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Publication Date

2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Erotic Negativity and Victorian Aestheticism, 1864-1896

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Dustin Edward Friedman

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Erotic Negativity and Victorian Aestheticism, 1864-1896

by

Dustin Edward Friedman

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Joseph Bristow, Chair

What is the relationship between erotic desire and aesthetic contemplation? This question was central to three of British aestheticism's most notable theorist-practitioners: Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee (Violet Paget). "Erotic Negativity" contends that Pater, Wilde, and Lee exercised Hegel's concept of "the negative" to describe the relationship between aesthetic experience and erotic response. The aesthete, when he or she gazes upon homoerotic aesthetic representation, undergoes a shock that is at once both intellectual and visceral: this is the revelation of an erotic desire, previously hidden as a determinate absence in the mind, which shatters and radically reconfigures the structure of consciousness itself. This process, which Hegel terms the "encounter with the negative," elicits not only greater self-knowledge, but also critical insight into the cultural and historical significance of the aesthetic object. "Erotic Negativity" thus demonstrates that the most profound critiques of modernity must ground

themselves in the reflective freedom that is created by artistically mediated experiences of erotic desire.

Chapter one discusses Walter Pater's early essays, up to and including *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, as the Aesthetic Movement's most elaborate and influential explication of negative homoeroticism. Chapter two examines Pater's post-*Renaissance* writings, such as "A Study of Dionysus," *Marius the Epicurean*, and *Plato and Platonism*. In these works, Pater turned to early anthropology to show how erotic violence, rather than undermining the humanist subject, actually enables the creation of that subject through an aesthetically mediated homoerotic encounter with the negative. Chapter three discusses Oscar Wilde's novella "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," which advances a homoerotic reading of Shakespeare's sonnets to express the insight he gains from the theory of erotic negativity: namely, that language's limited ability to capture the "truth" of erotic desire need not undermine the fundamental perdurability of individual subjectivity. Finally, chapter four shows how Vernon Lee's essay "Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art" and her fantastic tales "Oke of Okehurst" and "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" create a feminist revision of masculine homoerotic negativity by presenting women's supernatural encounters with history as erotically charged experiences that create new forms of feminine sexual subjectivity.

The dissertation of Dustin Edward Friedman is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2012

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents,

Leo and Ann Friedman

Frank and Judy Mitchell

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Acknowledgements

Although Oscar Wilde may have said, “Art is the most intense form of individualism the world has known,” a dissertation is decidedly not Art. Although mine is the only name appearing on the title page, this project has come into existence through the efforts of many. Words can hardly express the gratitude I have for my advisor, Joe Bristow. The quality of his teaching, the time and effort he spends on his students’ professional and personal wellbeing, and his high scholarly standards make him not only a superlative mentor, but also an inspiring professional role model. Whatever success I may have attained in graduate school is almost as much the result of Joe’s care and advice as it is my own efforts, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Whenever I began to struggle with this project, I could rely on Jonathan Grossman’s seemingly inexhaustible energy and enthusiasm for motivation. Besides giving perhaps the most incisive and detailed comments I have ever received on my writing, Jonathan pays his students the highest compliment possible: he takes their ideas seriously. Anne Mellor deserves thanks for helping to get my first article into print, and for her extensive knowledge of the German philosophical tradition, which helped me to sharpen a number of the claims made in this dissertation. Eleanor Kaufman’s mastery of modern French thought provided a decisive intervention at an early stage of this project, and Johanna Drucker kindly stepped in at a later moment to offer her expertise in aesthetic theory. I am also thankful for the help of Chris Chism, Helen Deutsch, Arthur Little, Chris Looby, Chris Mott, Sianne Ngai, Felicity Nussbaum, and Amy Richlin for their guidance throughout my time at UCLA.

The writing of this dissertation would not have been possible without ample material support. The English department at UCLA has been incredibly generous with its resources, financial and otherwise, and the efforts of its staff (especially Jeanette Gilkison and Mike

Lambert) have always ensured that my day-to-day life runs smoothly. A dissertation-year fellowship from the Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies sponsored my research into the Wilde archive at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, a task that was helped immensely by the work of Scott Jacobs and Carol Sommer. I would also like to thank the department of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies for extending their support in times of need.

I would never have been able to get through this process without the support and encouragement of my friends. Lara-Beye Molina has been a constant presence in my life since our first year of college, and ever since then, I have relied on her keen appreciation of the absurd to help me through the trials of academic life. Betsy Donaldson's friendship has been vital since our first days in the graduate program, and although she has moved on to bigger and better things, our shared enjoyment of the campy, the outré, and the bizarre have cemented a lifelong bond. Patrick Keilty's intensity and exuberance have been a bracing intellectual influence, and morsels of our conversations about sexuality, gender, and philosophy are sprinkled throughout these pages. I would also like to thank Noelle Chao, Noah Comet, Vivian Davis, Matt Dubord, Beth Goodhue, Laura Haupt, Neil Hultgren, Val Popp, Sam See, Maureen Shay, Erin Suzuki, Anne Stiles, and Dennis Tyler for their friendship and camaraderie.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Leo and Ann Friedman, and Frank and Judy Mitchell. The boundless love they gave me from the very first days of my life has given me the confidence necessary to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. I owe my parents a debt of gratitude that can never properly be repaid. Throughout my life I have drawn inspiration from my mother, Gail Mitchell. Her wit, intellect, and fortitude have been a beneficial influence for as long as I can remember, and her good humor continues to help me

