher to demonstrate that the student’s individuation is enabled by an intersubjective process, and no guarantee that the student will experience his education as dialogic, whether or not it actually is. The sentence alone demonstrates the teacher’s disappearance and unaccountability; it is not specifically *Socrates’* business to interest young men in themselves, but the abstract institution of education, which in its transhistorical impersonality cannot be called to give an account of its mechanisms. Describing the philosophy student’s education, Pater further insists that “the essential, or dynamic, dialogue, is ever that dialogue of the mind with itself, which any converse with Socrates or Plato does but promote. The very words of Plato then challenge us straightaway to larger and finer apprehension of the processes of our own minds” (129). What else is this self-reflexive discourse but soliloquy? Pater distances the moment of learning here from contact with another person—the true benefit of dialogue with another, whether that other is a textualized voice or a living interlocutor, is that it helps us question ourselves over our beliefs, rather than forcing us to declare our truth in response to another’s prodding. In the preceding description of reading, we do not even have a moment to consider the words of the other as different or to

imagine the value of those words to the other, we “straightaway” retreat inwards to consider the workings of our own minds.

The image of the mind in soliloquy comes from Matthew Arnold’s critique of introverted self consciousness. In his “Preface to the First Edition of Poems” Arnold explains that he excluded “Empedocles” from his collected poetry because it exemplified the spirit of modernity, not Apollonian classicism. In it: “the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared, the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves, we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragements of Hamlet and of Faust ” (10). In portraying the mindset of Empedocles, the poem depicts and creates in its audience a state of suffering that find no “vent in action, in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance, in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done” (11). For Pater, this mode where action is suspended in favor of contemplation, where doubts reign, is hardly a state of suffering. Rather it is the normal mode of philosophical skepticism, in which the subject, doubtful of knowing outward existence, explores the structures of his mind as he might appreciate the interior decoration of his home:

To make men interested in themselves, as being the very ground of all reality for them... that was the essential function of the Socratic method: to flash light into the house within, its many chambers, its memories and associations, upon its inscribed and pictured walls. Fully occupied there, as with his own essential business in his own home, the young man would become, of course, proportionately less interested...in what was superficial, in the mere outsides of other people and their occupations. (121)

Pater writes the preceding passage after he has denounced Sophist professional pedagogy and its failure to make its students realize and declare what they believe most deeply about phenomena they perceive. Here he urges students to apprehend what he elsewhere calls the *vraie verite*, not mere fact, but one’s personal sense of it, “those more liberal and durable impressions which, in respect of any really

considerable person or subject...lie beyond, and must supplement, the narrower range of strictly ascertained facts" (121). It is only when one has plumbed the depths of one's own subjectivity through introspection that one can then become interested in the depths of others. If we are too quick to claim Pater as a theorist of intersubjectivity, one whose textual "intrusions reiterate the *reciprocal* nature of socialization, demystify the dubious process of individuation, put a face upon the disembodied authority behind the *Bildungsroman*" we lose sight of how for him, too much traffic with others before one knows one's self endangers aesthetic perception. We may lose sight of how solitude calls forth a creative imaginative faculty. Kaiser observes:

Marius is never alone, never unitary. Even solitude is populated by subtle touches, the caress of others....To trust the touch of the invisible, to make loving companion of the seemingly insubstantial, to cohabit with sacred presences is the lesson to be drawn, certainly, from Pater's translation of Apuleius's "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," in which Psyche incurs the displeasure of the gods by doubting the sanctity, the sublimity, of the unseen companion at her side. It is a lesson Marius takes to heart. (198)

Kaiser is correct about this injunction to find companionship in solitude, but does not foreground that for Marius is the mind itself—the psyche—that is capable of making bringing the loving presence into existence.

When we read Pater's texts then, the essays that he states are successors to Platonic dialogues or the novels and short stories whose narrators and hybrid forms mark them as dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense, we are actually encountering texts that promote introspection, texts that prize soliloquy as the essential and primary form of intellectual labor. With this in mind, we might well return to the scene of instruction with which this chapter opened, wherein Oscar Wilde recognized Pater's public lecture as a form of speech overheard, rather than heard by his audience. Pater, somewhat stung by Wilde's quip, reproached him: "Mr. Wilde, you have a phrase for everything." But if we wanted to read against Wilde's criticism, to see what his wit did

not capture, we could see Pater's soliloquy as an instructive performance in itself. Even as he stands before his audience as an authority, he seems to undermine that authority, drawing into the recesses of himself. But what we see is not a shameful or shy retreat; rather it exemplifies the introspective turn that Pater teaches his students to do. It is this inward movement that accompanies the creative autodidactic process whereby the student animates the texts around him, turning text to flesh.

CHAPTER 2

“The Child in the Vatican”: Vernon Lee’s Gothic Aesthetic Pedagogy

I *Descending the Stool – Renouncing Academic Authority*

“It is not *easy* to do what you have done...to make, viz. *intellectual theorems* seem like the life’s essence of the concrete, sensuous objects from which they have been abstracted. I always welcome this evidence of intellectual structure in a poetic or imaginative piece of criticism, as I think it is a very rare thing, and it is also an effect I have myself endeavoured after, and so come to know its difficulties” (Pater, *Letters* 54). Praise like this allows critics to call Vernon Lee, born Violet Paget, “the only pupil Pater acknowledged” (Schaffer 62). But while Pater and Lee both labor to make critical texts pulse with the life of the objects they analyze, they do so with different, even opposed, pedagogical intentions. Pater deems the liveliness of texts and artworks as essentially benign. For him, it is the personified text that succors and playfully seduces the student when the teacher’s intellectual and amorous attention becomes perniciously unreliable. By contrast, there is little gentle about Lee’s animated artworks, which begin their aesthetic lessons with acts of erotic aggression against their students.

Difficult to characterize, Lee was an essayist, novelist and short-story writer. Born to English parents in France and resident most of her life in Italy, in the waning years of the nineteenth century she served her British public as a window on Continental culture. She first drew literary attention for her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), but with *Belcaro: Sundry Essays on Aesthetical Questions* (1881), she defined a fresh critical career for herself. Eager to represent ideas she had conceived “about art, considered not historically, but in its double relation to the artist

and the world for whom he works” (1), she killed the historian persona she had assumed for her intellectual debut and took the role of aesthete, posing “questions of artistic genesis and evolution” and “artistic right and wrong” (4).

Belcaro’s introduction, written to “one of my readers—the first and earliest” (1), explains Lee’s “highest ambition”: to “influence those young and powerful enough to act” upon her theories (1). She met her addressee, the poet Mary Robinson, in 1880, developing a relationship with her that would last nearly a decade. During this time, the pair introduced each other to artists and intellectuals from their respective social circles and inspired and critiqued each other’s work. Their attachment led the sexologist Havelock Ellis to suggest they “might serve as a possible case-history for the section on Lesbianism in *Sexual Inversion*” (Grosskurth 223), but their close collaboration was disrupted in 1888 when Robinson married. Lee suffered a nervous breakdown over this event, which she decried as the “sacrifice” of her companion’s beauty and brilliance to “a dwarf, a humpback, a cripple from birth” (qtd. in Colby 125). Although the women corresponded after the marriage, their relationship cooled. However, in 1881, still intimate with Robinson, Lee writes her in *Belcaro*’s preface, “my first thought is to place [my ideas] before you: it is, you see, a matter of conversion, and the nearest, most difficult convert is yourself” (1).

We might parse Lee’s desire to convert Robinson as the simple desire to teach, with the print circulation of *Belcaro* enabling her to educate a wide audience alongside her friend. Such an ambition seems evident in Lee’s 1878 review of Hippolyte Taine’s books on art philosophy. Consoling her contemporaries, she notes that although Taine shows how “the work of artistic production is no longer in store for us, [the activity] of artistic appreciation is our special domain. . . . The works of the aesthetician and art-historian, from Lessing and Winckelmann down to Ruskin and Taine, cannot indeed instruct us how to produce masterpieces, but they can teach us how to enjoy them (30).

We might expect that Lee desires to join this august company of teachers. But while she may wish to *influence* others to her way of thinking, by the time she reflects on *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in the preface of *Belcaro*, teaching and the teacher's position repel her:

To plan, to work for such a book as that first one, seems to me now about the most incomprehensible of all things, to care for one particular historical moment, to study the details of one particular civilisation, to worry about finding out the exact when and how of any definite event; above all, to feel (as I felt) any desire to teach any specified thing to anybody; all this has become unintelligible to my sympathies of to-day. And it is natural: natural in mental growth that we are, to some extent, professorial and professorially self-important and engrossed, before becoming restlessly and sceptically studious: we may teach some things before we even know the desire of learning others. Thus I, from my small magisterial chair or stool of 18th century expounder, have descended and humbly gone to school as a student of aesthetics. (4-5)

Here, Lee presents herself as the professional interpreter of Italian history who holds a “magisterial chair.”¹⁷ But as she describes stepping down from her endowed chair and humbly returning to school, she imposes an unusual developmental model on the roles of professor and student. Her former desire to teach belonged to an earlier state of mental growth when she was “professorially self-important and engrossed.” At this immature developmental stage, she acquired and disseminated knowledge in order to aggrandize herself. Hungry for the recognition that would nourish her sense of self-importance, she sought an audience for her narrowly defined expertise and limited her intellectual ambitions. She was eager to teach “some things” as the “18th century expounder” rather than to remain “restlessly and sceptically studious” about a wider variety of things. Reflecting upon this younger version of herself, Lee suggests that the mature scholar must maintain peripatetic habits of thought; such a scholar has no time to teach because all her energies are devoted to learning and probing what she learns.

¹⁷ This is audacious rhetoric. Lee renounces a professorial authority she cannot have—no woman held a full professorship at Oxbridge until 1939. Indeed, women were only admitted to *hear* lectures at Oxford in 1879. These female students were not full members of the University, could not earn degrees, and could still be barred from the classroom. Pater, for instance, did not allow women auditors.

The mature Lee will not delimit a fixed area of expertise from which to expound authoritatively.

By analyzing Lee's aversion to instructing others, above all her beloved Mary Robinson, we may situate her criticism within an anti-hermeneutical, anti-didactic aesthetic tradition. Rejecting historicism and valuing the appreciation of form over the interpretation of content, this aestheticism distrusts teachers, associating them with theories that distract from the sensuous immediacy of the art object. Perhaps the most famous recent proponent of a similar anti-theoretical stance is Susan Sontag, who in her essay "Against Interpretation" argues, "In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the world of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable" (8). Calling for criticism that would "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it" Sontag concludes, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (13, 14). *Belcaro* could teach us how to devise such an erotics. Recording how one woman initiates her dearest companion into the thoughts that she holds most fervently, the text is already concerned by the issue of eroticism, but remarkably, it commemorates the relationship between Lee and Robinson by celebrating the sexual allure of *anti*-pedagogy, not pedagogy. Lee downplays narratives that eroticize a teacher's masterful direction of her student to explore how *art* might seduce and instruct the student when no teacher, theory in hand, is at hand. If for Sontag, art untamed by interpretation renders us anxious with its erotic allure, Lee produces this nerve-racking experience for her contemporaries by writing aesthetic criticism in horror mode. Borrowing her rhetoric from the anti-Catholic Gothic novel she recasts education as religious conversion, giving the art object an

unsettling power to come uncannily to life and entice the spectator to new forms of belief.

To comprehend how Lee's aesthetics reinforces her disdain of teaching let us analyze her philosophy alongside that of her mentor, Pater. While Lee's late texts acknowledge him as her "master," she never cites him in *Belcaro*, an omission that may reflect her anxiety over educational figures. Nevertheless, critic Laurel Brake remarks the "numerous" elements of his influence as it affects the theme, philosophy and structure of Lee's text, an influence that informs Lee's anti-didacticism (56). For Pater, finding *pleasure* in an object is necessary to practice proper aesthetic criticism. As he notes in *The Renaissance*, "The aesthetic critic then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements" (xx). According to Pater, discriminating the "real, direct, aesthetic charm" of an art object from the "borrowed interest" that it gains from being placed in its proper historical context is "always pleasant" for the critic (15). One means of analyzing the pleasure one feels is to determine how successful the artwork is in its struggle to "be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception"—a condition Pater finds when the artwork achieves "perfect identification of matter and form" (109). In short, pleasure is paramount for Pater. Feeling aesthetic pleasure demands that the processes producing pleasure be investigated and describing how those processes operate produces more pleasure. Lee's criticism is supported by and promotes Pater's pleasure-seeking principles of criticism. So critical is this pleasure to Lee that even the most accomplished aesthetic criticism would be an impoverished formalism if undertaken without it. We are accustomed to hearing aestheticism's quarrel with historicist and moralistic modes of interpretation, but may

find it strange that when Lee disparages the wrong kind of critical engagement with art, she scorns not only how we “expound the civilisation, the mode of thought” that gives rise to an artwork, but how we “trace the differences of school” and “approve and condemn” art (*Belcaro*, 23), how we “dabble deliciously in alternate purity and impurity” (23) and how we are “saturated with every kind of critically distilled aesthetic essence, till there is not a flavour and not a scent, good or bad, sweet or foul, which may not be perceived in this strange soul of ours” (22). Lee’s rhetoric of aesthetic flavors and scents suggests it is necessary to have a refined taste that can discriminate the elements that compose our aesthetic impressions. But she is critical of this keen discrimination when it is born solely from a taxonomical desire rather than from an attempt to explain the conditions that produce pleasure. We must discover how the work brings us joy, determining how and whether “in reality this antique art is, in the life of our feelings, at all important, comforting, influential” (23).

Like Pater, Lee insists that the pleasure felt in the aesthetic encounter be immediate, or as he says, “direct.” Therefore she expresses dismay that “we are all of us getting more and more into the habit of enjoying, not so much art as the feelings and thoughts, the theories and passions for which we make it the excuse” (279). These theories are objects that block access to art and therefore her criticism works “towards getting rid of those foreign, extra-artistic, irrelevant interests which aestheticians have since the beginning of time interposed between art and those who are intended to enjoy it” (13). Opposing these aestheticians, her “work has unconsciously enough, been to logically justify that perfectly simple, direct connection between art and ourselves, which was the one I had felt, as a child, before learning all the wonderful fantastification of art philosophers” (13). Associating abstract theory with processes of education, Lee idealizes her child self as one whose untutored, “felt” connection with art was only disrupted by learning the professional discourse of aestheticians.

Lee goes so far as to suggest that professional theoretical discourse *destroys* the artwork. In her short story “Amour Dure” (1887) collected in her book, *Hauntings*, (1890) she portrays Spiridion Trepka, who denigrates himself as a “Pole grown into the semblance of a German pedant, doctor of philosophy, professor even” (42). Spiridion’s predicament is that he has longed for years to visit Italy, to “come face to face with the Past” (41). We may understand this Past as the artistic patrimony that makes Italy (above all Rome) a living museum; Victorian novels and travel accounts repeatedly exclaim that when one visits Italy, one encounters the Past by virtue of the overwhelming amounts of ancient architecture, painting, and sculpture there. Based in Berlin as a poor scholar, Spiridion finds a leisure trip to Italy unattainable, and can only afford his venture to Italy as a research trip. He writes: “Am I not myself a product of modern northern civilization; is not my coming to Italy due to this very modern scientific vandalism, which has given me a travelling scholarship because I have written a book like all those other atrocious books of erudition and art-criticism? Nay, am I not here at Urbania on the express understanding that....I shall produce just another such book?” (41). Spiridion’s reference to vandalism is notable. He characterizes the expatriate German scholars whom he meets in Italy as “Berlin and Munich Vandals” inviting us to compare these scholars with the Germanic invaders who despoiled Rome, destroying its beauty. His art criticism continues that violence against beauty, making him wonder if he can ever really come into contact with it, or the history identified with it. He laments, “Dost thou imagine...that thou, with thy ministerial letters and proof-sheets in thy black professorial coat pocket, canst ever come in spirit into the presence of the Past?” It is as if the scholarship that Spiridion would put into circulation to educate others insulates him from the pleasure art brings—his credentials and manuscripts are imagined here as if they, along with his academic garb, insulate him from the object of his study.

The armor-like quality of Spiridion's academic robes, which drape his intellectual authority over the surfaces meant to perceive, are a good symbol for how the teacher's intellectual authority threatens to disrupt the immediate, pleasurable connection that exists between us and art. Insofar as teaching supplies ideas and feelings that supplant the pleasure-inducing powers of art itself, it must be rejected.

Lee insists that she designs *Belcaro* not as

the Sir-Oracle manual of a professor, with all in its right place understood or misunderstood, truth and error all neatly systematized for the teaching of others; but rather the scholar's copy book, the fragmentary and somewhat helter-skelter notes of what, in his listening and questions, he has been able to understand and which he hands over to his fellow-pupils, who may have understood as much of the lessons as himself, but have in all probability understood different portions or in different ways. (5)

Drawn from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the reference to the "Sir-Oracle" professor's tome evokes the transcribed authoritative, omniscient oration that will "let no dog bark" let alone student speak¹⁸. If a novice in Professor Oracle's class possesses an aesthetic insight arising from a "simple, direct connection" to art, that notion is not valued in itself, but stands or falls at the professor's pleasure. While the teacher's handbook proclaims the already ordered, complete system of truth and error, *Belcaro*, merely fragmentary, is handed among co-equal fellow-students who collectively attempt to understand the truth.¹⁹ In comparing their different understandings, derived from personal contact with art, each assert intellectual agency, perhaps writing their insights on the blank pages of the unexpended copy-book, expanding its notes into thesis and exposition.

¹⁸ Gratiano says "I am Sir Oracle, / And when I ope my lips let no dog bark!" *The Merchant of Venice* I. i. 93-4.

¹⁹ Later in her life, Lee returns to this opposition between the all-knowing professor and the students who collaborate to work out things on their own. As she became a more established intellectual, she attracted a cult of admiring young women called "The Souls." In a letter to a woman she wished to draw into this group Lee wrote, "I can teach you infinitely less than any person at Oxford, but I think we might *think* things out together, which is sometimes quite as fruitful" (Seymour 39). Lee is acutely aware that she cannot teach with the authority of an Oxford don but she insists she does not want to instruct, she wants to think alongside a fellow, to study collaboratively.

Lee stresses, “My object is not to teach others, but to show them how far I have taught myself, and how far they may teach themselves” (13). Nevertheless, she is aware that her text may exceed her intentions. Although *Belcaro* should simply inspire others to self-education, some readers may seize her own record of her education as a guide to what to think about art. Anticipating that in “printing, correcting and publishing a whole volume of whims and ideas about art” she erects a theoretical system that will obstruct access to art (279), Lee replies:

I have never pretended that I am not as bad as my neighbours; but the whole gist of these my theorisings is that people should try and take art more simply than they do; that, if not called upon to try and persuade others to simpler courses, they should not theorise themselves. By theorising, I mean, incorrectly perhaps all manner of irrelevant fantasticating, whether it take the shape of seeking in art for hidden psychological meanings or moral values, or of using art merely as a suggestion of images and emotions, the perception of which infallibly interferes with, and sometimes entirely replaces the perception of the art itself. (280)

What Lee proposes then, is theorising only where necessary to undo the pedagogical work of the reigning critical paradigms. If indeed she must present a body of theory that mediates access to the art work, the eradicated content of that theory compensates for the lamentable fact that the theory exists at all. She conceives her work negatively—not as instilling principles of criticism, but as removing precepts that interfere with perception. And even this anti-education must be rendered in a way that makes its mechanism and effects as efficiently unobtrusive as possible. It is striking that Lee describes her intervention thus: “my work has *unconsciously* enough, been to logically justify that perfectly simple, direct connection between art and ourselves” [my emphasis]. She abstracts herself, effacing voluntarism from pedagogy. What could be more conceptually empty than an education construed as negation, deletion acting without a will present to direct it?

Lee’s evacuative rhetoric shows how strongly she wants to believe that no one needs to *learn* how to engage art properly. Indeed, this fancy appears in her review of

Taine's work, where she complains of a contemporary public "incapable of [an] appreciation, intense and almost instinctive, like that of the men of days of artistic progress and perfection" (27). Ideally, she would reduce the whole of aesthetic criticism to the commands "Perceive Art! Enjoy Art!" These actions she imagines as innate and natural to all, only contemporary man has forgotten how to exercise his perception (or more precisely, been alienated from it through aesthetic miseducation):

I suspect that in former days (I confess I do not know exactly when), art may have been perceived pretty much in the same way in which we perceive nature: that the enjoyed perception of a beautiful statue, of a picture, of a grand song, may have come interrupting, with pleasant interludes of quiet self-unconscious pleasure, the matter of fact, but not monotonous business of life, even as my work now...is for ever being interrupted by the flicker of the lime-leaf shadows. (278)

Notable here is the passivity of the perceiver, who need not learn any special knowledge to enjoy art, who need not even devote energy to observing. Instead, Lee endows art with special agency to invade quotidian affairs, filling one with "quiet self-unconscious pleasure."

This idyllic image of art and aesthetic pleasure that creep surreptitiously upon us is one we should keep near as we analyze Lee's pedagogical thoughts further. It is her idealized alternative to a world in which professional interpreters and educators mediate our access to art. In this fantasy, the image is merely anodyne. However, re-establishing this prelapsarian connection with beauty is so important that Lee is willing to imagine art's encounter with us as a violent invasion—by whatever means possible, the pleasurable union must be established. The stage for this encounter is the Vatican Museum in Rome, which lends its name to *Belcaro's* first pedagogical essay, "The Child in the Vatican."

II *Painting, Sculpture, and the Ideologies of Child Protectionism*

We might ask why a child's aesthetic education is of interest to Lee, and how the specific task of educating children relates to the instruction of her adult readers. We should first recall that Lee romanticizes her own childhood, seeing it as that time when she enjoyed an unparalleled intimacy with art. Therefore, the essay is a nostalgic exercise that allows her to commemorate the formative stages of her girlhood. As a contemporary review of *Belcaro* states "The Child in the Vatican" is "mental biography showing how certain scenes or pictures or stories have fired trains of thought which have resulted in the formation of opinion" (Monkhouse 112). However, Lee's essay is not simply a personal reminiscence. It participates in a larger social effort to examine child impressionability. As the proceeding quotation suggests, Lee's contemporaries considered childhood the ultimate state of human receptivity, a stage where environmental influences had enormous effects on all aspects of personal development, from the formation of moral character to the fixing of aesthetic susceptibilities. Therefore, the child furnishes a prime subject for people interested in teaching adults insofar as the optimal student must endeavor to become as absorbent as a child. Studying the child also shed light on how easily an adult could achieve the aesthetic (re)education that critics like Lee promoted. If the effects that childhood experience had created in the individual were immutable, or especially difficult to change, adult aesthetic training might have been pointless.

Lee might also have chosen the topic of a child's aesthetic education in order to better assert her critical authority as a woman. When she adopted the pseudonym Vernon Lee, she claimed "I am sure that no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt" (qtd in Gunn 66). And yet, almost as soon as she had submitted her first articles for publication, her

pseudonym was exploded. Writing about such topics as children's education, the exposed Lee may have drawn less of the contempt she feared because separate spheres ideology had ceded women responsibility for the rearing and training of the young.²⁰

Finally, "The Child in the Vatican" recalls Pater's imaginary portrait, "The Child in the House," and is probably written in homage to it. As Lee sought to establish herself as an aesthete, acknowledging Pater would have shown her familiarity with the field of aestheticist criticism. But even at this early stage, Lee is no slavish imitator of her mentor. Pater's narrative tracks a child's developing aesthetic receptivity or "brain-building" as it courts impressions in the domestic realm. However, Lee situates aesthetic education in the Vatican Museum in order to foreground questions of pedagogical method more pressingly than Pater does. Although it is possible to be taught in the home, Pater's titular child receives his aesthetic impressions haphazardly from the "influences of the sensible things which are tossed and fall and lie about us" (*Miscellaneous* 151). Undirected by governess or mother, he receives his education simply by being in the domestic environment. And lest Pater's readers think they should manage children's aesthetic education indirectly by scrupulous attention to interior decoration or landscaping, he reassures them "it is false to suppose that a child's sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it" (150). Pater's domestic aesthetic education does not emphasize the virtues of *art* to train perception; any old "sensible" thing around the house will do, but through the educational site she chooses Lee specifies that art is necessary for aesthetic training. Furthermore, in contrast with the family dwelling, the museum is a site to which a child must purposefully be taken

²⁰ This cover would have had its limitations however. The female sphere was the *domestic* realm and the instruction of children fell to women (especially the mother) when that education was conducted within the private sphere of the home. As I point out below, "The Child in the Vatican" imagines an education that takes children away from their proper places within the home.

and so questions of how a child's aesthetic education must be *conducted* inaugurate Lee's essay.