keep things in proper perspective. My father, Richard Friedman, and my stepmother, Carolyn Johnson, have always been the bedrock of my support. Their constant encouragement and love have seen me through the most difficult moments of this journey. I would also like to express affection for my amusing and endearing siblings: Ken Ansbro, Lindsay Johnson, and Aaron, Joel, and Leah Friedman. Finally, I want to offer my utmost gratitude and thanks to Karim Shah, whose influence shows on every page of this dissertation. The amount of happiness he brings into my life is too much to measure, and his laughter and love fill all of my days with joy. Without him, none of this would have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation argues that British aestheticism constituted a radical intervention in the history of aesthetic thought by considering the philosophical implications of erotic experience. Aestheticism, a late nineteenth-century cultural movement consisting of writers and artists who insisted on art's intrinsic value apart from any moral, didactic, or utilitarian function, insisted on the vital relationship between artistic experience and homoerotic desire. In order to portray this relationship between art and eros, I argue, the aesthetes turned to the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel, of which they had extensive direct knowledge, and his concept of "the negative."

As this dissertation demonstrates, the writings of aestheticism's most notable and influential theorist-practitioners—Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee—display a profound knowledge of the tradition of idealist aesthetic philosophy stemming from Plato, including Immanuel Kant's argument for aesthetic autonomy in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Yet these writers are equally concerned with providing artistic representations of erotic desire, especially between members of the same sex. Critics have long struggled to reconcile these sexual and philosophical aspects of aestheticism. As I show in chapter one, this intellectual impasse has not only been due to aestheticism's homophobic reception in the academy, but also because literary scholars reiterate a traditional discursive opposition between eroticism and aesthetics: either the erotic becomes sublimated into an idealized appreciation of aesthetic form, or the language of aesthetics is merely a code used to express otherwise unspeakable forms of desire.

This dissertation moves beyond the conceptual divide between intellectual history and sexuality studies by reimagining the terms in which the Aesthetic Movement's engaged with the history of aesthetic thought. I contend that the aesthetes exercised the idealist concept of "the

negative” to describe the relationship between aesthetic experience and erotic response. The negative finds its most famous articulation in the works of Hegel, whose aesthetic philosophy decisively influenced the theories of Pater, Wilde, and Lee. Distinct from the social and psychic forms of negativity described in recent queer theory, Hegelian negativity explains how systems develop without the introduction of noumenal elements that would exist beyond the limits of the system. Specifically, Hegel defines negation as an obstacle encountered on the path towards self-development. This development occurs through the disintegration of subjectivity, which allows for the recreation of consciousness through the reconfiguration of knowledge already immanent within the mind.

Thus the aesthetic critic, when he gazes upon the distinctly masculine beauty of an ancient Greek sculpture, or when she reads a supernatural tale featuring a ghostly *femme fatale*, undergoes a shock that is at once both intellectual and visceral: this is the revelation of an erotic desire, previously hidden as a determinate absence in the mind, which shatters and radically reconfigures the very structure of consciousness itself. In the words of Hegel, “the life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. [...] Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.”¹ This specifically eroticized encounter with the negative leads not only to greater self-knowledge, but also to greater critical insight into the cultural and historical significance of the aesthetic object. This phenomenon, which I term “erotic negativity,” changes our understanding not only of the Aesthetic Movement’s preoccupation with homoerotic desire, but also, as I show, the theoretical framework through which we comprehend queer sexualities. Although queer

theorists have argued that homophobic oppression lies at the very heart of queer identity, I show how aestheticism harnessed homoeroticism's transgressive force to respond creatively to its intellectual-historical situation.

While the Victorian critical mainstream relied on the precept that aesthetic judgments derive from a universally applicable structure of reason insisting on sameness, the aesthetes showed that the most profound critiques of modernity are grounded in a reflective freedom that is enabled by artistically mediated experiences of sexual difference. For example, in October 1867, the noted critic and philosopher James Hutchinson Stirling published the essay "De Quincey and Coleridge upon Kant" in the recently established liberal periodical, the *Fortnightly Review*. Two years prior, Stirling had written *The Secret of Hegel* (1865), perhaps the most significant publication in the dissemination of Hegel's philosophy in Britain.² Stirling calls attention to the "dreamy misapprehensions" and "strange misinterpretations" characterizing Samuel Taylor Coleridge's relationship to Kantian thought.³ Whereas "the emotional, the imaginative, the rhetorical, does not exist in Kant; he has no sallies of wit, no novelties of expression, no charms of manner, to attract in his works," Coleridge speaks of him "not in intelligence, but in the air; as it were, afloat, too, in a canoe of mere literary balance."⁴ Stirling goes on to assert that in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge "flows on in an endless prosing and prosiness—on and on, and round and round—his topics fancy and imagination [...]," misguidedly writing of "Kant and Schelling [...] as if supporting a mighty, a something precious, mystic, unapproachable, of profound import, of prophetic power" rather than recognizing what Stirling believes to be Kant's obvious support of an orthodox and universalist Christian theological framework.⁵