"The Child in the Vatican" is deeply ironic. At the beginning of the essay, Lee ventriloquizes a pessimistic persona that speaks as if she ²¹ could be the only possible authority on artistic interpretation. Deeply suspicious about the propriety and efficacy of educating children in the art museum, the pessimist insists that those who bring children there have misunderstood the nature of the young. She begins by saying, "There were a lot of children in the Vatican this morning: small barbarians scarce out of the nursery who should have been at home, at their lessons or reading fairy books or carpentering or doll-educating...or amusing themselves" (17). Thus she suggests that overzealous guardians have taken children too immature to appreciate art away from the home where they "should" be at lessons or imitating respectable pedagogy by "doll-educating." In the public space of the museum, the project of formal aesthetic training cannot supplement private domestic education. It can only prevent the children from pursuing their own playful pleasures. Presenting herself as someone who cares about the well-being and happiness of the young, the pessimist explains why no child could enjoy the Vatican, telling the woeful story of youth who are nearly bored to death there.²² Later in her essay, Lee explicitly argues that children can find pleasure and intellectual profit at the Vatican, but even before she begins this counterpoint, she undermines the pessimistic argument through irony, letting inconsistency creep into the pessimist's argument.

The pessimist contrasts two youthful groups in the Vatican. A fortunate few have been "left to their own devices." Free from instruction, they gleefully ignore the

²¹ We shall assume the narrator is female. "Child" teaches its lesson through a "fairy-tale" and the narrator explicitly links such story-telling to the "nurse or peasant woman" (27).

²² Indeed, with her descriptions of inactive, cold, affectless children, the speaker nearly literalizes the figure of speech, "bored to death."

art in the museum. For them, the museum is only valuable because it can be turned into a space for play. They “rush headlong through corridor and hall, looking neither to the right nor to the left” (21), and fill the rooms with “chattering and laughing” (17). Other children, “demure, weary, vacant” are led “by their elders” for edification (17). Their “dreary, vague” faces reveal that their aesthetic education is failing. They are “chilled, numbed by a sort of wonder unaccompanied by any curiosity, oppressed by a sense of undefineable desolation” (17). Given Lee’s distrust of teachers, might this be a portrait of spoiled pleasure, a scene portraying how mediatory didacticism interferes with children’s ability to engage art directly? No, this is not the pessimist’s message. If it were, the game-playing children might actually enjoy looking at the Vatican’s galleries, as well as racing through them. Are the narrator indicting adults for their attempt to interest children in difficult art prematurely? No, if that were so, *all* artistic forms should have an equal opportunity to bore the child. We can imagine an abstruse portrait that would not move a three-year old, as equally as we can a statue that would not invite his interest. Strangely, the speaker only objects to *sculpture* as the subject of education. She insists that to children “all this world of tintless stone can give but a confused, overpowering impression of dreariness and vacuity.” This is because “this clear and simple art of sculpture, born when the world was young and had not yet learned to think and talk in symbolical riddles, this currently so outspoken art is, to the childish soul of our days, the most silent art of any”(20).

To recapitulate—at first, the essay appears to be arguing against introducing children to art because comprehending it is beyond their developing capacities. But the preceding characterization of sculpture paradoxically suggests that it is the essential *lucidity* of this “clear and simple art of sculpture,” this “currently so outspoken art” that makes it uninteresting or unintelligible to the Victorian child. Sculpture, emerging as an artistic medium in the world’s youth, is associated with an originary moment

before learning and before art's message had to be coded in and decoded from "symbolical riddles"(20). Modern children, born when the world is old, learn for their mothertongue a language of symbols. They are deaf to that direct address of *sculptural* expression.

The idea that every modern child must find sculpture uninteresting is absurd. It is more plausible that an ideology exists that *wishes* every modern children to be indifferent to sculpture, a paranoid ideology that deems exposure to statues pernicious. In support of this ideology, the pessimist confidently proclaims how children must react to art: "Certain it is that to this child, to any child, this Vatican must have seemed like the most desolate, the most unintelligible of places" (20) However, the narrator should not be able to utter such certainties since she herself claims that to adults, childhood is a closed book: "What we were, how we felt, how we knew and understood and vaguely guessed things as children, none of us can know" (19). Since inquiring into a child's mind is like peering into the "soul of a dog or a cat," childish subjectivity is something adults can "only speculate [about] and reconstruct on a general basis" (20). And yet, this fundamental unknowability does not embarrass the speaker when she asserts that all children are interested in the "language of colour, of movement, of sound, of suggestion" (20). The imagined child, so immune to the enticements of sculpture, is drawn to the *pictorial*:

Hence it is that the child who will one day become ourselves rarely cares to return to these sculpture galleries, or if it care to return to any it is to mixed galleries like those of Florence where instead of the statues it looks at pictures. And out of pictures, out of coarse blurs of colour in picture books...infinitely suggestive engravings in bible and book of travel; out of fine glossy modern pictures which represent a definite place, or tell a definite story; out of all this ...do we get our original, never really alterable ideas and feelings about art. (22)

Why does the narrator desire so to posit that we have *unalterable* aesthetic notions and feelings engendered by paintings and line-drawing? What undesirable influence does

sculpture exercise upon a child's intellectual formation? To answer this question, we must examine the ways that some strains of art criticism have posed correspondences between specific artistic forms and the kinds of engagement they produce in spectators. For example, in *The Renaissance*, Pater's Hegelian approach to art suggests that sculpture, specifically classical Greek sculpture, provides the artistic medium best suited to explain the principles of aesthetic criticism and to advance its practice.²³ In the following passage Pater celebrates the Venus of Melos, contrasting it with typological medieval painting:

That is in no sense a symbol, a suggestion, of anything beyond its own victorious fairness. The mind begins and ends with the finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive. This motive is not lightly and loosely attached to the sensuous form, as its meaning to an allegory, but saturates and is identical with it. The Greek mind had advanced to a particular stage of self-reflexion, but was careful not to pass beyond it. (164).

For Pater the statue exists solely to showcase its triumphant beauty—it is art for art's sake. Any “spiritual motive” the work possesses is inextricably fused with its “sensuous form” so that the spectator cannot allegorize the work, but must begin and end with the sculpture's “finite image.” This fusion is particularly a feature of the medium of Greek sculpture as well as a product of the “happy limit” of Greek thought at a particular historical moment. In the stage of “self-reflexion” Pater lauds, Greek “thought does not outstrip or lie beyond the proper range of its sensible embodiment” (164). Therefore, the sculpture conceived by the felicitously restrained mind cannot express or authorize thought that denigrates the sensuousness of the art in favor of an abstracting allegory. Moreover, the medium of sculpture inherently resists the excessive self-consciousness that Pater associates with symbolism. Characterizing sculpture in opposition to “architecture and those romantic arts of painting, music and

²³ Of course, later in his career, Pater theorizes music the exemplar of inextricable form and content to urge formalistic interpretation—see *Plato and Platonism*, and “The School of Giorgione.” These accounts do not seek to rank the arts historically, however.

poetry” (168), Pater notes how sculpture “contrasts with the romantic arts, because it is not self-analytical. It has more to do exclusively than any other art with the human form, itself one entire medium of spiritual expression, trembling, blushing, melting into dew with inward excitement” (168) In depicting the human form, sculpture becomes “pure form.” If, as Pater argues, painting, music and poetry as “the special arts of the romantic and modern ages” cannot express themselves as absolutely in pure form as sculpture can (168), these arts find themselves more susceptible to those moralistic, allegorical, historic or didactic interpretations that aesthetic criticism attempts to resist. As a potential object for allegorizing criticism, classical sculpture is undesirable as it proliferates formalist analysis by offering no hidden motive but only “a little of suggested motion, and much of pure light on its gleaming surfaces, with pure form” (169). As we have already seen, Lee excludes ancient sculpture from those arts that speak in “symbolical riddles.” For her, sculpture expresses itself clearly and directly; its message lies in its immediate spectacularity.

By contrast, other art forms, from other eras, are associated with mediation. If we encounter sculpture in childhood, it might teach us to read all art formally, and it might teach us to crave direct contact with art’s sensuousness. But according to Lee, for modern people, the moment of coming face to face with statues is deferred long past childhood:

To grow up in the presence of the statues; to become acquainted with antique art long before any other; to perceive the beauty and enjoyableness of a statue before seeking for the beauty and enjoyableness of a picture or a piece of music; this is the reverse of the artistic training which every individual man or woman obtains consciously or unconsciously in our own day; for we begin with the art born nearest our time, then proceed to those further; we go from music to painting and from painting to sculpture. But humanity at large received the opposite training in the last four and twenty centuries. (28)

Lee imagines that if children are first exposed to forms of art that are not sculptural, they develop a particular critical orientation:

To the statues we return only quite late, when this long-formed, long moulded soul of ours has been well steeped in every sort of eclectic and artificial culture; has been saturated with modern art and modern criticism...saturated with every kind of critically distilled aesthetic essence, till there is not a flavour and not a scent, good or bad, sweet or foul, which may not be perceived in this strange soul of ours. Then we return to the statues; and having imbibed (like all things) a certain amount of Hellenic, Pagan, antique feeling, we try also to assimilate the spirit of the statues of Phidias or Praxiteles; we expound the civilisation, the mode of thought...as we occasionally, for a few moments feel actual, simple, unreasoning, wholesome pleasure in the sight of the old broken marbles. (23)

Modern aesthetic education exposes the young to “modern art and modern criticism” and “every sort of eclectic and artificial culture” in order to inculcate a certain way of interpreting art. Lee describes a world in which we exercise taste purely to categorize art. If we steep our souls in “every kind critically distilled essence” we are only educating our aesthetic palate so we can recognize those essences in art objects that we encounter. Thus having “imbibed...a certain amount of Hellenic, Pagan antique feeling,” we can recognize Phidian sculpture and can “expound the civilisation [and] the mode of thought” that informs Phidian work. Yet Lee does not speak of enjoying these flavors, scents and essences. Practicing the critical methods of modern aesthetic education, we generally feel no “actual, simple, unreasoning wholesome pleasure” in the art object itself. Instead, we enjoy theorizing or historicizing the art object. Naming this form of criticism “antiquarianism,” Pater writes that it works “by a purely historical effort, by putting its object in perspective and setting the reader in a certain point of view, from what gave pleasure to the past is pleasurable for him also” (*Renaissance*, 14).

What appears to be the most discriminating perceptiveness, the most cutting criticism then, is really revealed not to be in contact with the object at all. That perception is earned only at the cost of insulating the critic from sculpture, from the proper critical orientation that medium provides the viewer, and from pleasure that

comes from a more direct access to statues. As it is now, that pleasure is theorized as something that only occasionally surges past the “artificial” culture and criticism in which the soul is steeped by premature exposure to other media. But Lee wants to change this situation. Arguing against antiquarianism she demands, “Could this... art have been for us more than...a historic fossil, by study of which...we can amuse ourselves reconstructing the appearance and habits of a long dead, once living civilisation? Or might these statues have been much more to us? Might they, perhaps, have shaped and trained our souls with their unspoken lesson?” She sets the scene for a different aesthetic education, one in which sculpture displaces the other arts as the original source of the impressions that form our subjectivity. This counterhistory of how subjectivity is formed is referred to as a “fairy tale” (23).

Now, if we wanted to make practical use of “Child” we would simply say that Lee sees aesthetic education as a process to be begun early, while the child is most impressionable—that such an education must bring the child out of the privacy of the domestic sphere into public institutions and that sculpture (above all, Greek sculpture) is the medium best suited for introducing the child into serious art appreciation. But in resorting to a “fairy-tale” to supplement these practical points, Lee allows us to think more theoretically or philosophically about how this education is to be conducted. It is notable that she never prescribes the practical course that can be extracted from the essay, but chooses to tell a Gothic fantasy in which the statues themselves conduct the aesthetic education. In the section that follows we will examine the tropes and conventions with which this fairy-tale interrupts the essay’s description of a normal day at the Vatican. Analysis of this fantastic narrative will reveal a certain queer perversity in Lee’s pedagogy, perverse principles that lurk obliquely by the practical course we can develop from “Child”, but which are far more important for explaining

that fantasy of “conversion” which escapes the negative associations of teaching for Lee.

III *Gothicizing Greek Myth: Violating Innocence, Banishing Ignorance*

In Lee’s “fairy-tale,” the Greek statues at the Vatican are “merely stone imprisoned demons, dethroned gods of antiquity” that are desperate for worship (24). They had hoped for “restoration in the hearts of men” when “Winckelmann and Goethe came to them and adored” but they now realize “what men cared for was not them, but merely their own impertinent theories and grandiloquent speeches” (24). Therefore, the statues single out a visiting child to be their devotee and “cast a spell on it which would make it theirs” (24). Quite “unconscious of being . . . the victim of the statues,” the child goes about life regularly, but gradually begins to feel “strange symptoms” of giddiness and “brain-swimming” (26). These maladies occur because the “spell cast by the statues was not idle, the mysterious philter they had poured into it was working throughout that childish soul: the child was in love; in love with what it had hated; in love intensely, passionately with Rome. And...to the statues it returned, and in a way, grew up in their presence” (26). As it matures, the child realizes “that in those drowsy years of childish passions and day dreams, it had been learning something which others did not know” (26).

Concluding this story of the child’s tuition, Lee educates her readers by deriving “consciously and perhaps wearisomely” what “unconsciously, vaguely, the child of our fairy tale must have learned from its marble teachers in the Vatican” (48). By examining how the Niobe statuary group was composed, she deduces the following:

the only intrinsic perfection of art is the perfection of form and such perfection is obtainable only by boldly altering or even casting aside the subject with

which this form is only imaginatively, most often arbitrarily connected; and by humbly considering and obeying the inherent necessities of the material in which this form is made visible or audible. (48)

By assigning agency to the statues, Lee avoids staging a scene in which a human teacher instructs a pupil by interposing interpretive theories between the learner and the art object. Instead, *art* acts to inculcate the principles of right criticism. And yet, although Lee personifies art so that it can teach the child, art acts impersonally as it teaches. Sculpture does not melt from its rigid posture like Galatea to address the child and coax it to accept aestheticist tenets. Instead, the child comes to know critical truth about art because it falls in love with art, and the charm that causes the child to love works upon an unaware subject. Because the child only discovers it has been learning after the process has been completed, it never feels as if its critical autonomy has been threatened by another's instruction. Lee dreams of an education that never feels coercive, in which the transfer of knowledge is so efficient that it is undetectable except through the new epistemological abilities it grants the student.

While it is important to note the uncanny sentience of objects that enables this scene of teacherless education, it is more critical to understand how Lee's narrative, though its generic innovation, argues that students only acquire enlightenment because of an erotic event that radically alters their subjectivities. Lee calls her story a "fairy-tale" but her term misleads us insofar as it suggests an anodyne, sanitized narrative. Rather, we find her darkly re-interpreting Heinrich Heine's reflection on myth and cultural displacement, "The Gods in Exile." *Fin-de-siècle* writers such as Pater were fascinated by Heine's collection of medieval legends, narratives that did not dismiss pagan deities as superstitions, but used hegemonic Christian tradition to re-interpret those deities as mere demons within Christian mythos. Lee takes this source-material and embroiders it with Gothic tropes. We may recognize the Gothic genre mainly by a series of stock characters or plot schemes, but we might explain its essence and

genealogy by recalling the eighteenth century, when the Gothic novel, penned by writers such as Ann Radcliffe, arose to reinforce the Protestant ideology of a politically progressive Enlightenment England. This ideology proclaimed that although the Reformation had expelled irrational Catholicism from England, medieval barbarism, sexual anarchy and superstition flourished on the Catholic Continent. The Gothic novel throws its Protestant characters into the convents, catacombs and dungeon-filled castles that evoke this benighted world, exposing them to the supernatural horrors Catholics supposedly believed in as well as the mundane cruelties such debased Papists could inflict. For the novel's hapless protagonists, the danger of *becoming* a Catholic is ever-present. From the 1850's onward, Protestant Britain is gripped by anti-Catholic sentiment, an aversion expressed in denunciations of "papal aggression" and public outcry over conversion to Rome by notable Anglican figures such as Cardinal Newman. With its accounts of civilization threatened by barbarism, the Gothic attracted the aesthetes and decadents, who saw their own *fin-de-siècle* societies on the verge of collapse. Wilde, Pater and Ruskin all drew on the Gothic to inform their cultural criticism, but there is little analysis of how and why Lee does the same in *Belcaro*.

Lee's "fairy-tale" is her attempt to envision an aesthetic education that would focus upon the pleasure art's form brings us. She argues that modern aesthetic education sees art as a mere "historic fossil" by which we can reconstruct "a long dead, once living civilisation" (23). She then links this stance to the order in which artistic media are studied. While modern children progress from the study of "music to painting and from painting to sculpture", "humanity at large received the opposite training in the last four and twenty centuries" (28). Associating sculpture with aestheticist formalism, Lee argues that "the first standard of artistic right and wrong . . . was the standard of sculpture" (28), but that under the regime of modern aesthetic

education, the lessons sculpture teaches have been marginalized. When, as adults, we finally come to study sculpture, we are no longer receptive to its doctrine; we prefer to interpret art with theories that distract us from the sensuous, pleasurable immediacy of art.

To perpetuate itself, the ideology that promotes modern aesthetic education draws on Gothic rhetoric to make it unthinkable to bring a child to a sculpture gallery. To exemplify this paranoid Gothicism, Lee constructs a narrator who denounces the Vatican Museum as a “dreary labyrinth of brick and mortar, a sort of over-ground catacomb of stones, constructed in our art-studying, not art-loving times” (17). In this deathly Catholic space, the statues of Greek gods are portrayed as imperiled analogues to the Protestant protagonists of Gothic narrative. The sculpture gallery is both a “dismal scientific place of ostentation . . . where art is . . . ticketed and made dingy and lifeless” and “eminently a place of exile, or worse, of captivity for all this people of marble . . . who once stood each in happy independence against a screen of laurel or ilex branches” (18). The statues are “poor stone captives cloistered in monastic halls and cells or arranged like the skeletons of Capuchins in endless rows of niche, shelf and bracket (18). According to these overwrought descriptions, removing art from its original environment and placing it in a museum is an act of violence akin to imprisoning someone in a monastery. Hence the “sense of a sort of negative vandalism always clings” to collections of art, “especially to the galleries of sculptures, so uninhabited, so sepulchral” (18). Reinterpreting art-collecting through this distressing captivity narrative, the narrator suggests that children should not be brought to the Vatican because the themes of exile, incarceration and murder associated with curating will damage childhood innocence. “Grown up creatures . . . with powers of impression quite deadened by culture” are able to resist dwelling upon the traumatic circumstances that enable exhibition (19). They liberate the artwork from the gallery

through the imaginative trick of making a “fitting habitation for it in [their] fancy,” envisioning it as it would be in its original, historical setting (18). The child cannot perform this self-protective fantasy because it has not yet undergone the proper training that the adult has—recall that modern education, linked with non-sculptural artforms, produces a subject sheltered from impressionistic shock because it is “steeped in every sort of eclectic and artificial culture....saturated in modern art and modern criticism with mysticism and realism and sentiment and cynicism” (22).

Through its initial hatred of Rome and its longing to “get away from the stuffy horrible Rome of the popes,” the child in the Vatican is coded as culturally Protestant, an expatriate British youth that yearns for its homeland. Therefore, its aesthetic education at the Pope’s palace, an education that makes it fall in love with the metonym for Catholicism, functions as a countercultural conversion, an apostasy. The child is overtly converted to the pagan worship of the “dethroned gods of antiquity,” not Catholicism, but this is Lee’s way of safeguarding her narrative from her contemporaries’ censure. After all, who could really worry about a fairy-tale in which the cult of Apollo seduces good Protestants? We began this chapter by examining Lee’s desire to educate Mary Robinson, whom Lee figures as the “nearest, most difficult, desired convert” (2). The child’s experience exemplifies the conversion Lee desires for her friend—indeed, we may even regard the child as a fictionalized version of Robinson. Hence, we can only fully understand Lee’s metaphor for intellectual movement in the context of Victorian concerns over religious conversion.

Critics have not analyzed *Belcaro* by discussing the Gothic’s link to Catholicism. When she analyzes the circumstances that inspired the text, Martha Vicinus overlooks the religious root of Lee’s supernatural conventions. During a winter vacation in Tuscany, Lee and Robinson had visited Belcaro, a “strange isolated villa castle” (2), and had stood on its battlements, surveying the picturesque Italian

countryside. From this experience, the text's name is born: "Thus I have been haunted by this remembrance, this inner sight, this single moment . . . so that when it has come to giving a name for the book, I find there is already indissolubly associated . . . the name of Belcaro" (3). Vicinus writes:

If *Belcaro* had been a gothic tale, we might assume that the castle was a metaphor for the female body being explored by the two young lovers. Instead, Lee chose a highly coded celebration of an erotic relationship, transposed onto the Italian countryside. The tactile descriptions of the rounded hills, flushed with sunlight, and the dense bushy ilex evoke the beauty of skin and hair. Lee courts and memorializes Robinson on the printed page. (606)

Because she thinks of the Gothic primarily in psychoanalytic terms, focusing on the psychosexual symbolism of the two women exploring the architecture of Belcaro, Vicinus does not consider that the text's most overdetermined gothic space is the Vatican.

Ruth Hoberman recognizes Lee's Gothic conventions in "The Child in the Vatican" and also isolates them in her ghost stories, seeing those texts as exemplars of the "museum gothic." In Hoberman's materialist analysis, "Museum gothic endows objects with the power to trigger imaginative flights on the part of the viewer, flights which, while dramatizing the loss of aura intrinsic to the museal process, give the viewer the illusion of having in fact been in direct contact with the auratic object. These flights suggest that the truly auratic object can, in Benjamin's words, "look back" – but only in the phantasmatic world of gothic" (477). In other words, Hoberman believes that when aesthetes write about animate art objects on show in the museum, they are attempting to restore the Benjaminian aura to those objects, thus distinguishing them from non-artistic commodities one might see displayed at the department store.²⁴ The problem with her analysis of the Vatican Museum as a site for

²⁴Benjaminian readings of Lee's supernatural themes are prevalent. Kristin Mahoney follows Hoberman in seeing Lee's work as a response to the decline of the aura. For Mahoney, modern consumer practices turn art objects "into bibelots whose history and aura have been eliminated" (51). However, "Lee calls upon the established conventions of gothic and supernatural fiction, which rely upon the thrilling idea

her museum gothic is that it overlooks the Gothic's historical association with Catholicism; she sees a museum, but no Vatican. Therefore, although Hoberman claims "The whole project of the museum, in fact, could be read as an effort to resacralize displayed objects to compensate for the large-scale, society-wide 'decline of the aura' Benjamin detects" (468), by neglecting the religious significance of Lee's particular museum, she fails to reinforce her argument by recognizing Catholicism's potential to symbolically resacralize the art-objects housed at the Vatican/museum. Hoberman does not appreciate the religious context that makes Lee's Gothic conventions address Victorian anxieties about conversion as well as commodities.