Yet one year prior to the publication of Stirling's article, *Westminster Review* published an unsigned review article on "Coleridge's Writings" in January of 1866. The piece was authored by a young fellow of Brasenose College named Walter Pater, who would soon be recognized as one of the intellectual and spiritual founders of the Aesthetic Movement in Britain. When he revised this piece for inclusion in the essay collection *Appreciations* (1889), Pater included the assertion that "it is in [Coleridge's] theory art-criticism that he comes nearest to principles of permanent truth and importance," declaring that in his early writings "we may discern the power [...] of that voluptuousness, which is connected perhaps with his appreciation of the intimacy, the almost mystical communion of touch, between nature and man."⁶ Yet Coleridge lost this "intimacy" when he attempted "to introduce that spiritual philosophy, as represented by the more transcendental parts of Kant, and by Schelling, into all subjects, as a system of reason in them, one and ever identical with itself, however various the matter through which it diffused," a philosophy that represented an "enthusiasm [...] in which he was certainly far from uniformly at his best."⁷

Stirling and Pater both criticize Coleridge, but for very different reasons. Stirling takes Coleridge to task for misunderstanding and misrepresenting Kantian idealism through excessive attention to the "endless prosing and prosiness" of his own overwrought literary style, while Pater castigates Coleridge for throwing over his literary sensibilities and provocative aesthetic theories in favor of the abstractions and abstruseness of Kantian thought. While the stakes of their criticisms appear fairly straightforward— Stirling arguing for interpretive fidelity over poetic prolixity, and Pater arguing for the importance of aesthetic sensations over philosophical abstractions—it is difficult to ignore the intense sensuality of Pater's language. He claims that it is specifically the "voluptuousness" and natural "intimacy" of Coleridge's poetry that stand in

opposition to Kantian impulse to be “one and ever identical with itself,” despite the irreducible heterogeneity of existence. While Pater’s description says nothing explicit about sexual matters, he ascribes philosophical importance to the specifically erotic quality of aesthetic experience: for the aesthetes, the sensuality of art stands in antithesis to the Victorian critical mainstream’s demand for aesthetic sameness.

My definition of aestheticism thus broadly follows that of Jonathan Freedman, who asserts that the Aesthetic Movement was “a response to the disintegration of every possible form of synthesis or ground of belief that so conspicuously marks virtually all forms of high-cultural discourse in late Victorian England.”⁸ While Morse Peckham and Ruth Z. Temple have suggested jettisoning the term “aestheticism” altogether due to its misleading imprecision, Freedman asserts that the British Aesthetic Movement can be defined by its expression of “a complicated vision, which seeks to explore the experience of fragmentation, loss, and disintegration without necessarily giving up the possibility of reuniting those shards.”⁹ Aestheticism thus represents “the exploration of cultural contradiction—but without abandoning the option of contradicting contradiction itself [...]”¹⁰

My designation of the British Aesthetic Movement’s chronological span also roughly follows that of Freedman. I begin with Pater’s criticism and fiction of the 1860s and 1870s, proceed to examine the works of Wilde and Lee throughout the 1880s and 1890s, and conclude with Vernon Lee’s public disavowal of aestheticism in 1896, one year after Oscar Wilde’s trials. Similarly, Freedman argues, “the concept of aestheticism is appropriately derived from Pater’s work” of the 1860s, due to its “ability, inclination, [and] desire to hold onto contradictory assertions without giving up either their contradictoriness or the wish somehow to unify them.”¹¹ This dialectical impulse continues through “the generation of the 1880’s and 1890’s, with its

intensely contradictory vision and hesitant privileging of a newly demarcated aesthetic realm as that sphere in which the most crucial issues of the moment could be played out most fully.”

While aspects of the aestheticist project would certainly continue into the twentieth century, providing inspiration to modernist writers such as W.B. Yeats, Henry James, Ronald Firbank, Djuna Barnes, and Wallace Stevens, I concur with Freedman that modernist generation of the 1920s and 1930s, “with its mandarin self-assurance and aesthetic certitude,” is a far cry from aestheticism’s embrace of dialectical contradiction: especially, as I argue, its embrace of negativity.¹²

Negation and the Victorian Hegel

This dissertation demonstrates that the aesthetes crucially deployed the concept of “negativity” (or, alternatively, “negation” or “the negative”) in their discussions and representations of same-sex desire. G.W.F. Hegel elaborated the modern theory of negation throughout his philosophical *oeuvre*, most notably in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the *Science of Logic* (1812-1816), and *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835/1842).¹³ Hegel’s philosophy extends and revises Kant’s assertion that that we cannot know things in themselves, and that objects of knowledge conform to our faculties of representation, by arguing that even the supposed immediacy of the subject-object relationship is illusory. Hegel maintains that, because immediate perception lacks the certainty of immediacy itself, a complete philosophical system of experience must be elaborated.¹⁴

Hegel’s metaphysical system thus elaborates a theory of the development of consciousness consisting of three dialectical stages: Abstract, Negative, and Concrete.¹⁵ When consciousness is initially posited as the “abstract,” it is flawed due to its being untested, removed from the hustle and bustle of reality. Subsequently, it encounters the negative (or, in a different

idiom, undergoes the “labor of the negative”), the arduous process of trial, error, and experience that the abstract undergoes through its being in the world. In order to transform into the concrete, however, the negation must undergo the negation of the negation, which Hegel also calls the *Aufhebung* (often translated in English as “sublation”). This is the moment when the essentially destructive procedures of the negative become creative, through the rearrangement and reincorporation of the now fragmented abstract into a new idea, i.e. the concrete. Once the concrete comes into existence, however, the entire process begins again, with the concrete taken as the new abstract. As the British Idealist philosopher Bernard Bosanquet describes it in his late-Victorian summary of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*: “[e]very positive existence, in a progressive evolution, passes over into its negation, which then necessarily makes way for a further positive result, including both the earlier positive and the negative.”¹⁶ Negation thus explains how a system develops without the introduction of noumenal elements that somehow exist beyond the outer limits of the system (as Kant would have it), with negativity functioning as the motor driving the movement toward truth.