Now, why does Lee invoke these Gothic tropes to liken aesthetic education to apostasy? In part, the theme of apostasy allows her to attack the Protestant didacticism of the most renowned art critic, John Ruskin, whose errors she exposes in another essay in *Belcaro*. We have seen how Lee attacks professional aestheticians for their fantastication "whether it take the shape of seeking in art for hidden psychological meanings or moral values, or of using art merely as a suggestion of images and emotions" (280). Such interpretive modes "infallibly" interfere with "the perception of the art itself" (280). Although he has taught "more of the subtle reasons for art" than any of his contemporaries, Ruskin is still guilty of fantastication, and is a particularly dangerous teacher because of his pervasive influence. While other aestheticians are followed by "small eclectic bands" Ruskin draws the public in its "universality" (202). Moreover, Lee deems the effect of Ruskin's misguided criticism as far more damaging than other critic's errors because he speaks authoritatively on a wider expanse of human experience. While other aesthetic critics diagnose the evils

of the intrusion of the past into the present, to speak to the attractiveness of this possibility at a moment when the past seems to be disappearing all too quickly" (51). Mahoney uses the Gothic to argue for a "historicized consumption" of cultural artifacts, but because she fails to historicize the very Gothic conventions that enable her argument, she does not appreciate fully what those Gothic conventions meant to Lee's Protestant Victorian readers.

“of not understanding quite well or of not appreciating quite correctly” (198), Ruskin’s philosophy is “of far greater importance than any other system of aesthetics” because he connects aesthetics to ethics, questioning “how much of our thoughts and our energies we have a right to give to art, and for what reasons we may give any portion of them” (198). It is Ruskin’s double allegiance to aesthetics and ethics that flaws his thought on either area, according to Lee: “to Ruskin’s nature, compounded of artist and moralist, artistic engagement was a moral danger, a distraction from his duty—for Ruskin was not the mere artist, who, powerless outside his art, may, because he can only, give his whole energies to it; he was not the mere moralist who, indifferent to art, can give it a passing glance without interrupting for a moment his work of good” (203). In order to assure himself that taking pleasure in art is not a distraction from ethical engagement, Ruskin decides that “the basis of art is moral; that art cannot be merely pleasant or unpleasant, but must be lawful or unlawful . . . that the whole system of the beautiful is a system of moral emotions, moral selections, and moral appreciation; and that the aim and end of art is the expression of man’s obedience to God’s will, and of his recognition of God’s goodness” (205).

Ruskin horrifies Lee because he refuses to judge art primarily because of the pleasure it produces and because he subordinates artistic form and execution to moral meaning. Alluding to Torquato Tasso’s chivalric romance *La Gerusalemme liberata*, she attributes Ruskin’s anxiety over aesthetic pleasure to a fear of art’s erotic appeal:

This strange knight-errant of righteousness, conscious of his heaven endowed strength, felt that during every half-hour of delay in the Armida’s garden of art, new rootlets were being put forth, new leaves were being unfolded by the enchanted forest of error which overshadowed and poisoned the earth, and which it was his work to hew and burn down ; that every moment of reluctant farewell from the weird witch of beauty meant a fresh outrage, an additional defiling of the holy of holies to rescue which he had received his strong muscle and his sharp weapons. (204)

Tasso's poem follows a medieval Christian army of knights as they attempt to recapture Jerusalem from Muslim control. One knight, Rinaldo, is abducted by the Muslim witch Armida, who detains him from battle in her garden. Having abandoned his martial and Christian duty for carnal pleasure, Rinaldo becomes slothful and effeminate. When he escapes Armida, he shamefully beholds the tokens of his feminization: his "flowing hair/ With odours breathing," his "luxurious air" and his idle sword (Tasso 335). Thus, when Lee describes Ruskin as a muscled knight, "the almost isolated champion of creeds and ideas" (201), and the avenging "believer not only in Good and in God, but in Christianity, in the Bible, in Protestantism" (201), she implies that his moralistic aesthetics develops from anxiety; he is a hypermasculine, religious subject who fears art will seduce him from his faith and cause him to misuse his God-given chastity, virtue and virility.²⁵ When he dictates how much time others may devote to aesthetic pleasure for its own sake, he acts paternalistically, supposing that everyone is as averse or susceptible to art's seductiveness as he is. By adopting his interpretive method, Ruskin's student is insulated from art's erotic allure. Unlike Ruskin, the genderless child that Lee imagines educated at the Vatican has no investment in virility, and no firmly held religious principles. Unafraid that art's beauty will damage its faith or gender, it does not fear or resist being seduced by art, and is eventually converted by it.

Lee's discussion of Ruskin foregrounds the sexual danger art poses for some viewers when they approach it without theoretical mediation. As we have seen, "The Child in the Vatican" shows how under the pretense of safeguarding childish innocence modern aestheticians keep children from learning the aestheticist tenets

²⁵ Tasso's work is devoutly Catholic, as is the knight Rinaldo. It may seem strange that in order to characterize Ruskin, Lee adapts *La Gerusalemme liberata* rather than a Protestant nationalist romance like *The Faerie Queen*. But we might argue that casting Ruskin as Rinaldo rather than Redcrosse reflects Lee's pervasive interest in conversion. Her allusion allows her to rewrite Ruskin's religion.

taught by sculpture. But we have only emphasized how the sepulchral aura that clings to sculpture can interrupt childish blitheness. Lee shows how for the modern aesthete sculpture might become a threat to the child's social respectability, and how it might threaten the child's erotic innocence. The marble teachers that facilitate the child's learning at the Vatican are not wholly the acme of antique art. To "the carefully trained of our day" they are a "very mixed company" (29), not the Elgin marbles or Venus de Milo, but "imposters of exploded reputation" and a "whole host of despicable others of every degree of lateness of epoch and baseness of work" (30). Some of the works are "things to shudder at, things, hewn stones (for the right-minded cannot call them statues)" (30). Terms like "very mixed company" and "exploded reputation" designate more than the eclecticism of sculptural styles on display or the changing critical consensus on specific artworks; such phrases liken the statuary to persons whose compromised characters can barely be tolerated by polite society, people one can hardly trust with children.

Lee betrays no fear and shows no indignation that abject teachers play a role in educating the child. She refuses to deny the educational virtue of works that have fallen from classical standards; she associates no moral taint with their decadence. While affirming that some works are "ragtails and bobtail, nay unspeakable ruffians and outcasts" she insists they belong to the same antique stock as the artworks regarded as "artistic patricians and princes" and understands that this whole family promise to teach the child "the same lesson, if he would listen to them all" (30). In focusing on the child's choice to listen or no, Lee leaves this education at the child's pleasure, a promiscuous pleasure that may even be found among the things that would ruin its innocence. These louche characters pose an erotic threat that the text dispels only by imagining that children have an incredible will-to-ignorance. According to the overprotective figures who object to children visiting the museum, when a child sees nude Greek sculpture, it

“does not recognise in it anything familiar; these naked or half-naked limbs are things which the child has never seen, at least never observed” (20). Unless we imagine Lee’s child as that exaggerated creature, the Victorian prude, the idea that the child has *never* observed nudity if given the chance seems questionable. More unbelievable still is the notion that “in these vague white things . . . with their fold of white drapery about them, the child recognises nothing: men? Women? It does not ask: for it, they are mere things, figures cut out of stone” (20). What about the stony matter of statues precludes recognizing or even *wondering* what the sex of the sculptured figure is? The text tries to explain away this childish incuriosity about the statues by mentioning the concealing “fold of white drapery” that swathes the body. Presumably, the gender cues transmitted by the styles of Greek dress are so incomprehensible to the modern child that they render the statues unrecognizable as male or female. Also, insofar as such clothing conceals the genitals, the child cannot ascertain the statues’ sex. But can we assume this draped clothing hides rather than accentuates aspects of form that declare the sex of the depicted figure? Is there nothing in the style of the drapery or the features of the face, or other attributes of the sculpture that might make a viewer *ask* what the sex of the sculpture is? This willfully ignorant account of Greek nudity will not acknowledge that the child can fully perceive, let alone enjoy, sculpture because it wants to maintain the child’s erotic innocence. To be kept unsullied by sexuality, the child must remain ignorant of any aspect of sexuality, like gender difference; even its own gender has been erased in the text.

Instead of supporting a pedagogical philosophy that forbids aesthetic engagement because it corrupts, Lee proposes an education in which the repressed current of art’s sensuousness returns ferociously to overwhelm the student’s senses. We should recall her nostalgia for her childhood, a time when she enjoyed a “simple, direct connection” with art. Her fairy-tale forges such a bond for the Vatican child,

first by placing it in a position similar to the statues, a position that suggests the possibility of identifying with art rather than insulating oneself from it. Protectionist Gothic accounts of education present the Vatican museum as the place where art is imprisoned and endangered by the curatorial Catholic agents of “monastic halls and cells.” But in Lee’s narrative, the Vatican is where art comes to life to forcibly convert a child to a new set of beliefs. Both these narratives rely on the Gothic plot to make them meaningful, and we might wonder if by playing the role of the threatened victim in this plot, the child is enabled to sympathize more closely with art, to see it as an object of interest rather than a mere thing to be incurious about. In this way, Lee begins to diminish the distance between viewer and art-object that interrupts communion with the object.

Lee collapses that distance entirely as she relates how the statues bewitch the child. Her fairy-tale is akin to such myths as that of Zeus’ abduction of Ganymede or Pluto’s theft of Proserpine. As they do in the myths, the gods prey upon the Vatican child, who plays the innocent role of “the chosen one, the changeling, the victim” (26).²⁶ Contextualized in this way, the “absurd little story of the child in the Vatican” becomes a story that encodes aesthetic education as *rape*; the child is fated to become intimate with art through a process that resembles a violent sexual union

The particular god-statue Lee associates with the child’s aestheticist initiation is an “old noseless Vertumnus” wreathed in ivy leaves (28).²⁷ As the Roman god of change, Vertumnus is aptly linked to Lee’s parable of education as conversion. He is best-known because of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which recounts how the virginal

²⁶ It is useful to remember that the term “victim” derives from the Latin *victima*, a living creature killed and offered as a sacrifice to a deity.

²⁷ In an act that indexes how its taste is being formed in the Vatican, the child eats one of these “bitter glossy” ivy leaves. Eating the ivy is also a rite that allows the statue-demons to take charge of the child. Just as Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds and was incorporated into the world of the dead for half the year, so is the child compelled to return repeatedly to the “over-ground catacomb” that is the Vatican.

goddess Pomona rejected all her suitors in order to tend to her gardening. To gain access to Pomona in her locked orchard, Vertumnus transforms himself into an old woman²⁸ who entreats Pomona to accept a consort (himself). If his counsel does not melt her heart he is prepared to assume his proper form and ravish her. As one classicist argues, the “dominant presence of deception, of metamorphosis as a means of persuasion, of images of violation and of the threat of violence encourages us to read [the story of Vertumnus and Pomona] as an example of seduction rather than mutual love” (Gentilcore 110). Therefore, by referring to Vertumnus, Lee evokes the erotic dangers the Vatican’s statues pose to the child and suggests that those dangers will transform it.

The word “rape” derives from the Latin *rapere* “to seize or take by force.” *Rapere* is also the etymon for the words “rapture” and “ravish.” By connecting sexual assault to aesthetic education, Lee indicates that she feels aesthetic impressions should capture viewers’ attention and render them rapt. She details how the child’s rape makes it susceptible to aesthetic rapture. We learn how in the evenings it “would watch the bank of melting colours . . . left by the sun behind the black dome of St. Peter’s” (26). As it watches this sight, it feels “a vague acheless pain” (26). While the child’s playmates ignore the sunset to chatter, leaf through books and demand supper, the twilight scene enraptures it because of the changes the statues have worked upon its perception. Although Lee’s fairy-tale does not focus directly on the violence of the encounter between the child and the statue-demons, the sickening effects of being

²⁸ For Lee, Vertumnus may also be an emblem of the female homosociality or lesbian desire that inspires her to educate Robinson by writing *Belcaro*. She does not specify what form the sculpture of Vertumnus takes, but he is often depicted as the crone who teaches Pomona by telling her parables about marriage. Such portrayals stress how “disguise as a woman allows the god carefree access to the object of his lust, suggesting something like a community of women, a regularity of homosocial bonds between members of the same sex” (Ormand 97). Granted such access, the disguised god indulges in behaviors that appear lesbian. As Ovid writes, “to [Pomona] praised, he gave a few kisses, such kisses as never a true old woman gave” (qtd. in Ormand 97). Vertumnus raises questions about how the pedagogical erotics between Lee and Robinson shape *Belcaro*, questions we will address in the final section of this chapter.

violated can be detected in the “strange symptoms” the child develops after it is forced to fall in love with art (26). Invoking the language of pathology in this way, Lee’s narrative prefigures contemporary case-histories of child sexual abuse. In these psychoanalytic accounts, the traumatized victim of abuse experiences hysterical symptoms, then recovers repressed memories of sexual violation. However, Lee’s text departs from our accounts in her judgment of violation. She does not condemn the actions of these demons who waylay the victim, but celebrates the perceptive powers the child gains from them. The ultimate pleasure the child receives from art outweighs the “vague acheless pain” that it feels when it first is compelled to love sculpture.

What is clear then is that Lee appropriates the Gothic here to *valorize* the ways in which that genre imperils innocence, insofar as safeguarding that innocence means guarding the viewer from sensations, knowledge and pleasure. The best evidence of how destroying censorial innocence impels her pedagogy appears when we move from the allegory of the child to the object-lesson in sculptural analysis Lee provides for those who cannot experience the child’s fantastic education. Lee’s choice of the Niobides as the best subjects to explicate how aestheticism prioritizes the formal and material aspects of art is peculiar, but telling. Reckless Niobe, having boasted of her maternal superiority to the goddess Leto, affronts that deity’s own children. In vengeance, Artemis and Apollo rain arrows upon the hapless queen’s children, massacring all her blameless offspring. Those same gods Lee pictures as violating the child in the Vatican immolate the Niobides so that her readers may learn the principles of aesthetic criticism. We might expect our proper, immediate response to this murderous vision to be outrage, pity, or horror, all justifiable attendant emotions to imagining innocence sacrificed. Yet Lee is adamant about the goals of aesthetic criticism; the “more intense becomes our perception of the form, the vaguer becomes our recollection of the subject . . . our sympathies cease to vibrate with pity, as we

look on this visible embodiment of the terrible tragedy. We are no longer feeling emotion; we are merely perceiving beauty” (34). Resisting a tale of innocence traumatically despoiled, Lee explores the simultaneously frightening and thrilling pleasure of encountering the aesthetic.

In purposefully summoning the gothic to violate innocence, Lee was daringly working against the conventions used by other female aesthetes. In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Talia Schaffer argues that the Gothic was central to the development of women's aestheticist literature. She characterizes the Gothic novel as a “French Revolution-influenced demonization of the aristocratic order in which feudal spaces (convents, monasteries, and castles) are a site of unspeakable evil” (128). She then argues that in the nineteenth century Gothic literature, these spaces are transformed into domestic prisons for innocent and “helpless female victims in the grip of a masterful male intelligence (128). “The Gothic home, the dark archaic twin of Ruskin’s ‘place of peace’ is central to aesthetic women, who described it both in popular fiction and in domestic manuals” (130). Innocent gothic heroines found their freedom within the Gothic home by domesticating it. Through the powers of aestheticism, they could turn bare, oppressive rooms into salons for witty repartee or parlors in which to display fine objets d'art. By making the house into the home, she might even be able to transform her sadistic male captor. The woman's success in aestheticizing the gothic home then, was a visible sign of her triumphant innocence and purity.

Although Schaffer emphasizes the domesticity of the Gothic space, as we have seen, the home is exactly what Lee was interested in forgetting when she re-imagined Pater’s “Child in the House” in the Vatican. When she appropriates the Gothic, but divorces it from the domestic sphere, she is freed to embrace its decadent and disturbing energies to a degree that other female aesthetes could not. As proof of this,

we might contrast how Lee and the novelist Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramee) deploy Gothic rhetoric. Schaffer argues that Ouida's writings are an occluded source for the aesthetic novel. In the 1880s, interested in the "trope of the passive girl placed in the dangerous situation" (128), Ouida constructs narratives of female resistance to male cruelty and "transforms Gothic discourses into depictions of aesthetic life, [examining] particularly the different ways men and women utilize aesthetic connoisseurship and epigrams" (124). One of these narratives is the play *Afternoon* (1883).

Afternoon begins when an unsophisticated young woman, Claire, is sent to a convent for cultivation by L'Estrange, her embarrassed new husband. By staging her death, she escapes the "martyrdom, the death in life" of educational confinement. Twenty years later, matured into a renowned artist, she plots revenge on L'Estrange for judging and dismissing her as he would an art-object. Unrecognized by him, she captivates his heart through what Schaffer calls "the aesthete's artistic finesse: by her talent for unanswerable witty repartee, and by her remarkable taste and artistic skills" (134). Thus, the Gothic plot of female persecution impels the narrative of Claire's aestheticist self-fashioning. With the aid of a friend, Claire deploys her artistic powers in order to exact revenge on her husband, who wishes to marry her. Through epigrammatic wit and "double statements that preserve the literal truth of Claire's secret identity," the two women inform L'Estrange that his wife is still living and construct elaborate narratives that reproach him for having cruelly exiled her to the convent. This bewilders him into feelings of guilt, "entrapment and despair" (132). Schaffer claims, "The women's weapon against the connoisseur's objectifying gaze is a kind of verbal productivity that matches Claire's artistic productivity" (135). When L'Estrange repents the callous way he objectified his wife, Claire reconciles with him. The regularity of marriage is restored to a home that has been beautified by Claire's aestheticism.

Schaffer points out that Ouida's massive popular audience “demanded Gothic thrillers resolved by domesticity” (139). We might argue that popular desire for domesticity and resolution curbs the intensity of the Gothic plot. Although the Gothic plot is necessary to provide drama and sensation, it must quickly be brought under control so that the narrative route towards a happy marriage, family and home is clear. The innocent Gothic heroine must have her reward. In *Afternoon*, for instance, the harrowing details of Claire's convent life are swiftly dealt with in flashback. Furthermore, although Ouida sees the Gothic as a device that *leads* to aestheticist development, she is uninterested in imagining this development under Gothic conditions. Instead, she affects with which the Gothic is associated, and the settings and relationships in which Gothic pedagogy conventionally takes place *precipitate*, rather than characterize the aesthetic education *Afternoon* depicts. Although Schaffer proposes a parallel between the unpleasant feelings of guilt Claire arouses in L'Estrange and the despair she suffered during her convent education, if L'Estrange's mental anguish is to redeem rather than break him utterly, it cannot approach the magnitude of Claire's suffering. Her pain was so great that her staged suicide seemed like a plausible attempt to escape her dejection. To push L'Estrange so far might mean that Claire has no husband and no home to inhabit when the play ends. Therefore, instead of fully replicating her husband's role as a Gothic villain, Claire limits the sadistic potential of her revenge and employs her elusive epigrams to sting the conscience, when she could do much worse.

Writing in the genre of criticism rather than the novel and not driven to satisfy the readerly expectations of a popular audience, Lee was free to explore the resources of the Gothic without taming it. By contrast, in "The Child in the Vatican," Lee insists that the child learns through the violence inflicted upon it in the gothic spaces of the museum.

Considering Lee's complaints about contemporary alternatives to aesthetic criticism, her choice of the Gothic as her pedagogical vehicle is inspired. Against the shell of modern culture and criticism that deadens perception she offers the Gothic's interest in and evocation of extreme passions and bodily sensations. Against the interpretive mode that delays appreciation of the oldest of arts, prioritizing younger media and contemporary work, she portrays the anachronistic vitality of ancient forces amidst modernity. We might even see the Gothic fairy-tale itself as a frivolous interruption of the scholarly and serious essay form that Lee associates with educational texts, an attempt to disrupt the dry and systematic argument of truth and argument that she feared *Belcaro* could become. The Gothic is pre-eminently the genre that allows Lee's reader to be *exposed*. For her, aesthetic education demands a vulnerability to the overwhelming pleasure art solicits, it demands a self-positioning that may very well feel like an assault, but which must be endured. It is only through the proximity to art that this vulnerability permits that aesthetic experience can radically alter the subjectivity of its student through *conversion*.

IV *The Queerness of Conversion*

Throughout this chapter we have kept in sight Lee's desire to educate Mary Robinson, that friend figured as the "nearest, most difficult, desired convert" (2). We can only fully understand this metaphor for intellectual movement by considering Victorian concerns about religious conversion in Britain. Catholic conversion was not a merely religious or sectarian problem. It could be figured as a threat to national security, a practice that undermined social institutions like marriage, a disruption of gender norms, an incitement to non-heteronormative sexuality, or the symptom of mental degeneracy or hysterical fanaticism. Of these ways of understanding

conversion, religious change as erotic deviance characterizes “Child” most strongly, especially when *Belcaro* is understood as a gift that one woman lovingly presents to another. As James Eli Adams reminds us, “Given its association (even in sympathetic accounts) with feminized subjects vulnerable to both psychological and bodily subjection, conversion also was widely associated with seduction” (9). A seduction is always a leading astray, a pleasurable diversion from the proper path. In tracking the errantry of the “wayward” child, who, separated from its guardians, becomes vulnerable, Lee’s fairytale attempts to seduce its reader with the spectacle of conversion.

Recall Lee’s desire not to teach, but to show how far she has taught herself. If we adopt the understanding that poses the titular child as Lee’s presentation of her young self, the essay takes on an exhibitionist allure. By writing this fantasy, which is primarily an idealized portrait of self-culture, Lee invites us to be instructed by pedophilic visions of her raptured and converted by art, overwhelmed by erotic intensity. If we deem this identification of the author and the child as too direct, too unsophisticated, we may prefer to see the child as a substitutive and identificatory figure for we readers, but above all for the text’s primary addressee, Robinson. After all, Robinson *is* the desired convert that the child exemplifies. Such a reading raises questions of Lee’s *voyeuristic* investment in the fantasy of her beloved in a seductive scenario. Indeed, there is no reason these readings must exclude each other. The former is the accomplished act that instructively serves as the possibility of the latter. Juxtaposed, the two offer the prospect of a union between author and reader, teacher and student, friend and friend.

Knowing of the erotically fraught relationship between Lee and Robinson, we may be tempted to ask: is Lee’s interest in conversion an attempt to imagine or describe a shift in sexual subjectivity and the new perceptive powers such a shift

might bring? Is Lee narrating her own aesthetic education as a kind of initiation into lesbian identity? Does “The Child in the Vatican” document or fantasize about an aesthetic experience that would shift Robinson’s sexual nature fundamentally—perhaps to lesbianism? These readings are tantalizing but must remain suggestive. Certainly, from the mid-century onwards, the terms conversion and perversion, both linked to religious transgressions, begin to take on the sexual overtones they will assume for Freud and the Victorian sexologists. Additionally, Lee’s child looks like the textual precursor to the constructions of queer sexualities as the result of traumatic seduction. It is in response to the experience of erotic predation that Lee’s child has been fundamentally changed. It gains its knowledge unconsciously, through the experience of forceful love. The singular nature—both aesthetic and sexual—it consequently develops might be understood by how Lee singles it out from other children who occupy themselves with quotidian juvenile pursuits while it alone bursts into tears at stray notes of music or watches rising fog wreath the Eternal City. Such lonesome sentimentality has its queer associations, especially around male figures. But to read the education here as a mythic account of the development of *lesbian* subjectivity in Lee or Robinson is, if not necessarily anachronistic, perhaps too narrow. Apart from the biographical context *Belcaro* exists in and the association of conversion itself with the erotics of feminized subjects, no textual signifiers exist to link the child’s transformed subjectivity to lesbian specificity. With its suggestiveness, however, Lee’s text allows us to pose the question of what an aesthetic education might look when it is motivated by desire between women, and allows us to reflect on how this might be different from accounts of aesthetic education organized around male homoerotics.

Writing on aesthetic Platonism, Stefano Evangelista argues that from “the 1860s sexuality starts to be used as a critical category in the study of literature and the

arts in a way that anticipates the concerns and methods of feminist and ‘queer’ criticism today. Sympathetic commentators isolate a prestigious cultural tradition in which the shared element of homoerotic desire is used as the enabling factor for the interpretation and revision of critical history” (231). Evangelista is describing the way in which Victorian Hellenism historicized and suspended moral judgments around Greek pederasty, emphasizing how the erotic-educational relationship between men was seen as civically and artistically productive. As we have seen, it is this philhellenic discourse that allows Pater to find the key to Winckelmann’s critical powers in his sexual temperament. Filled with the enthusiasm described in the *Phaedrus*, Winckelmann divines the laws and conditions that govern the artwork. Yet, as Yopie Prins reminds us, “denied access to formal education in Greek and Latin, Victorian women had a different relationship to classical discourses than their counterparts” (78). Even assuming their ability to read the Platonic texts on love, they would find little there that valorized erotic attachments between women, leaving them to adapt the androcentric texts to their own use, or to fabricate gynocentric discourse out of different sources, such as the poetic fragments of Sappho. When we think of this troubled relationship to classical discourse, it seems notable that Lee uses tropes associated with contemporary religious discourse and the Gothic to inform her account of aesthetic education and an epistemology based in eroticism. The classical figures in her account, to be sure, but she foregrounds a different way to access it than her male counterparts would have done. Another key difference comes in the way that the art object is related to eroticism. In the accounts of critical formation that emerge from aesthetic Platonism, art, represented by the dramatic Platonic text or the Greek statue, serves to *reveal* to the young man in question his true nature, one taken to be essential, unchanging yet hidden. The discovery of this obscured nature is presented as a remembering, with the classical artifact serving as a mnemonic. We have explored

Pater's exploration of memory as an alternative to education in the previous chapter, but to add another example, we might turn to John Addington Symonds *Memoirs*, and his feelings upon reading the *Phaedrus*. He writes: "Here in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*...I discovered the true *liber amoris* at last, the revelation I had been waiting for, the consecration of a long-cherished idealism. It was just as though the voice of my own soul spoke to me through Plato, as though in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover"(99). Now both Symonds' fancy of antenatal existence and Pater's conception of critical experience felt as *déjà vu* make erotic subjectivity a part of cultural tradition—one does not find the source of one's own erotic subjectivity in any circumstances in the present so much as locate it in a history one has been separated from, but which exists to be discovered. This retrospection grounds epistemology in a problematic way for those whose erotic subjectivities are excluded from tradition; according to Pater's logic in Winckelmann, we might wonder if a woman could be a true critic of Greek art. Even less radically, does a male whose homoerotic desire finds no affinity with Greek pederasty still capable of understanding that enthusiasm that is the secret of understanding Greek art?

We detect Lee's skepticism to how aesthetic Platonism enshrines classical tradition in her caricature of aesthetic appreciation as gymnastics. The ancient gymnasium was imagined as the institution which created the canonical beauty of Greek art. As Pater writes in *Greek Studies*, "It was the Dorian cities, Plato tells us, which first shook off the false Asiatic shame, and stripped off their clothing for purposes of exercise and training in the gymnasium; and it was part of the Dorian or European influence to assert the value in art of the unveiled and healthy human form." The ascetic athletic ideal of Greek art also became a model for criticism among the Platonic aesthetes. Consider two of Pater's critical statements: "Surplusage! [the

writer] will dread that, as the runner on his muscles”(Appreciations 16). “Burn always with this . . . hard gem-like flame is success in life” (*Renaissance* 189). Both of these conjure a commitment to aesthetic discipline that is akin to the athlete keeping himself lean and fit in the gymnasium and *palaestra*. Yet Lee’s vision of the gymnasium is quite different. For her art cannot fulfill its functions when

its enjoyment is a sort of deliberate mental gymnastics which our desire for well balanced activity or our wish to display a certain unnecessary gracefulness of intellectual motions, impose upon us, setting aside a certain portion of our time for counteracting in the artistic gymnasiums (rows of soaped poles and hurdles and ladders and expanses of padded floor quite as unlike as may be from the climbable trees and walkable brooks we ought to meet in our walks) called galleries, concerts etc. the direful slackening of our muscles and stiffening of our joints almost inevitable in our cramped intellectual shop life of today. We writhe, clinging with arms and legs, up the soaped poles of aesthetic feeling, slipping and rising again, straining and twisting, to plop down at last on the padding and the sawdust, we dangle, with constrained grace, high in aesthetic contemplation, flying with a clutching swing from idea to idea and then we think an hour or two, every now and then, of such exercise is (except brutal slumber) all that can be required as repose in our intellectual life” (278-279).

Lee’s satire of exercise here suggests that the discourses authorized by romantic investment in the Greek gymnasium depend on an irrecoverable ideal—one not suited for modern times. To duplicate or attempt to realize that mode of existence renders one as silly or grotesque as those bodies that no longer wrestle in the *palaestra*, but writhe up the “soaped poles” of aesthetic feeling. Contemporary times demand different modes of exercise, as in the leisurely country walk evoked above. Although the desire for frenzied intellectual activity, metaphorically represented through athleticism, means to counteract the current unhealthy effects of commodity culture—“the direful slackening of our muscles...almost inevitable in our cramped intellectual shop life of today”—this classically influenced exercise, which, compared to the break-neck pace of everyday life, seems like “repose,” is only wearying over-exertion.

Of what use then is subscribing to a model of aesthetic contemplation authorized solely by ancient Greece?

Lee's Gothic-inflected metaphor of conversion offers one solution to this epistemological problem. While Pater and Symonds appeal to a particular historicized desire to enable their criticism, the desire that grounds Lee's aesthetic education is always seen as operating in the present—the art object serves not to remind the viewer of her kinship with lovers from the past, but *itself* alters her capacity to love in the present. We might imagine conversion as a critical and erotic re-orientation that takes place with reference to no fixed polarity. Thus, the emphasis on conversion in Lee's project enables an education that has fewer restrictions on which kinds of students it applies to. Even if we cannot see conversion as a dedicated lesbian metaphor for aesthetic education, it opens the possibility for a discussion of lesbian aesthetics and pedagogy.

In the previous chapter, we mentioned Pater's retelling of the romance of Abelard and Heloise. There he insists that Abelard's philosophy was saved from being abstract theory because of his loving handling of his student: "he tries to find a ground of reality below the abstractions of philosophy, as one bent on trying all things by their congruity with human experience, who had felt the hand of Heloise" (5). *Belcaro* occupies a vexed position. As it labors to educate Lee's beloved, it is constantly in danger of becoming a theoretical work that will only obscure Robinson's access to aesthetic pleasure, constantly in danger of restoring to Lee that "magisterial" endowed chair she has rejected in turning to aesthetics. But Pater is not alone in the ability to imagine erotic desire that dispels abstraction. As *Belcaro* closes, we see Lee touchingly alluding to the gothic conventions she hopes will help her and her lover to maintain contact with the concrete world of art and not the abstraction of theory. She embodies that in the mode of speech that closes the text. While *Belcaro* begins with

Lee's desire to convert Robinson, it ends with Robinson hearing Lee's confession, a situation that evokes the auricular confession derogated in the gothic discourse of Anglican Evangelicals and Broad Churchmen. "And thus...I will -confess to you that more nearly appealing to me, dearer also, than antique bas-relief or song of Mozart, has been the vague remembrance, evoked by trivial word or sight, -of that early winter afternoon on the ilex girded battlements of Belcaro" (284). She continues:

And, moreover, I will even confess (as severest self-chastisement to a writer - on art, as complete expiation of aesthetic dogmatism and fantastications), while we walk across the warm grass....I foresee that many a time in the future there will arise between me and the fresco or picture at which I am looking, a vision of this old world garden... that, sometimes, there will come into my head something— something ill-defined, pleasurable, painful—which will make me read only with my eyes ; which will make me (worst humiliation) lose the thread of my theories, of my thoughts, of my sentence. And, after this confession, I think I can say no more. (285)

In taking up the confessing role, Lee renounces the pastoral authority she would to effect a conversion, and endows Robinson with it, a renunciation that imitates her forsaking of professorial authority. But more importantly, she assures Robinson that the memory of their love and intimacy is what guarantees that she will remain grounded in aesthetic formalism, reading only with her eyes at the cost of abandoning her theories. Humiliating as the loss of expression might be, it recalls how Lee "humbly" reinvents herself as a student of aesthetics and though the vision of that love momentarily interposes between the art object and the critic, unlike the opaque body of theory that obscures sight of the art object, the nostalgic vision of love acts as a lens to sharpen critical powers. In the concluding aphasiac sentence, Lee's text performs the loss of language she prophesies, and in losing the ability to speak, escapes the danger of didactic theory, even as treats her reader to imagining her enraptured, silent in one of those moments of erotic nostalgia that commemorate her loving relationship with Robinson.

CHAPTER 3

“Strange Legacies of Thought and Passion”: Oscar Wilde’s Epistemology of Inheritance

I *Pedagogy and the Risk of Loss*

In his early career, Oscar Wilde was optimistic about training people to be better aesthetes. After graduating from Oxford in 1879, he sought an academic career and applied for fellowships in classics and archaeology. Rejected for these postgraduate positions, he simply assumed donnish authority, promoting himself in his calling cards as “Professor of Aesthetics” and “critic of Art.” At a time when his most substantial claim to fame was his weakly received poetry, educating the public about aesthetic issues and capitalizing on his identity as a brilliant Oxford graduate offered him the best way to earn a livelihood. Hence, in his introduction to Rennell Rodd’s poetry collection, *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* (1882), Wilde identifies himself as one of the “many young men in England who are seeking...to continue and perfect the English Renaissance” (3). This “younger school” of artists and aesthetes were students of John Ruskin, who “by the magic of his presence and the music of his lips taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the secret of Hellenism...and filled some of us, at least, with the lofty and passionate ambition to go forth into far and fair lands with some message for the nations and some mission for the world” (5). Wilde departs from Ruskin’s teachings because “the keystone to his aesthetic system is ethical always” while for the young aesthetes “the rule of art is not the rule of morals” (6). But even as Wilde rejects Ruskin’s moralism, he believes in his pedagogical vision. It is partially this desire to instruct others that sends Wilde to expound aesthetic principles on his transatlantic lecture tour in 1882. America,

Canada, Mexico, Australia and Japan are “the far and fair lands” he envisions as he evokes the aesthete as globe-trotting missionary, and it is through lecturing abroad that Wilde sets down his financial foundation and courts new audiences for his plays and cultural criticism.

We might well think that Wilde whole-heartedly adored teaching. Following the footsteps of Matthew Arnold, he applied for the position of inspector of schools. Furthermore, he delighted in writing dialogues that are modeled on Plato’s texts. Modernizing the pedagogical homosociality of the Greeks, Wilde’s aristocratic dandies smoke cigarettes, flirt with one another, and expound aesthetics over Chambertin and ortolans. But despite the social pleasures education made available, despite the opportunity that aesthetic education offered for raising the standard of beauty in the world, much of Wilde’s work, especially from his late career, is marked by the fear that teaching could damage the teacher. Perhaps that fear is best demonstrated in a line Wilde’s prose-poem, “The Teacher of Wisdom” (1894): “The pearl of great price thou hast divided, and the vesture without seam thou has parted asunder. He who giveth away wisdom robbeth himself. He is as one who giveth his treasure to a robber” (867-8). Wilde echoes this idea in another text, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1889): “Influence is simply the transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one’s self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss. Every disciple takes away something from his master” (1196). In Robert Ross’ introduction to his collection of Wilde’s *Miscellanies*, we learn that Wilde’s unfinished play *La Sainte Courtisane* was to have “expanded Wilde’s favourite theory that when you convert someone to an idea, you lose your faith in it” (xiii). The extant fragments from the first draft of the play communicate the theme of loss quite effectively. The voluptuary Myrrhina tempts the hermit Honorius, and he attempts to convert her to his beliefs. A pedagogical chiasmus occurs, for as the

courtesan and the holy man convince each other, they lose their own beliefs. Honorius cries, “Myrrhina, the scales have fallen from my eyes and I see now clearly what I did not before. Take me to Alexandria and let me taste of the seven sins” (705). Myrrhina replies, “Do not mock me Honorius, nor speak to me with such bitter words. For I have repented of my sin and I am seeking a cavern in this desert where I too may dwell so that my soul may become worthy to see God” (705).

In these scenarios, to teach is not to share knowledge, which cannot be communally possessed by more than one owner or divided and dispersed. To teach is to expend scarce and valuable resources, without any promise of eventual returns. Wilde does not improve this grim scenario by describing a Bataillean pleasure in giving or wasting one’s treasury of learning, nor does he suggest that giving away knowledge might leave room for more interesting or complex ideas.²⁹ Without these qualifications, his notion of teaching seems wholly negative, especially since he does not see teaching as a mere transference of knowledge or skills. To influence another is to give away “personality”; it reduces the self in some way.

In the preceding chapters, we have considered Pater’s concern over how the teacher’s comportment and emotional expression may endanger the student and we have seen how for Lee, the formal teacher and his systematic theories can insulate the student from the sensuous immediacy of art. It is these concerns that move Pater and Lee to propose theories of innate knowledge. Like Lee and Pater, Wilde knows that the interpersonal work of education can never cease, and his oeuvre is a persistent effort to instruct his audiences, even when he loses hope that they will ever listen to him. Yet he fantasizes that amid the necessary work of education, there might exist

²⁹ Myrrhina and Honorius receive new beliefs to replace their old ones, but seem unable to enjoy their new identities as holy woman and sinful man. Instead of devoting herself to holy contemplation, she is consumed by guilt for having tempted Honorius, and spends her time in self-recrimination. Honorius wishes to go to Alexandria, but seems not to know the way, for in the last lines of the fragment, he is still engaged in conversation with Myrrhina.

methods for learning wherein individuals would need only to rely on themselves. Wilde differs from Pater and Lee in the following way: while they are pre-eminently concerned with the student's well-being in the pedagogical encounter, Wilde's fantasies are motivated by his concern for the teacher and the teacher's loss.

Wilde has two kinds of fantasies about learning without teachers. The first, which originates in his early texts, has to do with the influence of environment on the critical senses. In his American lecture, "The English Renaissance of Art," he claims "the truths of art cannot be taught: they are revealed only, revealed to natures that have made themselves receptive of all beautiful impressions by the study and worship of all beautiful things" (23). Drawing on Plato's *Republic*, he then argues that if children are brought up in an environment of beautiful things, the spirit of art will "insensibly and gradually draw the child's soul into harmony with all knowledge and wisdom, so that he will love what is beautiful and good and hate what is evil and ugly (for they always go together) long before he knows the reason why" (23). Insofar as Wilde has concerns about the effect of authoritarian teachers on students, the idea that the spirit of art may instruct us eliminates the need for those teachers. But Wilde has another type of fantasy about teacherless education that appears in his later texts, and it is this that seems to emerge to assuage his anxieties about loss. If in the first set of fantasies the spirit of art alters the "soul" or the "temperament" so that they become more receptive, sensitive instruments for *discerning* the truth about art, the second kind of fantasy imagines that the critic holds within himself an immense trove of memories, impressions, or personalities. These comprise the sum of his innate knowledge of art, inform his critical decisions, and constitute, through their infinite variety, a kind of psychic superabundance to counter the loss teaching inflicts. Attempting to imagine the mechanisms by which this interior wealth comes to be hidden within the self, Wilde considers that it is stored there mystically, through processes associated with

anamnesis. But fancying that the hereditary transmission of knowledge is possible, he abandons the concept of *anamnesis* to base self-education in *organic* memory.

II *The Impoverishing Effects of Philanthropy and Pedagogy*

“The Teacher of Wisdom” follows one who from “his childhood had been as one filled with the perfect knowledge of God” (867). He gathers many disciples and “a great multitude also of people [who] followed him from each city” (867). But his stunningly successful instruction only brings him “sorrow and fear” (867). Surrounded by so many disciples, he becomes paranoid about their intentions and he deems each of them “an enemy that walks in the noonday” (867). The teacher’s Soul informs him, “God filled thee with the perfect knowledge of Himself and thou hast given this knowledge away to others. The pearl of great price thou hast divided, and the vesture without seam thou hast parted asunder. He who giveth away wisdom robbeth himself, He is as one who giveth his treasure to a robber” (867 – 8). Realizing he has only a mite of wisdom left, and that “his faith was leaving him by reason of the number of those who believed in him” (868), the teacher retires to the desert to become a Hermit, praising God that “He had suffered him to keep some knowledge of Him and of His wonderful greatness” (868). Eventually, the Hermit is moved to teach a young Robber³⁰ his knowledge of God in an attempt to keep this “young man of evil and beautiful face” from entering the “City of the Seven Sins” (868). Imparting this teaching, the Hermit is bereft of all knowledge of God and enveloped by a “great darkness” which symbolizes his new state of despair and ignorance (870).

³⁰ Wilde’s characterization of the Robber as student neatly realizes the simile that the Hermit’s Soul uses to describe pedagogy.

Confronted with the preceding scene, we seem to see the pedagogical economy described by “The Portrait of Mr. W.H”: a disciple takes something away from his master and a teacher loses what is most precious to him. But Wilde, refusing to close his prose-poem on such a scene of dejection, draws on the (conflicting) conventions of queer sentimental narrative³¹ and Christian eucatastrophe to restore the Hermit’s loss. In the process, the loss is redefined more specifically and nobly as *self-sacrifice*. As he lies forlorn and depressed, the Hermit is unexpectedly kissed and comforted by a beautiful man “with feet of brass and hair like fine wool” (870). This Christ-figure asks him why he weeps and tells him that by expending his perfect knowledge of God, he has earned the perfect Love of God. By redeeming a sinner through what might superficially seem an act of Christian selflessness, the Hermit guarantees that God will reward him with an even greater treasure than the knowledge he possessed. Or, read another way, having sacrificed all that is precious out of desire and compassion for an undeserving man, the Hermit is rewarded by the love of a *better* man who will wipe his tears and assure him that he is His own. The Christian system within which Wilde frames this pedagogical narrative is overseen by an interested agent on whose behalf the teacher teaches; this agent can intervene to redress the teacher’s loss. But what happens when teaching cannot be performed in a system that rewards the teacher, or at least requites him for his ruinous self-sacrifice?

³¹ If this were merely a Christian parable, the reluctant teacher would offer the knowledge of God to the Robber out of a selfless concern for his soul. But Wilde’s parable suggests he acts out of homoerotic or scopophilic desire. The Hermit enjoys looking at the beautiful thief as he passes to and fro on his daily robberies. He watches the young man so intently that he cries “no man has looked at me before in this manner. And the thing is a thorn and a trouble to me” (869). When the Robber decides to go to the City of the Seven Sins, which is three days journey away from the Hermit’s cave, he threatens to break the routine that the holy man enjoys gazing upon. For three days, the teacher follows the Robber maintaining sight of him and entreating him to return to the desert and not to enter the City. Desperate to keep the Robber from passing beyond the gates of the City he himself will not enter, the Hermit finally divulges his theological knowledge.

Gilbert, the aristocratic spokesman of Wilde's "The Critic as Artist" (1890), would be appalled by the way in which "The Teacher of Wisdom" glorifies the Hermit's selflessness. He condemns the nineteenth century as a "thoroughly selfish age" that deifies "self-sacrifice" (181). In other words, if, unlike the Hermit, people might no longer hope to be rewarded for their selflessness by God, they will turn self-sacrifice itself into a god, into a goal, into an ideal. Hence it is a time of "philanthropists and sentimentalists...who are always chattering to one about one's duty to one's neighbour" (181). Gilbert warns against these dutiful types, for in their zeal for self-sacrificial service to others they are "dominating [their neighbour's] lives" (182). Furthermore, he insists that "just as the philanthropist is the nuisance of the ethical sphere, so the nuisance of the intellectual sphere is the man who is so occupied in trying to educate others that he has never had any time to educate himself" (182). For Gilbert, "the development of the race depends on the development of the individual, and where self-culture has ceased to be the ideal, the intellectual standard is instantly lowered, and often, ultimately lost" (181). Devoting himself unreservedly to his students then, the teacher forgets to envision and execute his own program of development.³² Unable to challenge *himself* to be better than he is, the intellectual

³² I read self-culture here as a deliberate, self-conscious process, a definition that conflicts with critics such as Stephen Arata. Arata rightly notes that Wilde often "rejects humanist notions of the organic and autonomous individual" and he is also correct that for Wilde a "fully realized individual is defined not by authentic interiority but by a drive to become ever more inauthentic, ever more complex' and multiform'" (61). But Arata is too quick to link Wilde's anti-humanism with "an undirected and largely alogical process of accretion" (61). For Arata, self-development and self-culture are Spencerian evolutionary terms that define growth as "the coherent and directed realization of a potential latent in (and thus essential to the individual" (61). Therefore, he sees Wildean individuals as random aggregations of personalities who find their identity through constant, undirected change. But merely because Wilde rejects an *authentic* self that is realized through development does not mean the process of becoming a Wildean individual is not directed, logical, or deliberate. I say this to foreground the importance of personality for the Wildean individual. If, as Arata suggests, personality is acquired by accidental processes, and if the Wildean individual is constituted by random change, we are hard-pressed to explain why the transference of personality associated with pedagogy in Wilde should be experienced as the loss of something precious.

heights to which he can urge his students are curtailed more than they might have been otherwise.

When Wilde likens teaching to philanthropy, he is probably thinking of the aesthetic education carried out by practitioners of missionary aestheticism. Diana Maltz describes missionary aesthetes as disciples of Ruskin who “believed that exposure to art and to bourgeois manners would ‘elevate’ the poor and inculcate habits of self-regulation” (185). Hence they “worked accordingly to provide free concerts, playgrounds and public gardens in working-class neighborhoods, lobbied for extended museum and gallery hours on Sundays, and encouraged artists to open their studios to the poor” (186). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, before Lord Henry seduces Dorian to an entirely different lifestyle, the boy is at risk of being taken to London’s East End in order to amuse and enlighten the poor by playing piano duets with the philanthropic Lady Agatha.

One reason Wilde opposes aesthetic philanthropy is for its authoritarian, intrusive and condescending mission to “elevate” the working-classes and make them conform to bourgeois standards of comportment. Using aesthetic education to discipline the poor, missionary aesthetes rarely asked their students how they would like to shape their own lives aesthetically, given the means. Although missionary aestheticism offered working class people some skills and spaces with which they could pursue the “self-culture” Gilbert idealizes above, it failed to critique the economic system that prevented the poor from actually realizing the full benefits of aesthetic education. Lord Henry dismisses his Aunt Agatha’s piano-playing and notes, the problem of the East End is “the problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves” (36). Destroying the extant economic system, Wilde argues in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” would actually create the conditions that would give people time to be interested in art and to view their own lives as material for them

to fashion aesthetically. Freed from necessity of working just to survive, the poor could “choose the sphere of activity that is really congenial to them, and gives them pleasure” (233). They could develop their personalities in a way that currently only “the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men, the men who have realized themselves” do, assisted by private property (233).

Make no mistake, however. Lord Henry is no radical socialist. Although he critiques philanthropy and the conditions that make it necessary, he intimates, “I don’t desire to change anything in England except the weather” (37). As he entreats Dorian not to become a missionary aesthete, he argues that charitable education is wasteful expenditure on irredeemable subjects. “Don’t squander the gold of your days, listening to the tedious, trying to improve the hopeless failure or giving away your life to the ignorant, the common, and the vulgar. These are the sickly aims, the false ideals, of our age” (23). Lord Henry shares this pessimism with Wilde. In *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy*, Linda Dowling reminds us that when aesthetes like Wilde affirmed every individual’s right to criticize art without recourse to any authority, they were faced with “the crushing ugliness of late Victorian landscapes and especially cityscapes—now hideously defaced with the consequences of millions of individual aesthetic choices, each the result of ‘judging for yourself’” (90). According to Dowling, Wilde suffered as an artist, “finding himself implicated in and economically determined by the aesthetic preferences of a vast new democratic audience, its numbers swollen by working classes newly educated into ‘Board School ignorance’ and newly endowed with leisure and money undreamt of by their predecessors” (91). Empowered by the rise of consumer capitalism and better access to formal education, the working and middle classes were able to demand that art reflect *their* tastes and standards, even when those standards did not align with the

high-cultural ideals of the aesthetes. The aesthetes had assumed that their own tastes comprised the normative standard that the working-classes would unquestioningly adopt or eagerly aspire to once they were given increased opportunities to judge art freely. When the working classes began to express their vision of what art was, and what it should do, it must have seemed to Wilde and his fellow aesthetes that they were “trying to improve the hopeless failure,” squandering their time and intellectual resources on “the ignorant, the common and the vulgar.”