Subsequent to Hegel, negation has had an active life in critical and cultural theory throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Diana Coole has shown, however, “negativity” has not often been granted sustained philosophical attention on its own terms. As it has come to signify, in the parlance of modern critical theory, “the restlessness that characterizes all positive forms,” negativity has become synonymous with concepts such as “dialectics, non-identity, difference, *différance*, the invisible, the semiotic, the virtual, the unconscious, will to power, [and] the feminine.”¹⁷ While Coole distinguishes two ways in which theorists have figured negativity, one “postmodern/poststructural” and the other “dialectical” in the tradition of

Marx, she makes clear that these modern invocations of the term often challenge or refute outright the concept's Hegelian legacy.¹⁸

Although I will make occasional reference to these later philosophers of negativity throughout this dissertation, my primary interest is in the aesthetes' engagement with negativity in the context of Hegel's critical reception in Victorian Britain. I contend that the aesthetes advanced the often unsystematic examinations of Hegel's aesthetics offered in belletristic writings throughout the nineteenth century by synthesizing it with the more rigorous accounts of German Idealism produced by professional philosophers during the late-Victorian period. Kirk Willis has identified five distinct yet overlapping channels through which Hegel's philosophy was introduced to Britain during the Victorian era: discussions of German literature and aesthetic theory, theological studies of the "Higher Criticism" of the Bible coming from Germany (including, most notably, the discussion of Hegel in the introduction to the translation of David Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) made by Marian Evans [George Eliot] in 1846), academic studies of modern German philosophy, discussions of German historical scholarship and theory, and studies of contemporary Prussian (and after 1871, German) politics.¹⁹

Hegel first became known in Britain through early nineteenth-century efforts to promote German literature and culture, beginning with the publication of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in 1817.²⁰ By the 1830s, "propagandists for the serious study of German literature" such as Thomas Carlyle, J.H. Stirling, J.G. Lockhart, John Mitchell Kemble, J.S. Blackie, and George Moir began making scattered references Hegel in their reviews. Although they agreed that Hegel was an "immense influence" on German literature, these authors were often vague about what, exactly, that influence was.²¹ The first article to address any aspect of Hegelian thought, George Henry Lewes' review of "Hegel's Aesthetics," did not appear until

1842. Lewes's article, however, is famously obtuse regarding the specifics of the *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*. He includes the confession that "we neither understand every part of Hegel's *Aesthetic* nor do we agree generally with German philosophy," and he does not discuss Hegel until the final quarter of the essay.²² Willis notes, however, that "Lewes's choice of the *Aesthetik* as the means of introducing Hegelian thought into Britain was carefully calculated" because "it complemented the growing British fascination with German culture and might therefore have been expected to provoke the serious study of a wide range of Hegelian thought." Although his essay did not unleash a flood of interest in Hegel, Lewes was correct in his prediction that it was Hegel's aesthetic theories that would prove to be of most interest to a British audience, due to the rising popularity of German literature. For the next half-century, discussions of Hegel in the major general interest periodicals were mostly limited to his aesthetic doctrines and theories.²³ Many of these discussions appeared in the *Westminster Review*, a periodical known for its progressive literary, philosophical, and political views and which also, significantly, published Pater's early essays on "Coleridge" and "Winckelmann."

It was academic philosophy, however, that proved to be the most thorough and influential source for the dissemination of Hegelian thought in nineteenth-century Britain. Beginning in the late 1820s and continuing through the 1840s, scattered references to Hegel began appearing in the writings of philosophers such as Robert Ferguson, William Hamilton, and J.D. Morrell.²⁴ Although these allusions were generally less than comprehensive and often quite critical of idealism, interest in Hegel among professional philosophers grew steadily throughout the 1850s and early 1860s, with more sympathetic accounts appearing in works by H.L. Mansel, Edward Dowden, Shadworth Hodgson, J. F. Ferrier, and Benjamin Jowett.²⁵

Yet according to Willis, “[t]he most important contribution to the popularization and understanding of Hegelian thought in mid-Victorian Britain” was J.H. Stirling’s *The Secret of Hegel* (1865), an extended explication and polemical defense of Hegel’s philosophical system. Although “[t]he availability of an English-language introduction to the leading tenets of Hegelian thought naturally did much to prompt the expansion of British interest in philosophical idealism,” however, its ascendance to philosophical supremacy in the final quarter of the century can only be explained by its superlative ability to respond to the intellectual anxieties of the late-Victorian period.²⁶ Beginning in the 1860s, Willis finds a growing sense of intellectual stagnancy in British philosophy, which many younger thinkers attributed to the intellectual barrenness of the empiricism that had dominated Oxford and Cambridge for nearly a century. Consequently, this generation of philosophers looked to continental idealism to reinvigorate British philosophical discourse. In distinction from the focus on aesthetics that marked Hegel’s reception in the periodical press, Willis argues that much of idealism’s appeal for professional philosophers derived from the hope that it “might in some manner provide either a doctrine of religious consolation or an ethic of social duty”: “By offering its own brand of secular transcendentalism and spirituality as well as its unique mechanism of intellectual and historical evolution,” Willis states, “Hegelian thought proved especially appealing to many British students schooled in Darwinian controversies and prepared to forgive the excesses of Straussian theology and to accept the evidences of biblical criticism.”²⁷ In the words of J. H. Stirling, “the true result of the latest philosophy—the true result of Kant and Hegel—is, that knowledge and belief coalesce in a lucid union, that to reason as to faith there is but one religion, one God, and One Redeemer.”²⁸