The struggle between the aesthetic philanthropist and the vulgar working- and middle-classes is just the most extreme manifestation of the struggle between teacher and student that Wilde feels is present in *any* pedagogical situation. Hence even though Gilbert speaks to Earnest, a young man of the same learning and class as he, he begs his friend not to cast him in the position of educator: “Don’t degrade me into the position of giving you useful information. Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught” (136). Gilbert then portrays the horrible effects of teaching others:

If you meet at dinner a man who has spent his life in educating himself...you rise from table richer, and conscious that a high ideal has for a moment touched and sanctified your days. But oh! my dear Ernest, to sit next to a man who has spent his life in trying to educate others! What a dreadful experience that is! How appalling is that ignorance which is the inevitable result of the fatal habit of imparting opinions! How limited in range the creature's mind proves to be! How it wearies us, and must weary himself, with its endless repetitions and sickly reiteration! How lacking it is in any element of intellectual growth! In what a vicious circle it always moves! (181)

In deriding the educator here, Wilde draws on *The Renaissance*. There, Pater claims that in life “our failure is to form habits: for after all habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations seem alike” (189). There are reasons that teachers are forced to repeat themselves, to become creatures of habit. If we consider how the “vulgar” public ignored the intellectual standard of the aesthetes, we can easily imagine an

aesthetic critic repeating her message in lectures and in books, intent on being listened to. But for Wilde, such a scene reveals pedagogical failure more than it promises an imminent educational success. Viewed through a Paterian lens, repetitious pedagogical tactics are a symptom of weakening aesthetic capacities. Forming a fixed way of responding to an ever-changing world is a perceptual failing that renders the teacher unreceptive to what his senses might teach him and unresponsive to the varied needs and demands of the individuals he wishes to inform. Furthermore, because the educator locks himself into a “vicious circle” by habitually repeating the same opinions he loses the chance to expand his range of knowledge by listening to others or challenging his own opinions through study and reflection. As he expounds his material, his words are not the sign of his plenitude of knowledge; they only betray his intellectual lack. This intellectual deficiency is not merely defined by lost chances to learn more, rather, by contrasting the educator with the self-educated man, Wilde suggests that the teacher’s “repetitions” and “sickly reiteration” siphon away what little knowledge he might possess. We infer that when guests meet the self-taught man at dinner, they do not just meet him, surely they “rise from table richer” because they have engaged him in table talk. But no dialogue is mentioned in regard to the self-educated man. Because of this omission, he seems to enrich his dinner companions merely through his proximity, or his silent contact: he is a “high ideal” who “has for a moment touched and sanctified [their] days.”³³ Because his conversation is withheld from readers, the self-cultured man becomes an exemplar of reserve; although he challenges others to aspire to his high ideal and enriches them, it is as if he gives

³³ As Wilde wrote this part of Gilbert and Earnest’s dialogue, he may have been thinking about Plato’s dialogue, *Symposium*. There, Agathon says to his great teacher, “Come and lie down beside me Socrates, so that by contact with you, I can share the piece of wisdom that came to you in the porch” (7). In Agathon’s fancy, just being close to wisdom is enough to make him wise; he does not necessarily learn through a process that *transfers* knowledge from one man to another.

nothing away in the process. By contrast, the educator spews words repetitively; he lacks reserve. Speaking so much carries a cost, one that Wilde describes by employing the same tropes of degeneration that were associated with his dangerous pedagogy in America. His use of the term “creature” and his description of the teacher’s “sickly reiteration” suggest someone so enervated by pedagogical expenditure that he has devolved into an animal.

Given Wilde’s visions of students as robbers, of teachers degraded and animalized by teaching, of knowledge as capital that is squandered by being transferred from teacher to student, we might well wonder why anyone in Wilde’s texts teaches anyone else. As we will see in the next section, for all his interest in the dialogue as a form for education, for all his eroticization of the relationship between master and student, Wilde constantly toys with the fancy that we might acquire or possess all the knowledge we might ever wish to know, that we need learn from no-one else, but merely must look within to find what we wish to know.

III *Wildean Anamnesis and Self-Culture*

In “The Critic as Artist” Gilbert insists that the alternative to being educated by others is “self-culture,” and links this process not only to the *Bildung* of Goethe’s German Romanticism but to Greek philosophy. Following the aesthetic Platonism of critics like Pater, Wilde turned to dialogues like the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* for models of autodidacticism. As we have seen, Pater had employed the theory of *anamnesis* in “Winckelmann” and *Plato and Platonism* to propose that novice aesthetes innately knew how to criticize art, but had forgotten the methods of criticism. Therefore, aesthetes learned by reminding themselves of what they already knew, not by receiving guidance from teachers. As he also attempts to make the

relation of teacher and student unnecessary, Wilde also imagines that whatever one could wish to learn is already known to one, although it may be occluded. Uncovering this knowledge is one of the modes of “self-culture and self-development” that he praises in the epigraph above, a way of becoming conscious of aspects of the self that a person does not know. He gives accounts of how this knowledge comes to be hidden within, and how it may be revealed in a number of texts written within a short period of each other: “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” “The Critic as Artist” and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These texts record Wilde’s initial delight in *anamnesis* and then his disappointment that it could not underwrite a fantasy of innate knowledge.

Although we have examined *anamnesis* before, we have understood it in the context of Plato’s *Meno*, which only attempts to explain how education can be conceived as a form of reminiscence. The *Phaedrus* gives a much more detailed account of *how* knowledge comes to be inscribed within us, and why we seek to recall it. According to Socrates, before the soul is incarnated, it glimpses the godly realm of Forms or Ideals, of which earthly reality is merely a shadow. A soul that has won the clearest view of this true reality “will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or...will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love” (35). After incarnation, a person yearns to see the realm of Forms again and with the aid of certain simulacra, constantly strives to remind itself of the Forms, the most easily recalled of which is Beauty. Hence, when a philosopher or artist sees among young men “a godlike face or beautiful form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him, like those he had felt during that earlier time, then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god” (39). Overwhelmed by the beauty that enables him to recapture the heavenly vision, the philosopher falls in love, and feels as if he is going crazy—this is the state known as *mania*. Because the beloved’s beauty allows the lover to recall true Beauty, the lover cannot bear to be separated from him.

It is this Platonic myth that Wilde modifies to describe how Dorian Gray enables Basil to teach himself. When Basil sees Dorian, he feels the “terror” of coming under the youth’s “external influence” and tries to flee (11). His erotic desire for Dorian overwhelms him: “I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose entire personality was so fascinating that if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself...I have always been my own master; had at least always been so, till I met Dorian Gray” (11). Losing self-mastery, Basil would descend into the erotic mania that Plato describes, the crazed state that makes the soul renounce its autonomy and “sleep like a slave, anywhere, as near to the object of its longing as it is allowed to get” (41). As he tries to escape Dorian, Basil thinks, “Something seemed to tell me that I was on the verge of a terrible crisis in my life. I had a strange feeling that Fate had in store for me exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows” (11). Clearly, Dorian signals the approach of a decisive stage in Basil’s life, but as the artist tries to avoid the affective extremes of joy and sorrow, he risks losing the intellectual benefits of Dorian’s beauty. The words “crisis” and “criticism” both come from the same roots Greek roots, meaning “to decide”, “to discriminate” or “to judge.” A crisis is a time that generates a critical assessment of a situation. In this text, it marks the deciding point at which, if Basil chooses correctly, he will be rewarded with new critical powers, new powers of discriminating the world around him.³⁴ Eventually, Basil *does* choose correctly, asking to be introduced to Dorian and submitting to the erotic mania that drives him to see Dorian daily: “I couldn’t be happy if I didn’t see him every day. He is absolutely necessary to me” (14). Dorian’s “merely visible presence” inspires Basil by suggesting “an entirely new

³⁴ The critical importance of this moment is also seems marked by Wilde’s personification of Fate. At the moment the passage turns to the matter of judgment, Fate selects and stores “exquisite joys and exquisite sorrows” for Basil as if it were a connoisseur picking out artworks for a client.

manner in art, an entirely new mode of style” (14). Because of Dorian’s personality, Basil “can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from him” because he can “see things differently” (14).

The critical power of Basil’s new sight inheres in his ability to discriminate between the mundane aspect of worldly objects and the true Ideal values for which they are only simulacra. He portrays this difference between the reality and the ideal in the conscious style he adopts under Dorian’s inspiration. In the terms of Plato’s myth, Dorian has allowed Basil to recall the occulted reality that his soul once knew. It is Lord Henry who reveals the Platonic import of Basil’s apocalyptic encounter with Dorian, attributing the painter’s new artistic style to a “wonderful vision to which alone are wonderful things revealed; the mere shapes and patterns becoming as it were, refined and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as though they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadows they made real... Was it not Plato, that artist in form who had first analyzed it” (34)?

We might wish to say that Dorian *teaches* Basil how to see anew; that he instills some principle into the painter. After all, Basil claims that some “subtle influence passed” passed between his friend and him, and this usage links Dorian’s effect to the pedagogical economy of loss that we are arguing that Wilde attempts to escape. Lord Henry imagines that to influence somebody is like conveying “one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume” (33) and states, “To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul” (19). But Dorian, as we first find him, makes Lord Henry’s transferential model of teaching impossible because he has nothing to give, nothing to lose. He is curiously devoid of content, a “dream of form in days of thought” as Basil insists (14), “some beautiful brainless creature” as Lord Henry says more acidly (15). He is all innocence, whiteness, absence, blankness. For Basil, he represents no clearly written dogma; rather he is

only the “suggestion” of a new manner, someone who “unconsciously” defines merely “the lines of a fresh school” of art. “He is never more present in [Basil’s] work than when no image of him is there” (15). Because Dorian is so empty, we see that Basil’s new style is something wrought out from within himself, a product of cultivating himself under the encouraging effect of the man he loves.

In this early episode of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde presents a subtle and attractive fantasy of *anamnesis*. He presents the idea that Dorian might enable Basil to remember the reality of things fairly realistically, as a matter of simple inspiration. Only Lord Henry’s allusion to Plato makes it clear for readers that this is a rewriting of the fantastic narrative of the *Phaedrus*. By contrast, “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” the other text in which Wilde examines *anamnesis*, is skeptical about the concept and the criticism it enables. “Mr. W. H.” originally appeared in the June 1889 issue of *Blackwood’s*, but Wilde revised the text, intending to publish the magazine story as an expanded novella. (This second edition never appeared during Wilde’s lifetime. Donald L. Lawler and Charles E Knott note that “the expanded version of “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” was probably begun sometime in late 1889 or early 1890 but perhaps not completed until 1893 or even later” (390).) The expanded version was then lost during the auction of Wilde’s household in 1895. This chronology foregrounds for us that Wilde was conceiving, writing, and revising “Mr. W.H.” at the same time that he was working on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which first appeared in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine in 1890 and was then published as a novel in 1891. The growing skepticism displayed towards the concept of reminiscence in “Mr. W. H.” may represent Wilde’s developing thinking and critique of what appears rather unproblematically in *Dorian Gray*.

The original version of “Mr. W. H.” has little to say about *anamnesis* or Greek philosophy, but as Lawler and Knott point out, the revision contains “whole

sections in which the theme of love and Platonic friendship is explored” (394). Lawler and Knott attribute the strange development of these Platonic sections to the influence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In their reading, *Dorian Gray* is a kind of gestational work in which Wilde works out his opinions on neo-Platonism: “the theme of neo-Platonic ideals of friendship and their inspiration of esthetic forms has its origin in “The of Mr. W. H.,” reappears in *Dorian Gray*, and receives its fullest treatment and justification in the enlarged, revised version of the former story” (394 n).

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” recounts how a young actor, Cyril Graham, purported to discover the secret identity of the fair youth to whom Shakespeare’s Sonnets are addressed. He concludes that they are dedicated to a boy actor named “Willie Hughes.” Unable to convince his friend Erskine of his theory, Graham has a portrait forged as proof that Willie Hughes existed, and was indeed the Mr. W. H. of the Sonnets. Erskine is convinced until he discovers the forgery, whereupon Graham shoots himself, leaving a suicide note that asks Erskine to publicize his literary theory. Erskine, unconvinced of the theory’s truth, does not intend to make it known, but in telling of his friendship with Cyril Graham, he inadvertently interests the narrator of “Portrait” in the theory. The narrator sets out to corroborate Graham’s scholarship and build on his case. But when he has presented his proofs to Erskine, he finds he can no longer believe in his findings, a cause of “bitter disappointment” (1196). Erskine, however, is fully converted to the Willie Hughes theory. It is then the narrator speculates, “Influence is simply the transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one’s self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss. Every disciple takes away something from his master.”

Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “Mr. W. H.” is a layered and complicated meditation on the erotics of pedagogy, and the many ways in which teachers and students influence and counterinfluence each other. The narrator wishes to become a

kind of teacher. He vows to Erskine, "I will not rest till I have made you recognise, till I have made everyone recognise, that Cyril Graham was the most subtle Shakespearean critic of our day." But when this desire is fulfilled, and Erskine is converted, he feels only sadness. Our interest in the text is before this moment of loss. We will examine the narrator's solitary engagement with the Sonnets, and the means by which he reads them and provides evidence for his critical claims.

The narrator draws on the *Phaedrus*' myth (as well as *The Republic*) when he posits that the soul, "like the Philosopher of the Ideal City," is "the spectator of all time and of all existence" (1195). It has "senses that quickened, passions that came to birth, spiritual ecstasies of contemplation [and] ardours of fiery-coloured love" (1195). Because the soul's comprehensive vision, quick senses and contemplative habits make it is a source of knowledge about everything that has ever existed or will ever exist, it follows that critics only need to consult their souls if they wish to understand the meaning of an art object or the appropriate method of appraising it. In this way, Cyril Graham discovers the "true secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (1153). He relies "not so much on demonstrable proof or formal evidence, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense," an inner conviction that comes from his soul. This mystic knowledge is not so easily won because the soul itself is hidden. As the narrator of "Mr. W. H." observes, "the soul of each one of us is to each one of us a mystery. It hides in the dark and broods and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. Consciousness, indeed is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality" (1194). Fortunately, although art "even of the fullest scope and widest vision, can never show us the external world" it can "show us our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance" (1194). The narrator describes this process of self-discovery in the passage below:

We sit at the play with the woman we love, or listen to the music in some Oxford garden, or stroll with our friend through the cool galleries of the Pope's home at Rome, and suddenly we become aware that we have passions of which we have never dreamed, thoughts that make us afraid, pleasures whose secret

has been denied to us, sorrows that have been hidden from our tears. The actor is unconscious of our presence; the musician is thinking of the subtlety of the fugue or the tone of his instrument; the marble gods that smile so curiously at us are made of insensate stone³⁵. But they have given form and substance to what was within us; they have enabled us to realise our personality; and a sense of perilous joy, or some touch or thrill of pain, or that strange self-pity that man so often feels for himself comes over us and leaves us different. (1194)

Now, this process of realizing one's personality could mean discovering myriad hidden aspects of the self. The Sonnets change the narrator's life by revealing to him that in his past life he has *been* Shakespeare. As the playwright, he "had lived it all", watching his plays performed in the Globe, the "round theatre with its open roof and fluttering banners" (1194). Having identified with Shakespeare, the narrator attributes the interpretations he derives from his intensive close-readings to his *memory*; they are not newly discovered insights: "Week after week, I pored over these poems, and each new form of knowledge seemed to me a mode of reminiscence" (1196).

But it is not the mere fact of having been Shakespeare that allows the narrator to interpret the Sonnets. It is by understanding the nature of Shakespeare's sexuality and discovering that he shares that sexuality that the narrator comprehends the poetry. As Stefano Evangelista writes, in "Mr. W. H.," "reading produces self-knowledge, i.e. the awareness of one's own sexual preferences, and generates a retrospective autobiographical narrative in which homoeroticism is prominently rewritten into the individual histories of intellectual development" (242).

What the narrator remembers most vividly from his past life is "a romance that without my knowing it had coloured the very texture of my nature, had dyed it with strange and subtle dyes" (1194). The relationship that occurred in the past, but that still affects the narrator's nature is that between Shakespeare and Willie Hughes.

³⁵ We might wonder here if Wilde had read *Belcaro*. Both Lee's and Wilde's texts here choose the Vatican as an important site where the aesthete comes into fuller, queerer awareness of both art and herself. By insisting on the inanimate nature of sculpture, and the indifferent nature of the artwork, Wilde eschews the Gothic atmosphere Lee employs to narrate how the critic discovers his critical powers.

Because he has “been initiated into the secret of that passionate friendship;” he alone discerns that it is modeled after a pederastic relationship (1194). His mystic vision serves as evidence of what he has already hypothesized about the Sonnets: that Shakespeare had read Marsilio Ficino’s translation of Plato’s *Symposium*, and that the dialogue had inspired the playwright to raise male-male “friendship to the high dignity of the antique ideal, to make it a vital factor in the new culture, and a mode of self-conscious intellectual development” (1174). For the narrator, the Sonnets memorialize the Platonic romance between Shakespeare and Willie Hughes, and as the products of the erotic desire between Shakespeare and his beloved, the poems self-reflexively consider how the couple’s love enabled them to produce everlasting artistic works:

When he tells us of the marriage of true minds and exhorts his friend to beget children that time cannot destroy, he is but repeating the words in which the prophetess [Diotima] tells us that ‘friends are married by a far nearer tie than those who beget mortal children, for fairer and more immortal are the children who are their common offspring.’ (1174)

At first, the narrator’s fancy of having loved and lived as Shakespeare is merely the key to understanding a very limited set of cultural texts, the Sonnets. But suddenly his vision of homoerotic love in Elizabethan England is used to authorize a much broader sway of textual interpretation. Breaking out of his daydream about being Shakespeare, he announces:

And yet it was in this century that it had all happened. I had never seen my friend [Willie Hughes], but he had been with me for many years, and it was to his influence that I owed my passion for Greek thought and art, and indeed all my sympathy with the Hellenic spirit. (*Φιλοσοφήσας μετ έρωτος!*) How that phrase had stirred me in my Oxford days! I did not understand then why it was so. But I knew now. There had been a presence beside me always. Its silver feet had trod night’s shadowy meadows, and the white hands had moved aside the trembling curtains of the dawn. It had walked with me through the grey cloisters, and when I sat reading in my room, it was there also. What though I had been unconscious of it? The soul had a life of its own, and the brain its own sphere of action. (1195)

In addition to being the key to Shakespeare’s art, Willie Hughes is responsible for the narrator’s “sympathy with the Hellenic spirit” and his “passion for Greek thought and

art.” The untranslated Greek phrase explains how this can be so. Meaning “to love wisdom with *eros*” it is Wilde’s rendition of the *Phaedrus* 249A. Pater alludes to the same section of the dialogue when he refers to Winckelmann’s ability to interpret Greek art because he is a “lover and philosopher at once.” Socrates argues that the man “who practices philosophy without guile or who loves boys philosophically” will be granted quickest and easiest entry to the world of Forms for which we constantly yearn. In other words, intergenerational same-sex desire between males is the best guarantor of the all-encompassing vision associated with the world of Forms. As Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff write, “*Eros* is indispensable to pederasty because it provides the only entry into its real purpose: helping oneself and one’s beloved to recall what the soul had seen in its travels around the heavens” (xxv). Wilde’s narrator does not claim to see the entire world of Forms when he reads the Sonnets and views his life from the vantage of the pederastic Shakespeare. Instead, he has a comprehensive vision of his personality and the nature of art. Wilde clearly means for the “mode of reminiscence” the narrator experiences to evoke the recollection examined by the *Phaedrus*. If reading books is one way of triggering the process of reminiscence that grants the reader critical knowledge, loving boys is another.

Now the narrator imagines that he has loved a boy, Willie Hughes, in the past. But what about the present? What would mark him as a pederastic lover when he asks his audience to imagine sitting “at the play with the woman we love?” The narrator imagines that he has incorporated his long-dead beloved and loves him in spirit form. He acknowledges that in this life he “had never seen his friend” but still knows that “he had been with me for many years.” Notice that the invisible Hughes is associated with the pronoun “he.” But, when the narrator continues to speak of “the presence that had been beside him always” but of which he had been “unconscious,” the pronoun

“he” changes to “it,” and the narrator notes that the “soul had life of its own” of which the mind is unconscious because “the brain [has] its own sphere of action.” With this strange grammatical shift, the narrator turns the friend into his soul itself. Walking beside him in the cloisters and meadows, at his side at sunrise, his soul enjoys a lover-like intimacy with him.

Now, so far, “Mr. W.H.” sounds merely like a rewrite of Pater’s “Winckelmann.” In both texts the process of reminiscence, or *anamnesis*, allows a critic to discover that he shares a certain type of erotic sensibility with historical figures. That shared temperament becomes the key to interpreting art. We might think of *anamnesis* as another name for queer historical recovery. But if Pater uncritically celebrates Winckelmann’s strong identification with classical culture, and presents Winckelmann’s scholarly achievements as a kind of mystical process, Wilde seems more skeptical about the kind of knowledge produced by this erotic identification.

For the narrator, Willie Hughes and the homoerotic desire he enables becomes the key to more than “Greek thought and art” or to Shakespeare’s works. The narrator claims “it is not too much to say that to this young actor, whose very name the dull writers of his age forgot to chronicle, the Romantic Movement of English Literature is largely indebted.” Later he writes that he has had a mystic vision that conveys the “true secret” of Willie Hughes’ death (1192). The actor had been “one of those English comedians...who were slain at Nuremburg in a sudden uprising of the people, and were secretly buried...by some young men who had found pleasure in their performances, and of whom some had sought to be instructed in the mysteries of the new art” (1192, 1193). In this way, “the boy-actor whose beauty had been so vital an element in the realism and romance of Shakespeare’s art, had been the first to have brought to Germany the seed of the new culture, and was in his way the precursor of the *Aufklärung* or Illumination of the eighteenth century, that splendid

movement...begun by Lessing and Herder, and brought to its full and perfect issue by Goethe (1192). In this way, the narrator has queered the *Aufklärung* and Romanticism by fiat, and insofar as Goethe is the fruit of the *Aufklärung*, he too is claimed as a queer figure.³⁶ Now, these claims about Romanticism and the Enlightenment are based on no textual evidence. Their sweeping nature is ludicrous. By associating the actual physical presence of Shakespeare's supposed lover with all these intellectual movements, Wilde turns literary scholarship into a game of "Where's Willie?"; he and the desires he stands for are always responsible for any intellectual culture we might name. It is difficult to take the critical practice that enables such grand claims seriously. Wilde skewers the narrator's project by suddenly letting his own belief in his theories collapse, as if under the massiveness of its claims. When this happens, he exclaims, "I have been dreaming and all my life for these two months has been unreal. There was no such person as Willie Hughes." Even the renunciation of his overreaching theories is excessive. Realizing that he has deceived himself, he is "struck with a sorrow greater than any [he] had felt since boyhood" (1197). In response to this we might paraphrase a quip from "Mr. W.H." itself: "To cry for a literary theory? It seems impossible." One must have a heart of stone to read this line without laughing. All this groundless grandeur and wild theorizing suggests that Wilde is criticizing and parodying an overblown style of queer scholarship.

The narrator's critical methods are a version of what Chris Nealon describes as the "simple but enduring lesbian and gay practice of listing famous homosexuals from history—a gesture of genealogical claiming for which literary historian Rictor Norton finds evidence as far back as the sixteenth century" (5). These "modest, defiant lists of homosexuals...now form part of a wider array of lesbian and gay projects of historical

³⁶ Wilde would have observed how Pater's queers Goethe by imagining him as a potential lover for Winckelmann.

and cultural reformation that aim to uncover a sense of what Norton calls the ‘cultural unity’ of homosexual experience in history” (6). In addition to Shakespeare, in the course of his argument the narrator names Michelangelo, Montaigne, Giordano Bruno and Ben Jonson as great artists who have had romantic intellectual relationships with other men. In naming these figures, he traces an intellectual and erotic genealogy, links male same sex desire with cultural production and associates himself with the scholarly efforts of “Mr. Symonds” and “Mr. Pater” both of whom he refers to as scholars of neo-Platonism. But the naming Wilde’s narrator does is hardly the “modest” affair that Nealon describes. For what we can never forget as we read this novella is that there is no proof for the existence of “Willie Hughes.” In their texts, Pater and Symonds create intellectual genealogies through painstaking critical work, producing the names of queer precursors by scouring their texts and lives for the faintest trace of same-sex desire. The name “Willie Hughes” has nothing to give it substance, and yet it is used to authorize an overly-ambitious strain of a gay critical theory, a theory that presents itself as *the* master hermeneutical key, a gay critical theory that can measure the queer import of all it assesses because it *induces*, not uncovers, gayness in everything it touches. Careful scholarship would indeed show that Romanticism or the Enlightenment contain many queer aspects, but surely those aspects cannot be attributed *a priori* to “Willie Hughes,” or the particular mode of same-sex desire he is associated with.

The genealogical practices that Nealon describes are driven by identification and the desire to be represented. Listing the names of famous gay figures across history, the critic projects his desire into these figures, recasting the way they loved to match the way he loves, seeing them as versions of himself. In this way, he establishes a family resemblance with these celebrated fathers or brothers whose sexual identities he feels have been repressed by the dominant historical record. When we learn that the

forged portrait of Willie Hughes displays a man of “quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate” (1151), we should be unsurprised to hear that Cyril Graham, originator of the Willie Hughes theory is “wonderfully handsome” and “effeminate...in some things” and “always cast for the girls’ parts” when he acts (1152, 1153). As much as the portrait conforms to Shakespeare’s descriptions of the fair youth, it has also been shaped to mirror Cyril Graham himself. Similarly, the narrator’s claim that he once was Shakespeare carries genealogical identification to its extreme; for him it is simply not enough to claim *similarity* to gay forebears, one must claim *identity* with them. David Halperin argues for the value of the practices Nealon describes by noting that although identification may distort historicist understandings of how sexuality affects culture, it often “gets at something, something important: it picks out resemblances, connection, echo effects. Identification is a form of cognition” (15). For Halperin, “the tendency to refashion past sexual cultures in the shape of our own” can usefully reveal “a lot about our own historical situation, the functioning of contemporary sexual categories, our standard ways about thinking about the past” (15). But the understanding that identification offers is impaired unless we are self-conscious and critical about processes of identification. The narrator is not. “Identification is desire,” according to Halperin. The narrator’s critical practice exemplifies what happens when desire –the desire to be represented in all culture, throughout history—goes unchecked.

If for certain subjects transhistorical identification is a process associated with gain, for others identificatory processes inflict loss and create an impoverished field of erotic possibility. The collapse of identification into desire that Halperin points to has a particular history in accounts of same-sex desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the paradigm clash that occurred in the late-nineteenth century as different descriptive models of same-sex desire struggled for hegemony. There was the inversion model,

that of pederasty and finally, that of homosexuality. The first two models assume fixed differences between partners, for example, between the effeminate *Urning* and his masculine partner, or between the insertive older partner and the younger receptive partner. But homosexuality stresses the sameness between partners. As Sedgwick writes: “The *homo*- in the emerging concept of the homosexual seems to have the potential to perform a definitive de-differentiation—setting up a permanent avenue if potential slippage—between two sets of relations that had previously been seen as relatively distinct: identification and desire” (*Epistemology* 159). Sedgwick argues that the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is marked by this battle between definitional terms. For her although “Wilde’s own *eros* was most closely tuned to the note of the pederastic love in process of being superseded” by the rise of homosexuality, the novel does not celebrate the resilience or triumph of the pederastic model (57). Rather,

the suppression of the original defining differences between Dorian and his male admirers—differences of age and initiatedness, in the first place—in favor of the problematic of Dorian’s similarity to the painted male image that is and isn’t himself, seems to re-enact the discursive eclipse . . . of the Classically based pederastic assumption that male-male bonds of any duration must be structured around some diacritical difference. (*Tendencies* 57)

Using Sedgwick’s reading, we may argue both *Dorian Gray* and “Mr. W.H.” are affected by this “discursive eclipse.” In both texts, Wilde memorializes a dying way of understanding his desires and records the rise of an impoverished (for him) way of understanding erotic desire, a new mode of stultifying sameness. As he theorized sexuality and pursued sexual experiences, Wilde found himself confronting what Sedgwick describes as a ““homosexual homo-genization”” that is “critically routine” in our own time because “it so efficiently fills so many modern analytic, diagnostic and (hence) even deconstructive needs” (58). In other words, for us, if it is to be interpreted, all same sex desire between men must be assimilated under the sign of

“homosexuality,” and even when we speak of desire between men that names itself “homosexual,” we theorize this passion as man’s desire for his mirror image.

Sedgwick suggests Wilde’s resistance to homo-genization when she notes that although Wilde’s desire seems *primarily* pederastic he “did not only desire boys” (58). On the whole, Wilde’s “desires seem to have been structured intensely by the crossing of definitional lines—of age, milieu, initiatedness, and physique” (58).

Intergenerational relationships would have given Wilde opportunity to cross the categorical boundaries Sedgwick lists, but it is *transgression*, not his desire for men or boys, that is the most important characteristic of Wilde’s eroticism. To identify Wilde’s passion for crossing boundaries is to emphasize what is most queer about him. As Sedgwick reminds us, “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word queer itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European route *-terkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse)” (xii). As a queer subject, he had the capacity to transgress even his primary erotic desire because he had an erotic appreciation of alterity. As a queer subject, he would have had a heightened sense of how the transhistorical identification practiced by the narrator of “Mr. W. H.” constituted a form of “homosexual homo-genization.” But if *The Picture of Dorian Gray* only records the rise of this homo-sexual critical tendency, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” insists that it is ridiculous and inadequate.

After the narrator of “Mr. W.H.” has his vision of Shakespeare’s life, he exclaims, “How curiously it had all been revealed to me! A book of Sonnets, published nearly three hundred years ago, written by a dead hand and in honour of a dead youth, had suddenly explained to me the whole story of my soul’s romance” (1195). But then, strangely, he remembers witnessing “the opening of a frescoed coffin...at Thebes” (1196). Within the sarcophagus is the mummy of a young girl whose “little withered hands held a scroll of yellow papyrus covered in strange

characters” (1196). The narrator laments “How I wished now that I had had it read to me! It might have told me something more about the soul that hid within me, and had its mysteries of passion of which I was kept in ignorance” (1196). As he juxtaposes the “dead hand” of Shakespeare with the “little withered hands” of the mummified girl, and the “book of Sonnets” with the “strange characters” on the “scroll of yellow papyrus,” Wilde suggests an alternative cultural and erotic tradition that can explain art, a tradition routed through Egypt, not Greece.³⁷ For one moment, the narrator considers that “the whole story of [his] soul’s romance” might *not* have been explained by the Sonnets, and imagines that there are “mysteries of passion” that might only be revealed when he reads a different script. But it is exactly this ability to think of myriad forms of desire and their relation to culture that the narrator puts aside when he brusquely makes Willie Hughes the seminal figure of the Enlightenment or of Romanticism.

When he loses his faith in the Willie Hughes theory, the narrator wonders if he had been “merely influenced by the beauty of the forged portrait, charmed by that Shelley-like face into faith and credence” (1197). He considers that it is “the pathetic tragedy of Cyril Graham’s death” that made him so credulous. Whatever the specific cause, he knows he was “under the influence of a perfectly silly enthusiasm” (1197). The instant he committed his beliefs to writing and sent them to Erskine, he exorcizes that zeal (1196). As he mocks the excesses of his ardour and records how easily it was dispelled, the narrator allows Wilde to show the dangers of the erotically based aesthetic criticism that Pater had imagined in *The Renaissance*. As we have seen, Pater

³⁷ We cannot explain this alternative tradition fully, but Wilde may have associated it with female homoerotic desire. As he mourns the destruction of Sappho’s poems in his essay “English Poetesses,” he imagines a mummy who safeguards a written text: “Of her poems, burnt with other most precious work by Byzantine Emperor and Roman Pope, only a few fragments remain. Possibly they lie mouldering in the darkness of an Egyptian tomb, clasped in the withered arms of some long-dead lover” (102).

had coded enthusiasm as pederastic desire, praised Winckelmann as the “quick susceptible enthusiast,” and attributed the art critic’s acumen to his queer passion. In his zeal to make desire the basis for aesthetic criticism, he had envisioned forms of knowledge that lay buried in the mind, forms that could *only* be accessible to those who felt same-sex desire. But in “Mr. W. H.,” Wilde imagines that knowledge is not something that lies fully formed, waiting to be discovered by those with the right erotic orientation. Rather, much of what the critic finds in the past has been placed there to satisfy some personal need or desire. While Pater casts “enthusiasm” as a particular way of knowing what objectively exists, Wilde sees how “enthusiasm” can become an irrational and uncritical creativity that imagines what it wants to know into existence. For him, enthusiasm destabilized *anamnesis* as a metaphor for recovering forgotten knowledge from the self.

With its links to mystic visions, romantic identification and fevered enthusiasm, *anamnesis* could never ground Wilde's fantasy of innate knowledge with any seriousness. We might suggest that this is why he begins to think about heredity's relationship to memory in "The Critic as Artist" and in the second half of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to Laura Otis, “nineteenth-century organic memory theory...proposed that memory and heredity were essentially the same and that one inherited memories from ancestors along with their physical features” (2). She continues “the theory of organic memory placed the past in the individual, in the body, in the nervous system; it pulled memory from the domain of the metaphysical into the domain of the physical with the intention of making it knowable” (3).

IV *Organic Memory: Heredity and Possibility of Innate Knowledge*

Dorian Gray is celebrated by “many, especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray the true realization of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. To them he seemed to be of the company of those whom Dante describes as having sought to ‘make themselves perfect by the worship of beauty.’ Like Gautier, he was one for whom ‘the visible world existed’” (100). When Dorian comes of age, he is “almost immediately offered” the role of expert in the art of gracious, tasteful, cosmopolitan living, but although he eagerly accepts this authority, he does not want to be limited to the role of “mere *arbiter elegantiarum*, to be consulted on the wearing of a jewel” (101). Emphasizing the scholarly aspect of his image, he wishes to “elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the sense its highest realization” (101).

Influenced by Lord Henry’s Paterian sermons, Dorian dedicates himself to a life of courting sensuous impressions, and seeks to “concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (101). But he realizes that the age he lives in is governed by an “uncomely puritanism” that attempts to “starve [the senses] into submission or to kill them by pain” (101). Because Dorian wishes to make the senses “elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic” he decides to quicken and nurture them by pursuing whatever impulses might strengthen his perceptive powers. By avoiding the “asceticism that deadens the senses” as well as the “vulgar profligacy that dulls them” (101), Dorian hopes to defamiliarize his environs, changing them into “a world in which things

would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed” (102). We should stress here Dorian’s aversion to “vulgar profligacy.” Either he believes that indulging immoderately in certain sensuous experiences is a mark of vulgarity, or he believes that the unlearned, common people pursue a special type of licentious behavior that endangers aesthetic susceptibility. Whatever the case, when he pursues aesthetic experience, he does not see himself as indulging indiscriminately in aesthetic pleasures. In theory at least, he regulates aesthetic experience, and must be devising criticism that can judge the relative merits of aesthetic moments and objects as well as the proper exposure one can have to them. It is important to remember the discriminatory kernel that is supposed to lie at the center of Dorian’s aesthetic experimentation because so often it can appear to be an undirected, uncritical process.

For example, we hear that he would

often adopt certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature, abandon himself to their subtle influences, and then, having as it were, caught their colour and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, leave them with that curious indifference that is not incompatible with a real ardour of temperament, and that indeed...is often a condition of it. (102)

Now, this describes an enthusiasm, and a process of understanding, but very little judgment. Dorian “abandon[s] himself” to the influences he studies, and takes on “their colour,” but when he leaves these modes of thought for others, what does he think of them? How do they rank as sources of pleasure? How do they affect the capacity of the senses to feel a range of sensations? It is possible that the “curious indifference” Wilde mentions here is a codeword for critical detachment, but if so we never see Dorian’s critical faculty in operation. More often it seems as if boredom and weariness govern Dorian’s shift from theory to theory or object to object. Because Wilde desires to stress the freedom Dorian has to pursue whatever impressions he likes, he underemphasizes the grounds from which Dorian makes critical judgments. Thus we hear “he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by

any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night” (103). But how does Dorian distinguish an inn from a house? Under what set of rules does this misrecognition of intellectual spaces constitute a “mistake” or “error”? What governs his decision to move on to a new system or creed? Why one system and not another? How does he decide which, of many systems could afford him most pleasure to examine at any moment? And yet, although the grounds for all these choices remain mysterious, in theory they must exist, since Dorian is aware that a “vulgar profligacy” will damage the very senses he hopes to cultivate. He cannot afford to abandon himself carelessly to any and all influences.

As Dorian experiments and fashions himself into a decadent version of a Paterian aesthete, he is ostensibly deriving the “reasoned philosophy and ordered principles” that he wishes to teach others. These would comprise the basis of his aesthetics. But ironically, the narrative that relates how he might prepare himself to educate others fantasizes that education is needless, because critics need no one to teach them how to judge art or impressions. They have *inherited* that knowledge.³⁸ This idea of inherited critical powers first appears in “Mr. Pater’s Last Volume,”

³⁸ Dorian’s desire to instruct others is merely a premise that allows the novel to relate how he educates himself; the text preserves its anti-didactic bias by never depicting Dorian teaching anyone. Occupied in his preparatory self-culture, he spends all his time training for an educational career that seems never to commence formally. While it is rumored he corrupts others with his influence, it is unclear whether the downfall of these people is really due to Dorian’s *deliberate* example and his lessons in aesthetics. It is also unclear whether those who might be corrupted by Dorian are truly students of his New Hedonism, or merely of imperfect theoretical formations that precede the “reasoned philosophy” and “ordered principles” of New Hedonism in its fully articulated form.

Wilde's March 1890³⁹ review of Pater's *Appreciations* (1889). In the review, Wilde ascribes the modernity of the text's essays to Pater's comprehensive understanding:⁴⁰

For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century, one must realise every century that has preceded it, and that has contributed to its making. To know anything about oneself, one must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive. The legacies of heredity may make us alter our views of moral responsibility, but they cannot but intensify our sense of the value of Criticism; for the true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure.⁴¹ (234)

As he wanders through the gallery of his ancestral portraits and contemplates "those whose blood flowed in his veins" Dorian is identified with the critical model embodied by Pater in Wilde's review. He wonders

at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. (111)

Dorian attempts to determine how each ancestor has contributed to his aesthetic susceptibility. For instance, he attributes his "passion for the beauty of others" to his mother (289). Studying the portrait of another nobleman, he wonders if his actions are merely "the dreams that the dead man had not realized" (288). As Dorian reflects upon the genealogical sources of his "temperament," the portraits seem to come to life: His "mother laughed at him in her loose Bacchante dress" and her eyes, "still wonderful in their depth and brilliancy of colour" seem "to follow him wherever he went" (289). In

³⁹ Wilde delivered the finished draft of *Dorian Gray* in March 1890, which suggests he lifted the passage from the novel in order to complete the review of Pater's collection. It is impossible to tell which was written first, although readers encountered the review before they read the novel, and would have contextualized Wilde's self-plagiarism according to that chronology.

⁴⁰ Wilde derived the idea of modernity as the sum of all preceding intellectual history from Pater. In *The Renaissance*, Pater casts the Mona Lisa as "the symbol of the modern idea" because she embodies the "idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life" (99).

⁴¹ Here Wilde seems to be evoking Terence's phrase "*Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto.*" I am a man, therefore nothing that is human is alien to me.

similar fashion, another ancestor seems “to look curiously at him” with her “oval heavy lidded eyes” (289). These uncanny moments mark the portrait-gallery scene as one of criticism. If as Wilde writes, “There must be no mood with which [the critic] cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that [the critic] cannot make alive,” Dorian exercises his powers of judgment by resurrecting his dead in the attempt to understand their personalities, and in turn, his own.

Jonah Siegel allows us to see how Dorian’s genealogical interests relate to criticism. He writes, “To talk about criticism, for both Pater and Wilde, is to talk about an unavoidable practice imposed by the realization that modernity is not simply in possession of the fragments of the past, but composed of those very fragments” (230). In the same way that Dorian realizes he is the sum of his ancestor’s legacies, when the critic attempts to understand contemporary aesthetic objects, he does not view them as absolutely original objects isolated from historical influence; in order to judge them he must be able to comprehend cultural elements of older eras that inhere in contemporary texts. The critic is able to understand these older elements because he can sympathise with them. Lord Henry exemplifies a critic who uses this historicism to make critical judgments. When he first attempts to understand Dorian Gray’s beauty, he seeks out the story of the younger man’s parentage and situates it as the “interesting background” that “posed the lad, made him more perfect...Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic” (33). Lord Henry aestheticizes historicism by understanding Dorian as if he were a model in a *tableau vivant*. Standing in the foreground, Dorian can only be truly appreciated in relation to the tragic genealogical background that informs the nature of his pose.

Lord Henry may have gotten his regard for historicism from the “poisonous book” he gives to Dorian. This novel concerns a young Parisian who attempts to “sum up . . . in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit” had passed by

“trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own” (97). According to the criteria from “Mr. Pater’s Last Volume,” the Parisian is pursuing an aesthetic education that will enable him to become a critic. Because Dorian believes that one has “ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament. . . and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious” (113), he sees the Parisian as the “prefiguring type of himself” (98), but he has an important insight the Parisian does not: one does not attain sympathy with bygone modes of thought and feeling merely by the active process of making oneself sympathetic, one already has a sympathetic capacity because one has *inherited* the passions and thoughts that will enable one to identify with cultures that seem alienated by the passage of time.

In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde further explores the nature of heredity, detailing the process by which heredity can endow the critic with insight. According to Gilbert, as the “last of the fates and the most Terrible,” Heredity supplies the “warrant for the contemplative life” because it reveals “the absolute mechanism of all action” (177). To attempt acting, rather than to merely be an engaged spectator of life is a waste of energy in a world where behavior and character is already determined by unchangeable biological laws.

But although in the sphere of practical and external life [heredity] has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice, in the subjective sphere...it comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands, gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities, gifts of wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thought that are at variance with each other and passions that war against themselves (177).

According to this fanciful theory we have not merely inherited our ancestors’ physiognomies or their dispositions to disease; rather, we have inherited their very memories, desires and affective capacities. Accordingly, “it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within is no single spiritual

entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places....It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins” (177). But this soul becomes our tutor, for in its “bitter” wisdom, it is “wiser than we are” (177).

The soul enables our aesthetic education by leading our imagination “away from surroundings whose beauty is dimmed to us by the mist of familiarity, or whose ignoble ugliness and sordid claims are marring the perfection of our development. It can help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages and find ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and to realise the experiences of those who are greater than we are” (177). All this is made possible because “the imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race-experience” (178). We profit by recapitulating the lives of our dead forebears, and assuming their experience. For example, “The pain of Leopardi crying out against life becomes our pain” (178). “Ours is the anguish of Atys, and ours the weak rage and noble sorrows of the Dane” (178).

Having established that Wilde wished to attribute aesthetic capability to heredity, we should pause to consider why. As we’ve seen, formal pedagogical relationships are debilitating not only because of the losses (of knowledge, of credence, of the soul) they produce but because they rob teachers of the time for self-development. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, self-development means the development of one’s personality. The novel’s strategies for this multiplication of personality are numerous. Dorian doubles his personality when he consents to sit for Basil, and as he develops his secret life the scandal and rumor that follow him tell tales of a dozen different Dorians, none of whom resemble his public respectable persona. Unlike other women, who are “limited to their century” (44), Sybil Vane assumes multiple personalities by virtue of her acting; she appears “in every age and in every

costume” and is “all the great heroines of the world in one (47). The novel’s narrator advises “insincerity” as “a method by which we can multiply our personalities” (111). Now, as Dorian notes, it is only a “shallow psychology” that assumes that the ego is “simple, permanent, reliable and of one essence.” By contrast, Dorian’s deep psychology takes heredity as a scientific demonstration of how the self is inherently multiple, a being with inherited “myriad lives and myriad sensations.” Dorian takes this innate multiplicity as a challenge and inspiration; as he adopts “certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature” he attempts to deepen the diversity that is already a part of his nature.

If the pedagogical encounter produces a gap in the self through which the “soul” flows out when the pedagogue exercises influence, Wilde’s notion of the complex, multiform, composite soul reveals his desire for an interior fullness that could never be exhausted by social encounters.⁴² By holding the “dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations” within him, Wilde’s critic does not need to seek instruction from others, and if this capacity to unlock the critical gifts bequeathed by heredity is universal, no one need seek instruction from him. But even if this fancied critic were to attract students, the loss of personality or knowledge he would incur by dealing with them seems less costly if the soul is a multiplex conglomeration rather than a singular entity. In the very review in which Wilde suggests Pater’s essays are formed by the spirit of heredity he claims Pater “has no rival in his own sphere, and he has escaped disciples” (236). Wilde claims that Pater is free from students because his

⁴² We should note here that although Lord Henry does see teaching as an activity in which one gives up one’s soul to the student, he thinks of this activity as a *lending* than an absolute loss. For Lord Henry, to influence another is to “project” oneself into “a gracious form” for but a moment—just long enough to hear one’s views echoed to one with interest, with “all the added music of passion and youth.” The pedagogical intercourse Lord Henry idealizes here is modeled upon pederasty, and assumes that the student is a youthful, enthusiastic object of physical desire. If the student did not meet these criteria, it is probable Lord Henry would see the exercise of influence in the negative way that Wilde’s other teachers do. None of Wilde’s teacher figures identifies the exercise of influence as a pleasurable loss in itself.

critical style is so fine, so unique, that it is inimitable and unteachable, but we might well think that Pater escapes the disciples in another sense: through the graces of Heredity, he has become an irreducible hoard of psychic richness. He is not subject to the vampiristic tendencies of his students.

At this point, it may seem that “the scientific principle of Heredity” truly is “the warrant for the contemplative life.” Heredity provides the critic with a space of independence in which to pursue his own self-development and education. However, this autonomy is precariously situated. The gothic rhetoric with which Wilde describes Heredity makes it a force that is constantly drawing the critic into relation with his undead relations, figures whose desires threaten to displace the critic’s own desire, and whose passions and thoughts have a life of their own that the critic cannot control. This gothic rhetoric frames the scene in which Dorian looks at his picture-gallery, but is most clearly apparent in “The Critic as Artist,” which best explains the mechanisms by which heredity underwrites the practice of criticism. It is to that dialogue we will turn to consider why the theory of hereditary transmission fails Wilde.

V “*That Terrible Shadow*” – *Wildean Heredity and the Rhetoric of the Gothic*

“Beneath every face are the latent faces of ancestors, beneath every character their characters”—Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind*

In order to describe Heredity to Earnest, Gilbert resorts to the Gothic. Heredity is “Nemesis without her mark,” and a “terrible shadow” (177). Thanks to her, and her “many gifts” we discover that “it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead.” The very soul within us is tainted by death and disease; like some ghoul it has “dwelt in fearful places and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode.”