Due to its perceived ability to assuage the moral and spiritual uncertainties of the period, Hegelian idealism dominated professional philosophy in Britain from the 1870s until the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁹ The three generations of philosophers who came of age during this period became known as the “British Idealists.”³⁰ Some of the most notable philosophers of this school included T.H. Green and David Caird (of the first generation), F.H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet (of the second generation), and R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott (of the third generation). Of these, Green was perhaps the most renowned and influential philosopher and political theorist both inside and outside Oxford and Cambridge during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In addition to his academic career as Whyte’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, Green was an active promoter of liberal ideas both in his philosophy and his political activism. He delivered the Hegelian *Lecture on Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract* in 1861, which historians consider a major influence shaping liberal political policy during the late Victorian era. In addition, Green campaigned for common citizenship during the passage of the Second Reform Bill.³¹ Mary Augusta Ward dedicated her epoch-defining *Robert Elsmere* (1888) to Green, who also served as the model for the main character’s mentor, Henry Grey.³² Ward’s novel of religious doubt was one of the most controversial and, by most reckonings, one of the best-selling novels of the Victorian period. Henry James called it “not merely an extraordinarily successful novel; it was, as reflected in contemporary conversation, a momentous public event.”³³

Ward’s husband, T.H. Ward, was a colleague of Pater’s at Brasenose College, and Mary Augusta was a close friend of Pater, as well as the author of a notable review of *Marius the Epicurean* in 1885.³⁴ Pater, in turn, wrote a review of *Robert Elsmere* in 1888. Although Pater never explicitly mentions Green in this essay (nor, indeed, in any of his writings), Kit Andrews

notes that, given the personal and professional context of this review, “neither Pater nor his informed audience could fail to note that one of the era’s major intellectuals was indirectly passing judgment on another.”³⁵ Pater slyly references Green in his discussion of Ward’s ability to bring out the “so well-known grey and green of college and garden,” before going on to criticize “the high-pitched Grey” for his expression of “the purely negative action of the scientific spirit” that leads Robert Elsmere to give up his faith in the Church of England.³⁶ For Andrews, Pater’s review of *Elsmere* is one moment of contact between two notable Oxford figures whose careers paralleled each other in many ways:

Green went up to Balliol in 1855; Pater, three years younger than Green, began his studies at Queen’s College in 1858. As exceptional students, both caught the eye of Benjamin Jowett, Oxford’s dominant intellectual figure at mid-century, and the major catalyst for the Victorian academic reception of German Idealism. Under Jowett’s influence, Green and Pater learned German and devoted their long vacations to the intense reading of Kant, Fichte, Schiller, and Hegel. Both joined the elite Oxford essay society Old Mortality (Green five years before Pater), characterized by its progressive politics and German philosophical bent, where they heard each other deliver some of their earliest essays.³⁷

Although Green was renowned in the sphere of professional philosophy, and Pater in the world of letters—two realms that were becoming increasingly distinct in the late nineteenth century—both thinkers inhabited the same social and intellectual *milieu* throughout most of their careers. Pater owed his fellowship at Brasenose to his knowledge of German Idealism, and “he regularly lectured on philosophy from the early 1860s till near his death in 1894, precisely the decades when the Oxford Hegelians came to dominate the teaching of philosophy in Great Britain.”³⁸

Although Hegel's influence on Pater has been well documented, this legacy has rarely been considered in the larger historical and cultural context of late-Victorian intellectual discourse.³⁹ Pater's writings, and the writings of the aesthetes more generally, synthesized two important strands of Hegelianism in late-Victorian intellectual life: general literary interest in Hegel's aesthetic theories, and professional philosophy's concern with his system of metaphysics. Much the same could be said for the writings of Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee. Wilde's attendance at Oxford from 1874 to 1878 and his mentorship in art-criticism by Pater guaranteed his deep engagement with Hegelian philosophy. The idealist strain in Wilde's writing was recognized as early as 1892, when Max Nordau, in his infamous study *Degeneration*, classed Wilde with Nietzsche as "egomaniacal individualists who had willfully distorted Hegel's idealism."⁴⁰ Additionally, critics have long recognized the signal importance of Hegel's thought within Wilde's aesthetics. Major literary critics of the early twentieth century, such as William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and René Wellek, recognized Wilde's aesthetics to be part of the Hegelian idealist tradition, and Rodney Shewan has discussed the Hegelian elements within Wilde's notion of "soul."⁴¹ More recently, Philip E. Smith and Michael Helfand's edition of his Oxford "Commonplace Book" has established once and for all Wilde's detailed knowledge of Hegel's works as mediated by the British Idealists at Oxford.⁴² And while Vernon Lee lacked the credentials of her university-trained male peers, her education in Germany, her deep interest in aesthetic philosophy, and the influence of Pater led her, in the words of Christa Zorn, to "follow [Hegel's] philosophy more closely than she would admit."⁴³ As Lee claims in her introduction to *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, that she has read "a great many books about all the arts [...] from Plato to Lessing, from Reynolds to Taine, [and] from Hegel to Ruskin."⁴⁴

This dissertation shows, however, that it is the sustained attention granted to the concept of negativity that distinguishes the writings of the aesthetes from the Victorian literary and philosophical mainstream. References to negation appeared only briefly and infrequently in the decidedly incomprehensive discussions of Hegelian aesthetic theory found in Victorian periodicals, and the religious and moral concerns of the British Idealists led them to share a common emphasis on the harmonious and reconciliatory aspects of Hegel's thought, generally to the minimization or exclusion of negativity's destructive role in the dialectical process.⁴⁵ In the writings of the aesthetes, however, negativity plays a crucial role in the representation of same-sex eroticism. From Pater's discussion of art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's "romantic and fervent friendships with young men," to Wilde's speculations regarding Shakespeare's erotic obsession with the boy-actor Willie Hughes, to Vernon Lee's supernatural tales of feminine eroticism's resistance to artistic form, the logic of negativity structures the erotically charged encounter between subject and object in aestheticist writing.

Yet as I discuss below, accounts of British aestheticism have generally been uninterested in the idealist philosophical overtones found in the aesthetes' representations of same-sex eroticism, with critics such as Richard Dellamora and Linda Dowling focusing instead on the turn to classical notions of pederasty in aesthetic discourses on "Greek love" and "the new Hellenism." This lack of engagement with Hegelian negativity might seem odd, given literary criticism's enthusiastic embrace of negativity in its figurations as "dialectics, non-identity, difference, *différance*, the invisible, the semiotic, the virtual, the unconscious, will to power, [and] the feminine." Yet this reluctance to engage with the specifically Hegelian version of negativity becomes understandable when examined in the context of poststructuralist theory's hostility to Hegel, and to aesthetic philosophy more generally.

Hegel, Poststructuralism, and the Anti-Aesthetic

This dissertation goes against the grain of much twentieth- and twenty-first century literary criticism by considering aestheticism's engagement with same-sex eroticism in the context of Hegelian philosophy. While negation has occasionally received attention in literary studies, it has rarely been considered in a specifically Hegelian context. Instead, critics such as Marie Jaanus Kurrik, Sanford Budick, Wolfgang Iser, and Slavoj Žižek have brought negativity into the ambit of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought.⁴⁶ This is because, in the words of Rita Felski, "literary studies has been shaped by a strong strand of anti-Hegelianism in twentieth-century French thought." Specifically, poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Lacan have found in Hegel's philosophy "a logic of appropriation and a totalizing desire for sameness."⁴⁷

The origin of this hostility lies in the writings of philosopher Jean Hyppolite, whose radically anti-humanist interpretation of Hegel proved to be a decisive influence on the development of poststructuralist thought in France. Hyppolite, along with Alexandre Kojève, was responsible for placing Hegel at the center of postwar French intellectual life.⁴⁸ In addition, most of the major figures of the poststructuralist movement were students of Hyppolite.⁴⁹ In contrast to the Marxist readings of Hegel that dominated early twentieth-century thought, Hyppolite focused not on the dialectic, but rather on the notion of *Bildung* (development) as a process that "takes place concretely in the linguistic medium that underlies the collective interaction of human beings."⁵⁰ Hyppolite's linguistic interpretation of Hegel culminated in the influential study *Logic and Existence* (1952), which attempted to explain the dialectical synthesis between the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. According to Leonard Lawlor, "Hyppolite's non-reductionistic interpretation of the relation between the phenomenology and the logic effectively

ended the simple anthropological interpretation of Hegel popularized by Kojève before World War II”: “Because of Hyppolite, no reading of Hegel would be able to push man up to the immodest position of being the Absolute, the end of history, the source of nothingness.”⁵¹ For Hyppolite (writing under the influence of Martin Heidegger), speculative thought “will be a reduction of the human condition. The Logic’s dialectical discourse will be a discourse of Being, the *Phenomenology* having shown the possibility of bracketing man as natural *Dasein*.”⁵² Lawlor asserts that this interpretation of Hegel “fueled the fire of French anti-humanism,” and that “the concept of difference found in the philosophies of Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault would not exist without the publication of *Logic and Existence*.”⁵³

The influence of Hyppolite’s strongly anti-humanist reading of Hegel led to the explicit rejection of Hegelian thought by the major poststructuralists. In the words of Foucault, “truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. [...] If, then, more than one of us is indebted to Jean Hyppolite, it is because he has tirelessly explored, for us, and ahead of us, the path along which we may escape from Hegel.”⁵⁴ According to Jere Paul Surber, the poststructuralist turn taken by Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan was in large part motivated by their desire to reject the humanist tenets of the Hegelian system. These included his positing of the development of human subjectivity’s self-awareness as the source of all reality, truth, and being; his belief in the fundamental rationality of all cultural productions; and his understanding of history as unfolding in a unitary, coherent, and rational manner.⁵⁵ Thus, while the poststructuralists seized on negativity as a force of disruption and fragmentation, they divorced negation from the redemptive, humanist logic of Hegel’s dialectic by reconfiguring it as a form absolute difference.

The influence of poststructuralist theorists on literary criticism in the United States and the United Kingdom beginning in the late 1960s has been much discussed and well documented.⁵⁶ Their rejection of liberal humanist verities in favor of anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, and anti-universalist philosophies was one of the major intellectual forces that transformed literary criticism in the late twentieth century. Under the influence of poststructuralism, among other theoretical schools, the purview of literary studies broadened immensely to include works authored by members of culturally marginalized groups and texts that had previously been considered “non-literary.” In addition, “canonical” works of literature began to be reconsidered in light of poststructuralist theory’s sophisticated accounts of the intersections between language, power, and desire.