Why does Gilbert describe inheritance in this way? Why this preoccupation with the morbid and macabre? The traits we inherit need not be the traits of our *dead*

forebears. By presenting hereditary gifts as legacies, Wilde ties them unnecessarily to death. But it is not the mere linkage of inherited thoughts and passions to death that might send a frisson through us as we read. For even if Heredity brings the property of the dead, such gifts need not be *haunted* objects. Yet by insisting that by accepting the gifts of heredity, we come to live the lives of the dead, Wilde turns the story of cultural inheritance into the horrific tale of our dispossession by our dead.

This Gothic image of Heredity is a mark of how difficult Wilde found it to escape from legacy bequeathed by his mentor, Pater. As we've seen, when he first began to call himself Professor of Aesthetics and "critic of art" Wilde had publicly claimed to be Ruskin's student at Oxford, and had expressed his differences from Ruskin's moralism. As far as I can find, Wilde's review of *Appreciations* is the first published document in which he connects Pater with his university education. Wilde recalls his "undergraduate days at Oxford; days of lyrical ardour and of studious sonnet-writing" (24). Pater, smiling, had asked him "Why do you always write poetry? Why do you not write prose? Prose is so much more difficult" (24). To understand what Pater meant, Wilde "carefully studied his beautiful and suggestive essays on the Renaissance" and "fully realized what a wonderful self-conscious art the art of English prose-writing really is" (24). Pater's essays became "'the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty'" (24). Acknowledging his wild enthusiasm for the essays, Wilde confesses, "It is possible, of course that I may exaggerate about them. I certainly hope that I do; for where there is no exaggeration there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding" (24).

Wilde's defense of exaggeration is underwritten by erotics of reading Pater would have delighted in, and indeed is an homage to Pater, who argues that the true critic is a lover, and that aesthetic criticism begins when critics seek to explain how texts have touched them. But if Wilde was Pater's student he was also his rival. His

desire to outshine the older man is evident in the simultaneously self-promoting and ingratiating tone of his review, a tone of which he seems conscious. He writes, “I must not allow this brief notice of Mr Pater’s new volume to degenerate into an autobiography. I remember being told in America that whenever Margaret Fuller wrote an essay upon Emerson the printers had always to send out to borrow some additional capital ‘T’s’, and I feel it right to accept this transatlantic warning” (24).

Wilde checks himself when he realizes that his reminiscences of Oxford threaten to displace discussion of Pater’s text. But even this realization offers him a chance to remind readers of his transatlantic travels, during which he was hailed as the apostle of Aestheticism. Josephine Guy notes that Matthew Arnold’s death had left vacant a position “at the very centre of cultural life” for both Wilde and Pater to claim (xxxiii). Pater poised himself to seize this place by publishing *Appreciations*, the lead essay of which “seems designed to confirm Pater’s authority as literary (rather than art) critic—perhaps the pre-eminent literary critic of the time” (xxxiii). Guy argues that as “Wilde was in the process of composing his first major critical statement to appear under signature for a serious periodical...Pater may have appeared, suddenly and surprisingly as the most likely inheritor of Arnold’s mantle” (xxxiv). In the absence of Wilde’s own magisterial books of criticism, those lectures constitute his only claim to be a cultural critic of international renown, one who drew more crowds and publicity than the shy Pater ever could.⁴³

The commercial and critical success of *Appreciations* would have been clear signs to Wilde that Pater had fully rehabilitated his reputation after the scandal of *The*

⁴³ Until 1889, the majority of Wilde’s critical writing had been on topical subjects and appearing in the form of unsigned contributions to publications like *The Pall Mall Gazette*. He had not yet produced long pieces for prestigious journals like *Nineteenth Century* or *Fortnightly Review* and he had not published a book of criticism. As Guy argues, critical collections like *Appreciations* and *Intentions* “conferred a particularly desirable form of cultural capital, one rendered especially attractive from the 1880s onwards by the growth of the new journalism, with its emphasis on sensation, populism and disposability” (xiv).

Renaissance's publication in 1873. This process had only begun with the publication of *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), which purported to explain more clearly what had been misunderstood in *The Renaissance*'s conclusion. Responding to the outcry over the conclusion, Pater had suppressed it from the second edition of *The Renaissance*, but by 1888, he was secure enough to restore it. With Pater's ascendancy, Wilde's critical texts are marked by the question of how to situate themselves with respect to him. In *Intentions*, Wilde veers from revering Pater to ridiculing him to ignoring his influence altogether. Guy attributes these conflicting responses not so much to Wilde's personal feelings about his mentor, but to his attempts to associate or disassociate himself with Pater's cultural authority: in other words, Wilde was determining whether it would be better to challenge Pater's claim for the Arnold's throne or whether it be better for him to take some slightly less magisterial chair for himself, helped by his association with the Oxford don. And yet, to be identified as Pater's student was also to risk being branded an inferior version of Pater, just as when Wilde had claimed Ruskin as his master, he had been labeled a "penny-Ruskin."

Read within the context of Guy's narrative, the last lines of Wilde's review reveal one strategy to deal with the problem of Pater's influence: "But in Mr. Pater, as in Cardinal Newman, we find the union of personality with perfection. He has no rival in his own sphere, and he has escaped disciples. And this, not because he has not been imitated, but because in art so fine as his there is something that, in its essence is inimitable "(26).

Wilde credits Pater with defying mimesis and "escaping disciples" in order to declare his own independence from his mentor.⁴⁴ If Pater's art can be imitated, but is

⁴⁴ When Wilde celebrates one party's freedom from another, he is usually celebrating the disappearance of both parties entanglement with the other. For example, with the dissolution of philanthropy, it is not merely the poor who escape the indignity of accepting charity; the rich are relieved of their responsibility to give.

in its essence inimitable, it can leave no trace in the art of those who may appear to be his ardent followers. Unmarked by this evidence, as Wilde aspires to fame as a renowned cultural critic; he can never be cast as a derivative of Pater's style or substance. However, Wilde's vision of Pater, safeguarded and secluded in "his own sphere" is not merely designed to disavow the Oxford don's influence; rather it dramatizes one of Wilde's oldest fantasies. As early as 1886, piqued by the ingratitude of one of his acolytes, Wilde had quipped "The only schools worthy of founding are those without disciples" (Ellmann 213). Insofar as Pater defied imitation and escaped followers, he exemplified an aloof inimitability that Wilde sometimes craved, a freedom from the enervating or vampiric desires of those who sought to learn from him. We might argue this then: even as Wilde sought to distance himself from Pater, he was compelled to return constantly to Pater's texts and his teaching for models of how one could refuse the exchanges involved in education. When the narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." reads the Sonnets and experiences analytical reading as a "mode of reminiscence" Wilde is reworking the revelatory experience of *anamnesis* that Pater depicted in "Winckelmann." When Wilde imagines Pater as the modern critic whose hereditary legacies bestow him with innate critical knowledge, he is making a Paterian reading of Pater's character, endowing him with the omniscience of *The Renaissance's* Mona Lisa. As the "symbol of the modern idea" she stands for "the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life" (99). La Gioconda is also the source of the tomb-haunting rhetoric with which Wilde depicts Heredity in "The Critic as Artist." Like the vampire, the Mona Lisa "has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave" (99). Her beauty is the product "of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" and she possesses a soul afflicted with maladies.

In his reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James Eli Adams quotes the scene wherein Dorian examines his ancestral portraits and states, “The trappings of charnel-house Gothic should not obscure Wilde’s subtle invocation of a complex and momentous intellectual genealogy to authorize his ‘new Hedonism’” (220). Adams then reveals this lineage, arguing that when Wilde explores heredity, he is contextualizing Pater’s claims about cultural transmission and modernity with respect to Victorian science rather than Greek philosophy:

Wilde recasts Pater’s various tropes of tradition and inheritance in emphatically biological terms so that the modernity of Pater’s *Gioconda* becomes a fusion of “legacies” at once cultural and physical, which conflates history and heredity. Culture is thus envisioned as a force not only proved upon the pulses, in Keats’s phrase, but flowing within them. Modern science might thus give renewed authority to a form of Platonic *anamnesis*, under which introspection yields encounters with myriad lives that are both a collective cultural legacy, as in Leonardo’s portrait, and a biological inheritance inscribed in one’s very body—the two legacies joined in Dorian’s contemplation of the portraits of his ancestors. (221)

The link that Adams traces between Pater and Wilde is undeniable, but what is curious about his reading is that he presents “the trappings of charnel-house Gothic” as pure Wildean ornament, as mere decadent excess that threatens to *hide* Wilde’s intellectual lineage. But surely, the morbid rhetoric Adams identifies is a clear marker of Wilde’s intellectual kinship with Pater. To think otherwise is to overlook the Gothic nature of the grave-haunting *Gioconda* that Adams himself cites as the basis for Wilde’s reformulation of Paterian thought. Faced with the question of Wilde’s intellectual paternity, although Adams knows the object of his analysis is the decadent Pater of “Leonardo da Vinci,” he seems to yearn for a sanitized, un-Gothic Pater associated with Hellenism. When he writes that Wilde’s “[m]odern science might thus give renewed authority to a form of Platonic *anamnesis*” we might think he is analyzing Pater’s essays “Winckelmann” or “Diaphaneité,” both of which take up that term. The Mona Lisa is certainly a figure for *reminiscence*, but insofar as she is a figure for

modernity, she is not the ideal emblem for memory in its specifically Hellenic guise as *anamnesis*.⁴⁵ As Adams forcibly associates Leonardo's portrait with the renewal and recasting of the classical doctrine of *anamnesis*, he is able to forget the morbidity that is at the heart of Pater's description of Lady Lisa. This amnesia produces this problem: when Adams dismisses the Gothic by reducing it to mere "trappings" he makes it difficult to see how this Gothic rhetoric is a considerable force that disrupts the *content* of Wilde's theories. By taking seriously the stench of the charnel-house in Wilde's work, and by relating it to the Paterian Gothic, we can see how Gothic rhetoric affects each author's model of critical consciousness differently.

Because she holds within her the totality of history, La Gioconda possesses a critical consciousness similar to the one Wilde's critics aspire to. Yet she maintains a serenity that is absent in Wildean critics. It is the Mona Lisa herself, not her ancestors, who witnesses time passing, she herself who has died over and over again and then returns to live in one century as Leda or in another as St Anne. Experiences impress themselves on her *individual* soul as it passes through history. Pater uses the gothic to imagine the omniscience of the undead, and as the embodiment of this gothic undeath, Lady Lisa has no fears of the dead or dying. She is untroubled by the history she has witnessed, or her recurring deaths: "all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands" (99). Since Pater suggests that La Gioconda's enigmatic smile was elicited by "mimes and flute-players" we understand that for her history's passage is light entertainment.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ As we have seen, for aesthetic Platonists like Pater and Wilde, *anamnesis* is a term associated with Hellenism and male same-sex *eros*. The Mona Lisa may possess some of "the animalism of Greece," but she is also a figure antithetical to Greek classicism. If she were set "for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses of beautiful women of antiquity" they would be "troubled" (98).

⁴⁶ In this reading I differ slightly from Andrew Eastman, who believes La Gioconda's eyes and mouth express her icy irony and utter detachment. But we agree that despite her many face and lives, Mona Lisa history as if she were always the same. As Eastman writes she "eludes the protean identity of

Unlike Pater's serene Gioconda, whose knowledge is rooted in her own diverse experiences, Wilde's critics are troubled because they have inherited and incorporated the experiences of undead others, experiences they can never assimilate or lay claim to. As Jeff Nunokawa states, for Wilde, Heredity is "the agent of insinuation who annuls the boundaries of our own individuality by inculcating strange desires in place of our own" (119). Although Heredity "delivers and defines our own essential genetic character" it "fills us with affects that are not our own," affects that may seem intolerable because "being the desires of another, they never cease to be implausible as our desires" (117). Nunokawa reveals the gothic face of heredity, but as soon as he shows it to us, he masks it again—too quickly for us to understand all the implications of that face:

As common for all their strangeness, as "the tears we shed at a play," these alien desires, as light as the natural need they displace is heavy, whose endless deferral is as easy to bear as that of the other would be impossible to live with, are calculated by Wilde, with all the rhetorical resources at his disposal, as a central benefit of art. The synthetic fervors he pictures our systems absorbing belong to a genus of inorganic affects what Wilde praises as "the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken, "exquisite sterile emotions which offer a safe substitute for the potent ones they replace. (117)

As Dorian Gray knew, we have ancestors in art, and it is to this idea that Nunokawa turns to reassure us when he contemplates the strange susceptibilities and temperaments that the Wildean critic inherits. In "The Critic as Artist" Gilbert claims "Art does not hurt us" (116). Instead it offers us a shield from "the sordid perils of existence" (117). No matter then, that Heredity seems to dispossess us, Nunokawa says, we can be assured that it will not hurt us, since the influences we have inherited are "synthetic fervors" and "inorganic affects." The problem with this move is that it ignores the full context in which Wilde means his theory of hereditary transmission to be read in. When Wilde says the imagination is "concentrated race-experience," when

mythical embodiment, experiencing the panoply of different incarnations "but as the sound of lyres and flutes' her famously elusive gaze suggesting her ultimate disengagement" (83).

he insists that we live the lives of the dead, he clearly numbers human ancestors among the forebears of the critic. Their *organic* affects prove to be far less bearable than those artificial emotions that Nunokawa concentrates on from his arguments. Harboring the “impossible desires” of the dead within their hearts, Wilde’s hereditary critics are disturbed by a terrible self-division. But critics who overlook how degeneration theory and decadence inform Wildean heredity may minimize or miss this inward division.

Reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James Eli Adams claims that if we understand Wilde’s inheriting subject in “the larger context of the rise of evolutionary theories of culture” that subject “represents a claim to cultural authority that...promises to repair the rupture of ‘completeness’ and ‘harmony’” (221). He then attributes Wilde’s fantasies of hereditary transmission to Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary theory, which, as he points out, has a teleology missing from Darwinian evolution (220). Spencerian teleology would posit the final product of the evolutionary process as a coherent, fully realized organism whose constituent elements worked purposefully together in synergistic union. Therefore, insofar as Dorian is a Spencerian, and sees himself as the summation of all history, he would regard himself as a complete, harmonious system. As Adams attempts to evoke the sense of this inward tranquility, he repeatedly suggests synthesis. For example, when he considers how the legacies of heredity are represented in the body, he concentrates on their “fusion,” not merely to suggest that Wilde is melding together theories of biological and cultural inheritance, but also to suggest that any conflicting aspects of cultural inheritance have been reconciled because they have been summed together in a dialectical fashion. In other words, the myriad inherited elements that are housed in Dorian’s body are not co-existent and potentially conflicting; they are dissolved and commingled in the very blood that flows within his pulses. Adams can come to this

view because he derives his account of Wildean heredity by reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in isolation from “The Critic as Artist.” While Dorian speaks of the “myriad lives and myriad sensations” that constitute critical man, that “complex multiform creature,” he does not stress the how elements struggle against each other.

In the “Critic as Artist,” Gilbert imagines the subjectivity of the critic as an anarchic zone where inherited thoughts “are at variance with each other” and where inherited passions “war against themselves.” Wilde deviates from the Spencerianism Adams describes when he indicates no teleological or discriminatory principle that would select one embattled passion above another. Neither does he envision a time when this inner conflict is resolved by the triumph of one mood over another, by establishing an equilibrium of balanced warring passions, or by setting up a cyclical system in which one mood holds sway and then gives way to another before regaining its rule. Without some set of regulations to govern these inherited passions, which have a life of their own quite apart from the will or rational consciousness of their owner, how would the critic use them to enable his work? Presented with an object or aesthetic experience about which he has inherited a number of contradictory attitudes, how is the critic enabled to make a judgment about the object at hand? Gilbert himself does not explain how, when he says:

For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? And who the true man of culture, if not he who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent and can separate the work that has distinction from the work that has it not, and so by contact and comparison makes himself master of the secrets of style and school, and understands their meaning, and listens to their voices, and develops that spirit of disinterested curiosity which is the real root, as it is the real flower of intellectual life, and thus attains to intellectual clarity, and having learned “the best that is known and thought in the world,” lives—it is not fanciful to say so—with those who are the Immortals. (170)

Now, the preceding passage seems to trace the development of critical capability. At first, the critic judges unconsciously, by “instinct.” His instinct seems informed by what he has inherited: “the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations” are unconscious principles that allow him to make aesthetic judgments. Because Wilde associates true criticism with self-awareness, we might describe these principles as proto-critical. So far, this account sounds as if it could describe Pater’s Winckelmann, who guided by his Hellenic, queer nature, “followed the clue of instinct, of unerring instinct” in order to read Greek art (176). But the difference between Pater and Wilde is this: for Wilde, the concept of instinct hides an underexplained moment of adjudication between conflicting, proto-critical elements while for Pater, “instinct” refers to Winckelmann’s ability to grasp the rules of criticism immediately or in themselves, not because he instinctively distinguishes the correct or better interpretive principles from incorrect or worse ones. The very metaphor of instinct as an unerring clue, or thread, suggests this. If we trace a rope through a labyrinth, we suspend judgment, making no decisions about which of two forking paths to take. In a sense, the right path becomes the only path since it follows the course of the thread that charts the way. For Pater, instinct does not describe an unconscious decision-making process; rather, it is the process by which the mind responds to aesthetic impressions by apprehending or evolving the critical principles that correspond to stimuli. Hence “that world in which others had moved with so much embarrassment seems to call out in Winckelmann new senses fitted to deal with it.” He “catches the thread of a whole sequence of laws in some hollowing of the hand, or dividing of the hair” (154).

Now, as Nunokawa reminded us, heredity is responsible for the unique combination of inherited aspects that defines the individual’s “own essential genetic character.” Insofar as the critic has the agency to adjudicate between the competing claims of his hereditary legacies, the power to choose, and the rationale behind

choosing should be rooted in that aspect of his personality that owes itself to no ancestor's influence. But Wilde cedes this agency when he insists "it is not our own life that we lead, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that swells within us is no single spiritual entity making us personal and individual, created for our service and entering into us for our joy" (177). We might say that for Wilde, "instinct" is the name for some internal choice of which the critic knows the result, but it is a choice that has been made by the dead, without any input from their host. It is not surprising then, that when Dorian Gray surveys the portraits of his ancestors he wonders if all his choices have been determined by them, if all his deeds merely fulfill the desires that the dead could not satisfy in life, but harbor still in the grave. Looking at one portrait, he asks:

Was it young Herbert's life that he sometimes led? Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own? Was it some dim sense of that ruined grace that had made him so suddenly, and almost without cause, give utterance, in Basil Hallward's studio, to the mad prayer that had so changed his life? (111)

In his speech, Gilbert seems to attribute agency to the critic by arguing that that through his "fine scholarship and fastidious rejection" the critic is able to make instinct into a "self-conscious and intelligent" hermeneutical system. Yet we must wonder how this is done. The critic's ability to reject a failed art object fastidiously means he already possesses a form of critical self-awareness, but Wilde doesn't describe where this critical awareness comes from, or what its authority is. In this drama of critical formation, "fine scholarship and fastidious rejection" arrive like a *deus ex machina* in order to bring the critic's instinct under his conscious control. But if the critic in training is making instinctive claims about his aesthetic experiences, claims which are never said to be incorrect, only unconscious, why does he need or want to follow the hermeneutical system that underwrites the process of "fastidious rejection"?

What we see here then is that Wilde's decadent notion of Heredity cannot underwrite his fantasy of independent aesthetic education. Heredity allows Wilde to imagine the critic a subject with incredible interior depth and complexity, as one who has inherited an immeasurably abundant collectivity of sensations and susceptibilities, legacies that should make him an autonomous critic. His education does not depend on others, but upon introspection and processes of self-cultivation. But as soon as the critic's autonomy is established, it collapses because of the tainted model of inheritance that is Wilde's Paterian legacy.

Now, we have been attempting to situate Wilde in a tradition of liberal aesthetics. When he explores *anamnesis*, then heredity, he is attempting to write a personal myth that explains the aesthetic freedom of the individual, the capacity of the individual to have and express an aesthetic judgment that needs no authorization from any other person. But as "The Critic as Artist" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* show, the specifically Gothic and decadent nature of Wildean inheritance undermines any notion of the individual as self-governing, private, and impervious to the invasive influence of other people. This conflict between a Gothic element that is hostile to the autonomous individual and a discourse that promotes liberal individualism is not a minor or isolated confrontation in Wilde's work. Nils Claussøn argues that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is characterized and structured by this conflict itself. The novel is "disjunctively situated between two conflicting genres, each of which is related to one of the two antithetical literary and cultural discourses that the novel engages but cannot successfully integrate: namely, self-development . . . and Gothic degeneration" (342). We can agree with Claussøn's generic analysis of Wilde's novel, and extend his diagnosis of genre trouble to "The Critic as Artist," but we need not agree with the conclusions he draws from his readings. For Claussøn, *Dorian Gray* is "flawed work, riven by generic dissonances" (363). He complains that the "Gothic

plot of degeneration takes over and eventually supersedes the incompatible Paterian plot of self-development and individual liberation” (343). When Wilde allows the Gothic plot to predominate, he dashes the “progressive hopes held out by the Paterian plot of self-actualization” (362), compromising the political project Clausson believes the novel could have advanced (344). Although Clausson acknowledges that the novel is a “provocative and important work” he is clearly disappointed by it (363).

I want to eschew the dejected tone described above, a tone it is all too easy to adopt because the expectations of my project and of Clausson’s criticism often overlap. The keywords of his essay—“self-development”, “individual liberation”, “self-actualization”—all betray his fervent wish that Wilde’s text celebrate a self-possessed individual who is realizing its desires. If we expect Wilde to follow the footsteps of his fellow aesthetes Pater and Lee, we too might be disappointed by the Gothic fantasy he devises to explain innate knowledge. Lee’s Vatican child and Pater’s ideal critic, exemplified by Winckelmann, are autonomous agents who judge as they please, and who are certain that their judgments are their own. They never wonder, unlike Wilde’s critics, if “it is not our own lives that we lead, but the lives of the dead.” I do not want to dismiss Wilde’s gothic narrative as merely a disruptive element, a textual flaw he haphazardly acquired from Pater because he was not careful enough to correct it. The conflict between the gothic element and the text’s narratives of development can teach us something about aestheticist pedagogy. To illuminate this lesson, let us turn to Nancy Armstrong’s work on individualism and the fin-de-siècle resurgence of the gothic.

In *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719 – 1900*, Armstrong compares the bourgeois realist novel with the genre of romance. Her latter term is wide-ranging, but the romances she actually analyzes are all Victorian gothic novels. For her, mainstream Victorian fiction, represented by the bourgeois realist

novel, “concerned itself with the problem of how to harness the individual’s energy for social purposes” and imagined a “social body composed of individuals positioned each according to his or her worth” (105). By contrast, the late Victorian romance imagined a social collectivity in which “the boundaries distinguishing individuals no longer exist” (105). Romance plots imagine “an alien form of energy that ripples through the human aggregate,” fusing countless individuals together. Under the assault of this invasive force, the individual loses discreteness to become merely one of “many points of intensification through which ... desires circulate to form one all-encompassing and mindless mass of humanity” (105). The “individual’s private storehouse of ideas is not only infiltrated but also transformed by an alien desire that overwhelms the internal faculty of judgment” (24). Armstrong illustrate her point with *Dracula*, arguing that when the eponymous vampire “infects the individual with his blood [he] robs that person of individuality” (). When Dracula feeds his blood to his victim, his mind melds with hers and his will becomes hers; she joins a family of vampires who replicate Dracula’s desire and who attempt to bring others under his control. Armstrong could easily have used “The Critic as Artist” or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to illustrate her arguments. In Wilde’s texts, the fearsome force of heredity both constitutes and threatens the unique character of the individual. When Wilde’s aesthetic critics in training opine that “the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity making us personal and individual,” they are merely pointing out that when we use the concept of heredity to understand kinship, we may find it impossible to distinguish between what is uniquely ours and what is the resurgent trait of some forebear. Heredity reveals to us that our name is Legion; we are merely a collective of alien ancestral subjectivities.