One consequence of this revolution in literary studies was a reevaluation of the category of the aesthetic. In addition to the broad anti-Hegelianism that Felski finds in modern literary criticism, scholars influenced by poststructuralism began examining aesthetic philosophy with deep suspicion. Critics began analyzing the aesthetic aspect of literature in terms of its ideological function, and interpreting the affective experiences Kant and Hegel referred to as “beauty” and “sublimity” as techniques for eliciting socio-political compliance from readers. Consequently, the tradition of philosophical aesthetics that provided the intellectual foundation for these experiences was understood to be complicit with the humanist project of Enlightenment rationality that postmodern theorists explicitly sought to reject: the project that, for French poststructuralists, reached its apogee in the philosophy of Hegel.

In much late twentieth-century Anglo-American literary criticism, this poststructuralist hostility was combined with the radically revisionary Marxist accounts of the Hegelian dialectic offered by Frankfurt School and post-Frankfurt school critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno.

These writings build upon Karl Marx's own critique of Hegel's idealism in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), where he attempts to provide a historicist and materialist account of dialectical negativity.⁵⁷ Subsequently, post-Marxist critical theories have made use of the concept of negativity to refute the Hegelian system itself, often by turning to works of art in order to find evidence that negation's destructiveness cannot be contained by the redemptive logic of the idealist dialectic.⁵⁸

The writings of many late twentieth-century scholars influenced by poststructuralism and post-Marxist theory thus provide rich accounts of the specifically political implications of aesthetic engagements with literary works. Ideological considerations of aesthetic experience can be found in the writings of major critics influenced by poststructuralist thought, including such intellectually diverse figures as Paul de Man, Edward Said, Stephen Greenblatt, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁵⁹ In addition, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's analysis of the state of critical theory in the late 1980s discussed how the discourse of aesthetic "value" is simply an ideological mystification of economic value.⁶⁰

Modern criticism's deep suspicion of the aesthetic as an intellectual and affective category found its most extensive elaboration, however, in one work in particular: Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). In Eagleton's account of the post-Enlightenment aesthetic thought, the aesthetic is not merely a tool of ideology, it *is* ideology itself. One of the aims of his project is thus to separate artistic experience from the stultifying ideology of the aesthetic. According to Eagleton, bourgeois European culture created the concept of the aesthetic in order to resolve the contradictions of a capitalist economic system, such as the intellectual conflicts internal to concepts of freedom, legality, self-determination, necessity, universality, et cetera. Eagleton argues

that the category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it speaks of these matters too, which are at the heart of the middle-class's struggle for political hegemony. The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order.⁶¹

This ideology finds its most complete expression in the Kantian-cum-Hegelian notion of aesthetic autonomy. The notion of aesthetic autonomy is politically disabling not only because it sequesters art from all other social practices, making it “an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness,” but also because “the idea of autonomy — of a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-determining — provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations.”⁶² Eagleton’s critique of aesthetic thought thus relies on a strict distinction between theory and practice: the ideological abstractions of aesthetic philosophy nullify the politically transformative potential of individual works of art. Yet given this relentless interrogation of aesthetic autonomy’s ideological dimension, however, the absence of any discussion of British aestheticism’s immensely influential popularization of that notion in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* is noteworthy.

While Eagleton’s critique of art’s autonomy relies on an understanding of the artwork that remains “pure” from the ideologically corrupt influence of aesthetic theory, the works produced by the aesthetes undermine this binary. By producing generically hybrid works that blur the distinction between artistic criticism and artistic creation, the writings of Pater, Wilde,

and Lee express the mutually reciprocal relationship that can exist between theories and practices of the aesthetic. Thus, while Eagleton attempts to reject bourgeois aesthetic autonomy in order to return to the work of art “in itself” as a location for political transformation, the writings of the aesthetes demonstrate the impossibility of divorcing the artwork from the discourse of aesthetic autonomy that has conditioned the creation and reception of art in the post-Enlightenment world.

Aestheticism without Aesthetics

Indeed, the major critical works on British aestheticism written during the past two and a half decades have grappled with precisely this contradiction: how can the aesthetes’ theoretical commitment to aesthetic autonomy be reconciled with the obvious political and social implications of their writings? Critics have attempted to answer this question by analyzing the Aesthetic Movement within its historical *milieu*. Yet the strongly Marxist and Foucauldian orientations of their studies has resulted in an emphasis on aestheticism’s social and political contexts to the overall exclusion of its place within aesthetic intellectual history.