Armstrong argues that fantastic narratives of infiltration and possession allow their readers to “take pleasure in [a] destructive creativity that temporarily overthrows

the norms of realism in order to expose its limitations as the limitations of individualism itself (135). For her, texts associated with the genre of romance are hostile to liberal individualism; they attempt to think of a world in which the ideal subject would need not be self-standing, autonomous, and afraid of melding with others in a corporate identity or community. Valorizing the vampire as an enemy that undermines individualism, Armstrong argues that if readers can bring themselves to identify with the monster and the fantastic narratives that feature it, they could learn how to reject a “realism designed to maintain the autonomy of nation, family, and individual” (139).

Making a critical move parallel to Armstrong’s, we might ask this: if Wilde’s gothic heredity threatens the borders that demarcate the aesthetic critic from other people, must that be such a bad thing? Determined to preserve the aesthetic sphere as a zone where the perceiver retained absolute authority to judge art, the aesthetes assured their followers that all people inherently possessed the attributes they needed to be self-sufficient and independent art critics. They freed their listeners from needing to consult experts for an authoritative reading of an aesthetic object. Yet when they aesthetes celebrate the critic’s self-sufficiency, they often come close to celebrating atomism. In its most paranoid form, the aesthetes’ praise of critical autonomy sounds like a rejection of all intercourse with others. To the suspicious aesthete anxiously guarding the individual’s right to expression, other people pose an ever-present threat. They may influence, change or subvert the individual’s impressions in ways he cannot detect. They may ridicule his judgment rather than respectfully disagreeing with it. Recall that when Pater grows wary about the risks other people pose, he redefines social intercourse, claiming that the essential or prototypical dialogue is the “dialogue of the mind with itself” (*Plato* 129). It is this same wariness that causes him to claim that the central business of education is to interest a young man in himself, a goal

Pater deems far more important “than ...making him interested in other people or things” (*Plato* 80). Pater confronts the danger that social interaction poses by reinforcing the borders of the self, making the individual self-sufficient and keeping other people far away from the individual. But if these strategies are the only or primary response to the threat posed by other people, the aesthetic critic cannot admit that some people will find pleasure in interacting with others as they explore the aesthetic realm. Moreover, some individuals have no desire to have a private, utterly idiosyncratic impression of an artwork. Pater believed that “in aesthetic criticism, the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (*Renaissance* xix). However, the Aesthetic Movement was home to several artistic and critical partnerships whose members represented their collaborative thinking and writing processes as a melding in which the subjective boundaries between collaborators were lost or blurred. Perhaps the most famous of these partnerships occurred between Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote poetry as if they were a single entity named Michael Field. For subjects like Bradley and Cooper who experience their full vitality as “we” not “I,” the injunction to know “one’s own impression” might be dangerously divisive, an edict that seeks to estrange one part of a whole from its mate.

Bradley and Cooper were friends with Wilde, and as they read his texts, they may have identified with Wildean characters who invoke the Gothic to describe their subjectivities as collective rather than single, as permeable rather than inviolably bounded. Yet this recognition could only have been partial. When Michael Field describes merging and collaboration, they are wholly positive processes. By contrast, the Gothic model of intersubjectivity Wilde imagines is indissociable from degeneration, monstrosity, and morbidity. These negative qualities cause Nancy Armstrong to give only qualified approval to the anti-individual politics of the late-

Victorian romance. According to her, although the romance is interested in non-individualist modes of understanding the subjectivity, because it has been developed during the hegemony of the liberal bourgeois realist novel, it cannot help but portray those modes as monstrous and ultimately unlivable. Because romance “equates the pleasure of escaping the limits of individualism with the loss of humanity itself [it] ultimately compels us to defend individualism at any cost” (135). In other words, for Armstrong, the agents that refuse autonomy in Gothic narratives are entities we cannot want to be, at least not permanently. Endowed with an inhuman and supernatural strength, they demolish the walls and structures that separate individuals; they free us from the strictures of individualism by assimilating us into their own monstrous, collective bodies. But we cannot remain alive if we are to enjoy the freedoms these Gothic agents bring.

Armstrong overstates her case. For certain subjects, the risk of becoming inhuman is not necessarily a deterrent to a particular political course. (One might think of Lee Edelman, whose queer ethics in *No Future* is grounded in the concept of becoming undead and embodying the death drive). Nevertheless, even if some of us readily identify with or become the monstrous agents of Gothic narrative, others of us cannot. We might take the Gothic elements that appear so strangely in Wilde’s pedagogical narratives as a provocation then, a challenge to find non-Gothic rhetoric and non-Gothic plots with which we could refuse liberal conceptions of individualism.

The virtue of Wilde’s work on aestheticist pedagogy is its peripatetic nature. When we read his work, we can never be satisfied with one position or one solution to a problem because his texts never settle for these resting points. To follow Wilde in quest of an answer is wearying, frustrating. However, as he refuses to give us a final answer, he models an unceasing process of critique that we can adopt in order to think more deeply about those answers that others settle upon. Wilde has no stable myth of

innate knowledge. As we have seen, he adopts, then abandons an epistemological myth based upon *anamnesis*, and his attempt to ground innate knowledge in heredity also fails. Yet Wilde's incoherent myths help to show the limits of his fellow aesthetes' projects, and in so doing can help further the ideals that he shares with them.

CHAPTER 4

Here Endeth the Lesson, or Towards an Erotics of Art

Imagine that today Pater, Wilde, or Lee were to return from the grave like one of the revenants that so often haunt aestheticist texts. Visiting the classrooms of some Oxford college—Brasenose or perhaps Magdalen—they might be appalled to find that their critical texts had become objects of formal literary study. Today, students rarely approach aestheticism's critical texts without professorial aid, yet Jonathan Freedman writes of grateful nineteenth-century readers who turned directly to aesthetic criticism in order to learn how to gather the greatest aesthetic experiences "from this artist, this natural scene, and not from that one or that one" (*Professions* 56). For these readers, the works of aesthetes such as Pater or Lee were illuminating, accessible guides to art. When *The Renaissance* first appeared, one reviewer praised its "considerable learning and acumen" but assured readers that Pater did not "parade" his intelligence in his pages, which contained "not a single sign of more than common study or of recondite knowledge" (Stephens 80). Nowadays, aestheticist guidebooks are read as texts that demand their own guides. The aesthetic conventions that govern them have made them puzzling artistic masterpieces in their own right. As common use of English has changed and as standards governing critical and argumentative style have shifted over the last century, the style of aestheticist textbooks has arguably become more difficult for its readers to comprehend. Furthermore, texts like *The Renaissance*, *Belcaro* and *Intentions* have increasingly become abstruse intellectual documents. The decades have distanced contemporary audiences from the personal professional quarrels and philosophical debates in which the texts participate.

While Pater's Victorian critic believed he could be understood after merely "common study," nowadays, the critic Adam Phillips (and those like him) stresses the text's difficult nature:

The Renaissance now looks like what we have come to think of as a modernist text. It is densely self-referential: providing intermittently, an implied commentary and critique of itself. It is also, through the endless qualifications of its elaborate style, drawing attention, sometimes obtrusively, to its own medium. . . . It even includes in its first two sentences a hint about how to read it. (vii)

In Phillips' description, Pater's text is only "now" becoming comprehensible to readers through the category of modernism. Twentieth century audiences are just beginning to understand and manage the strangeness of the aestheticist textbook by categorizing it and by listing its characteristics. Despite readers' dawning understanding, the text will not be mastered with ease. The language with which it is written "obtrusively" draws the reader's attention from its arguments. Although it is "densely self-referential," as if advertising that it has some message to impart, it is ultimately coy, reticent: the critique of itself it can offer is only "implied." It will not clearly state how it wants to be read; it will only "hint" how it should be engaged. Phillips implies that only a special personality who can discern *The Renaissance's* subtextual critique, grasp its hints or overlook its distracting, ornate style. He is one of these perspicacious persons—a critic—and that is why he is writing an introduction for the Oxford World's Classics edition of Pater's text. Here then is an ironic circumstance: the very texts which argued that the people needed no guide to help them interpret aesthetic experience currently require critics who can contextualize, historicize and explicate them.

We have examined Pater, Lee, and Wilde's fantasy that art itself might come to life and aid its observers to appreciate it correctly. The idea that art itself could stir, address its viewers, and instruct them in the ways of connoisseurship allowed

aesthetes to imagine an ideal world in which experts did not reserve the final word on aesthetic judgments. This animation can never happen, but nevertheless, the aesthetes' fancy suggests practical steps we can take in order to promote the ideal they envisioned. When the aesthetic critics dream of living art that erotically engages and enlightens the observer, they are imagining a world in which intimacy with art might generate comprehension. For them, art seems like a vital thing because it is immediate. Hence Pater's Gaston de Latour craves "a poetry, as veritable, as intimately near, as corporeal, as the new faces of the hour, the flowers of the actual season" (27). Dorian Gray also experiences art as an ineludibly proximate living force. After he has first heard Lord Henry's oratory, he thinks: "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid and cruel! One could not escape from them" (21).

When we teach then, we must ask ourselves, how do we make aestheticist texts vivid and vital for our students? If texts seem to have a vitality the more "intimately near" that we can come to them, then how do we encourage our students to approach texts closely? How do we need to present the process of textual analysis in order to make intimacy with texts a prerequisite for intellectual inquiry? Once we orient students towards texts, once they have begun to scrutinize the texts, how can we defer the moment when we must interrupt their communion by interposing our critical judgments and our critical prescriptions between the readers and the text?

One name for the process of becoming intimate with a text is "close-reading." By deferring questions of sociological context, political import and aesthetic value, by diligently considering the way a text's constituent parts produce this set of meanings or negate that mode of interpretation, readers focus on the immediate impressions the text gives them. To close-read is to scrutinize the text's account of itself, to understand the text through the terms it offers readers most eagerly. If, as Pater writes, gaining knowledge of a text is like getting to know a person, the techniques of close-reading

are akin to the observational practices that acquaint us those we wish to know most deeply. Close-reading is a type of benign dismemberment, a fetishistic dissection of the text. Confronted by the plenitude of a novel or poem, we excise a few words or a passage, scrutinizing the parts in order to understand the whole. As Roland Barthes writes “To *scrutinize* means to search: I am searching the other’s body, as if I wanted to see what was inside it. . . (I am like one of those children who take a clock apart in order to find out what time is)” (71). To read closely is to enter a deeply sensuous—even erotic—relationship with cultural objects, a relationship so intimate, that readers may feel they are merging with the texts they engage. Describing her literary experiences as a young person, Eve Sedgwick captures this lovingly close union: “For me, a kind of formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects” (3).

Close-reading is not a simple or obvious approach to reading texts; students are often confused by it and resistant to learning it. When we are encouraging them to become intimate with texts, we must keep in mind technology like internet search engines and online encyclopedias. Confronted by a challenging text, students often turn to Internet tools such as Google or Wikipedia, tools that make it easy for them to locate literary criticism that will explicate baffling textual characteristics. If the text is canonical, enjoyed a recent critical vogue or is currently popular as a teaching text, students need not grapple with it in order to derive their own reading of it; they can find a wealth of online commentary that will supply them with opinions of texts to which they can subscribe. Although we must teach students to evaluate and employ the critical and theoretical arguments of others, aestheticist texts ask that readers first know their *own* impressions of the objects they engage. Non-canonical or newly recovered texts on which there is a dearth of critical material are vital to any syllabus

on aestheticism. If we introduce these underanalyzed texts alongside canonical ones and stress comparative approaches towards understanding them, students will form readings based less upon the criticism of others than upon on the immediate impressions they derive from the paired texts. For example, by contrasting Wilde's "Critic as Artist" with Lee's little discussed "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality" students might discover for themselves how an aesthete's gender affects her use of the dialogue as an pedagogical genre.

Students who have started to close-read aestheticist texts are apt to notice their intertextual and referential nature. Critical texts such as *Belcaro* and *The Renaissance* necessarily list and describe a variety of artworks. Additionally, even aestheticist novels such as *Marius the Epicurean* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* sometimes seem little more than bibliographies or museum catalogs. Aestheticist poetry follows this trend as well; each ekphrastic poem that composes Michael Field's *Sight and Song* is titled after the painting that inspired it. Observing this referential characteristic, we might argue that not only do aestheticist texts ask that their readers attend to their own formal peculiarities, they also direct their readers to become familiar with *other* works of art. For example, as if to make it easier for readers to pursue particular aesthetic experiences, Field's poems report the institutions where particular paintings can be found. If readers cannot or have not actually encountered the works to which an aestheticist text alludes, that text's argument or narrative is compromised because it is not as vividly present to the reader as it wishes to be.

Aestheticist texts imagine that their readers are Europeans who can easily visit the Grosvenor or make a grand tour of the continental museums, but contemporary students of aestheticism are not necessarily as well-placed as the texts suppose. When we teach aestheticist literature, we must devise ways for students to approximate the experience of viewing in person the objects described and catalogued by the text.

Anyone who has taught *The Renaissance* in a literature class will know that many students are quite content to read Pater's descriptions of Botticelli's Madonnas without actually looking closely at any of Botticelli's work. Even Pater's paean to La Gioconda does not cause such students to re-view the Mona Lisa; they trust that their memory of the iconic painting is all they need to understand Pater's purple passage. Luckily, technology has made it possible for us to show high quality photographs of paintings and sculpture or to play recordings of musical or theatrical performances. Many of the institutions the aesthetes were urging their readers to visit now have virtual exhibitions that are accessible through the internet. Some of the institutions in which we teach are even privileged enough to have art museums and library archives that possess works by artists the aesthetes championed. Close-reading is the fundamental skill that allows students to examine the form of aestheticist literature, to see *how* aestheticist texts say what they say. But if we are to make what aestheticist texts say seem vibrant, we must also make *what* they say seem more immediate to the student. The interdisciplinary study of aestheticism ensures that students experience the process of reading literature in the most sensuous way possible, in a way that engages the senses most fully by giving them a superabundance of material to act upon.

The aesthetes explicitly argued that if their readers could experience the artwork that inspired their criticism and fictional narratives, readers would better understand those texts. For example, Vernon Lee insists that her critical ideas about aesthetics "have come mainly in the presence of works of art" (6), emphasizing that thought is generated and enlivened by setting—the "real, living, shimmering setting" one occupies as part of a particular public at a specific place and time (6). When she describes her ideas separate from the setting occupied by the artwork, she evokes death. "In order to endure, they had, these ideas, to be removed out of all this living

frame-work; to be written down . . . to be made quite lifeless and inorganic and dry and stiff” (6). Convinced that “art questions should always be discussed in the presence of some definite work of art” Lee experiments with her critical style in order to approximate for the reader some sense of the vivacious, sensuous objects that inspired her. She crafts *Belcaro* as an artificial setting “which should in a manner be equivalent to that original real setting of place and moment, and individuality and digression: equivalent as an acre of garden, with artificial rocks, streams, groves, grottoes, places for losing your way, flower-beds etc, is equivalent for all the country you can travel over in five or six years” (8).

As they languorously unfold their arguments, *Belcaro*’s lengthy, syntactically complex sentences slow readers, who must amble through the text, just as they might amble through an art gallery’s chambers. Having retarded readers’ progress, Lee confronts them with such a surfeit of polished writing—adjective upon *recherché* adjective, parenthetical remarks, strings of appositives—that they can hardly avoid examining the aesthetic qualities of her own writing. And yet, as she writes, her primary goal is not to call attention to her own text as a work of art, but to direct readers towards sensuous representations of other artists’ work. Those who frequent museums may have desultorily followed labyrinthine paths through this and that room, only to be arrested by the sight of a painting that dominates a wall or a lone bust that is spotlight in the darkness of an antechamber. Just as readers are about to become frustrated by Lee’s cheerful digressiveness and verbosity, she rewards their patience by displaying an absorbing natural scene or aesthetic object; *Belcaro* teems with ekphrastic passages that detail art objects for the mind’s eye.

Lee’s ekphrastic criticism demonstrates how we may modify critical style in order to promote intimacy between our students and the art objects they observe. She suggests is that it is not enough for criticism to direct the reader towards a particular

art object. Although criticism wishes the reader to come into contact with the artwork itself, this encounter may not be immediately possible. In advance of the aesthetic rendez-vous, criticism must provide its reader with the sense of the object that is to come; it must perform and evoke the attributes of the art object as best it can with the resources of literary style. Some contemporary criticism endeavors to do this and it deserves incorporation into courses on aestheticism. In *Against Interpretation*, styling herself as heir to Wilde and Pater, Susan Sontag calls herself a “pugnacious aesthete” and argues: “The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us” (13). Therefore, criticism should “supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art” (13). In calling for this descriptive criticism, Sontag might have in mind Wilde’s definition of the critic as “he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things” (*Dorian Gray* 4); Lee’s evocative criticism is merely one means of achieving this Wildean translation, and contemporary critics might emulate or modify when they need to present texts for analysis.

Aestheticist texts ask teachers to minimize their role in the educational process. Rather than represent themselves as authorities to be consulted for the right interpretation of a painting, or the proper theory with which to understand a novel, teachers should train students to consult aesthetic objects themselves for the answers to questions about art. However, when we teach about aestheticism, we may find that our very field of study drives us to assert ourselves as experts.

Many teachers observe a discrepancy between the level of expertise they believe themselves to have and the level of expertise attributed to them by students, the subjects who wish to know. Many teachers are troubled because they feel they must instruct without possibly being able to know everything about their objects of

study. However, the discursive boundaries of certain fields of study may cause some of us to feel these anxieties more acutely than others. As Andrew Eastham observes, scholarship and pedagogy that concern Aestheticism must be interdisciplinary:

It's reasonable to assume that any teacher working in this area has at some point had to temporarily forge an intellectual identity well outside the confines of their research: it is arguably simply not enough to be a literary scholar to teach Aestheticism and Decadence, and we may have to temporarily don the mask of the critic of painting, architecture, music or dance. (Eastham, "Teaching" n.p.).

For Eastham, since Aestheticism and Decadence are fields that encompass "such a vast array of European literary and artistic reference" teachers "cannot hope to master all contexts" (n.p.). He lists the myriad theoretical sources that inform the work of just a few aesthetes, implicitly asking his readers if they are thoroughly conversant with "Kant, Schiller, Fichte and Hegel, British Empiricism, Spencer's Sociology and the Natural Sciences" (n.p.). Even if teachers claim that they are "master of these intellectual traditions, another scholar will claim that late Victorian periodicals" or some other source are vital for explicating aestheticism Eastham concludes, "Any teacher thus faces a choice; do we limit the archive to a space where the teacher retains a safe grasp on academic authority, or do we open our study beyond the borders of our knowledge – allow for a sea of textual echoes that we will never quite have control over?" (n.p.)

Addressing his colleagues, Eastham presents the issue of delimiting the pedagogical archive as a set of choices that primarily affect the instructor's sense of control. We should remember that when mastery-seeking teachers shrink the archive's perimeter, *students* lose access to texts. They miss the chance to encounter texts that have been abjected from the archive and they lose direct routes of access to the texts and bodies of knowledge that *are* being taught. There would be little point in attempting to maintain academic authority if that mastery could not be ostentatiously

performed and therefore, teachers who shore up authority by merely teaching what they already know well guard their authority jealously. They interpose their textual interpretations between the student and the text, squelching or deferring learners' opportunity to develop and assert their own independent, authoritative readings of texts.

Teachers who are daunted by the vast disciplinary field of Aestheticism should remember that they need not be the sole informative source in the classroom. Students bring with them knowledge that is often different or even more advanced than that of their teachers. When they are trained to read carefully and articulate their points of view critically, students can become co-teachers, covering areas that we are less familiar with. As teachers, we must quell our craving for mastery. The difficulty of this renunciation can be seen in Eastham's remarks on teaching. Although he desires educational situations in which teachers would not need to base their authority to teach on a masterful omniscience, the way he describes his ideal educational process works against the pedagogical possibilities he works to realize.

Eastham recounts "being forced to dissimulate a specialty in fin de siècle visual culture to a mixed group of Fine Art and Literature students." He then argues that when teachers assume their forged identity "a pact emerges – if the students are implicitly aware that we are learning on the job, we hope for their generosity in allowing for a shared discovery. This kind of experience is integral to an area where we cannot hope to master all contexts, especially since British Aestheticism and Decadence incorporates such a vast array of European literary and artistic reference." Eastham's pact should create the conditions for students to find intimacy with texts. If students are no longer obliged to regard teachers as experts or to privilege teachers' critical commentary over their own understanding, they can engage aestheticist texts directly, more closely, which is what those texts desire. Yet the promise of Eastham's

pact is not fully realized in his comments on pedagogy. Although he acknowledges that aestheticism is a field in which one “cannot hope to master all contexts” he still seems to believe that it is necessary to “dissimulate” mastery. Why does he not simply divulge to his students that he is not a specialist, in visual culture? In writing his account of teaching, why does he not discredit the idea that teachers must project the aura of expertise? After all, he believes that students are capable of a “generosity” that allows them to conceive the pedagogical relationship as an intellectual partnership between student and teacher, rather than a system in which the teacher instills knowledge. Why not call on that generosity as soon as the pedagogical relationship begins? Eastham only *hopes* for the students’ goodwill, never suggesting that it can be appealed to directly or that it might be a quality to develop in students. Furthermore, he only hopes for this good-naturedness in the event that students are “implicitly aware” of his imposture. In his account, the egalitarian educational scenario of teacher and student discovering knowledge together emerges *only* because the teacher suspects that he can be exposed as less than omniscient. By contrast the aestheticist texts of this study imagine the “shared discovery” of learning as an inherently desirable goal. Pater praises the Socrates who professes his ignorance and therefore “does not propose to teach anything,” but who is willing “‘along with you’ and if you concur ‘to consider to seek out what the thing may be’” (*Plato* 160). Lee repeatedly refuses the title of the all-knowing professor, preferring to imagine herself as a schoolboy who has been able to learn some things, but who is eager to confer with “his fellow pupils who may have understood as much of the lessons as himself, but have in all probability understood different portions or in different ways” (*Belcaro* 5). As these examples show, the aesthetes’ ideal of intellectual fellowship presumes that in the quest for knowledge each fellow has close contact with the objects or texts that will reveal knowledge.

As students seek knowledge in our classrooms, they should be guided by the following protocol. First, they should consult the texts they study, then their own experience and that of their peers, and then they should turn to our expertise. This does not mean that teachers should not intervene to correct the errors that students necessarily make when they are reading a text, but students must be taught not to rely upon the teacher's guidance to save them from making mistakes. Mistakes are part of the risk we take when we expose ourselves directly to the text. To impart this protocol, we can develop pedagogical exercises that center around textual engagement and which defer the moment when the teacher offers an interpretation. For instance, the week before I first lecture on an aestheticist text, I ask my students to select and close-read a passage from the text. Then, they use their close reading to generate a question about the text, posting both the textual analysis and question to an online message board. Finally, I ask students to post an online response to at least one of their peers' concerns, basing that response in a close-reading of the text. While I refer to these postings in seminars, and use them to steer group discussion, I refrain from responding to students on the message board itself. In this way I establish that space as a zone where students must engage intimately with the text, using it, not me, to support their arguments for their peers.

It is all too easy to think of aestheticist texts as inaccessible tomes, texts that one can only appreciate by appealing to a wise expert who holds the key to these arcane works. But it is clear that this is not the only way these texts present themselves. They wish that readers will pick them up and dare to get close to them. They promise us that they will teach us how to understand them. Those of us who teach on aestheticism will surely find our jobs easier if we stop presenting ourselves as intermediaries or interpreters for aestheticist texts. Instead, we need to figure out how

to foster intimacy between aestheticist texts and their readers, intimacy that will produce greater understanding, intimacy that will allow these texts to divulge their own secrets.

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