Most recent studies have analyzed the aestheticism within either the growth of commodity culture in late nineteenth-century Britain, or the development of sexological classifications of “the homosexual” in *fin-de-siècle* Europe. In the former category, Regenia Gagnier has focused on Oscar Wilde’s relationship with his audiences in the context of late-Victorian consumer culture. Gagnier, by analyzing Wilde’s works within the broader social and political circumstances in which he addressed his audiences, attempts to resolve the apparent intellectual contradictions in his works by considering his stance toward aesthetic autonomy as a rhetorical device rather than a philosophical proposition.⁶³ Jonathan Freedman also deemphasizes the Aesthetic Movement’s philosophical underpinnings in favor of analyzing its hesitant complicity with the commodity culture it ostensibly rejected. According to Freedman,

aestheticism was conflicted internally: while it championed the aesthetic sphere's absolute autonomy from consumer culture, the artists and consumers who espoused the theory of aesthetic autonomy were, in turn, granted immense cultural capital and material benefit. Consequently, although an aesthete like Pater might be a "faithful post-Hegelian," his awareness of the aesthetic's material foundations makes him one in the tradition of "Weber, Adorno, and Foucault"—which is to say, essentially an anti-Hegelian.⁶⁴ Similarly, Kathy Alexis Psomiades follows Gagnier and Freedman by considering aestheticism's vexed relationship to consumer culture in specifically gendered terms, through an analysis of the aesthetes' use of the femininity a dual cultural signifier that permitted them both to acknowledge and repress art's status as a commodity.⁶⁵

Studies that have discussed the erotic aspects of aestheticism have been inspired by Michel Foucault's claim that sexology's rise in the late nineteenth century created a epochal shift in cultural understandings of sexuality, where the "temporary aberration" of the sodomite transformed into the "species" of the homosexual.⁶⁶ These studies have also tended to ascribe the movement's intellectual contradictions to its ambivalent relationship toward dominant Victorian sexual mores, rather than its philosophical heritage. Richard Dellamora discusses aestheticism's place within the "micropractices that show how individual subjects respond at the very moments when codes of sexuality are being induced and/or imposed."⁶⁷ Specifically, he examines the "implications of the question of the male as subject of desire—at times as both subject and object of desire—in androgynous language" which he claims had "a long, complex development in the history of nineteenth-century poetry," especially within the works created by men affiliated with the Aesthetic Movement at Oxford University.⁶⁸ Ultimately, he finds

aestheticism's sexual politics to be deeply ambivalent, both subversive and complicit with mainstream Victorian sexual politics.

Linda Dowling's Foucauldian study also traces the Aesthetic Movement's origins to late-Victorian Oxford. She situates the development of homosexual identity within the network of power relations in the local context of university reform, which was centered on the development of a curriculum of Greek studies. According to Dowling, the significance of the new curriculum at Oxford stemmed not from its articulation of philosophical idealism, but from its ability to provide a "homosexual code" that vindicated male-male love among the aesthetes but also had to fight off intimations of homoerotic moral corruption.⁶⁹

Similarly, Alan Sinfield examines the conflicts within Wildean aestheticism's place in the history of male effeminacy rather than the history of aesthetic philosophy. Sinfield characterizes Wilde, and the Aesthetic Movement generally, as a definitive marker of a shift in the cultural discourse around homosexuality. Effete masculinity was not suggestive of sodomical relations between men until after Wilde's trials and conviction, which forever after linked effeminacy with homosexuality in the public imagination.⁷⁰

In the past decade, critics have broadened our understanding of the contours of late-Victorian aestheticism by looking beyond the coterie of university trained men traditionally associated with the movement and turning to works that have been dismissed by scholars as "popular" or "ephemeral." Talia Schaffer turns her attention to the "forgotten female aesthetes" whose popular works competed with and often outsold the writings of canonical male aesthetes, and Ana Parejo Vadillo looks at the writings of urban women poets who adapted "masculine" aestheticism to craft a poetics of the ephemeral and the minor that prefigured literary modernism.⁷¹ Dennis Denisoff discusses how popular parodies of the Aesthetic Movement's

sexual nonconformity were inadvertently complicit with its project of normalizing sexual difference, and Diana Maltz examines the role of “missionary aesthetes” who “institutionalized aestheticism as a species of philanthropy” in their attempts to use artistic beauty as a palliative force for the urban working classes.⁷² In their attempts to move critical attention away from elite brands of aestheticism and toward its circulation among individuals who appear far removed from the discourses of Oxford and Cambridge intellectuals, however, these critical accounts also minimize the significance of the movement’s philosophical foundations. A notable exception to this trend is Philip E. Smith and Michael Helfand’s critical edition of Wilde’s Oxford notebooks, which places Wilde firmly within his late-Victorian intellectual context, yet refrains from addressing specifically sexual matters.⁷³

While this dissertation certainly does not call for a return to the elite discourse of aestheticism at the expense of its more popular instantiations, it nonetheless argues that any discussion of the Aesthetic Movement’s engagement with otherness must begin with a consideration of its aesthetic intellectual heritage. My emphasis on the importance of Hegelian aesthetics and the role it plays in aestheticism’s account of the erotic relationship between the perceiving subject and the aesthetic object is thus in line with a particular strain of recent literary criticism. During the past decade, certain critics have made a much-heralded “return to beauty” through their reconsiderations of the idealist aesthetic thought that had fallen deeply out of fashion in literary studies. In their attempts to vindicate aesthetic philosophy, however, these critics have often reified the boundary between aesthetic theory and artistic practice that British aestheticism actively worked to undermine.

Revising the Aesthetic

The return to aesthetics in literary criticism could be said to begin in the early 1990s, with the publication of studies by John Guillory and George Levine. Both critics wrote with a sense of urgency that it was not only aesthetic philosophy, but also the aesthetic experience of literature itself, that was in danger of disappearing in contemporary literary criticism. In his Marxist study of the canon wars of the 1980s, Guillory maintains that, although the aesthetic can never be entirely autonomous from political and economic struggle, artistic value cannot simply be reduced to economic value.⁷⁴ Similarly, Levine states in the introduction to his anthology on aesthetics and ideology that, although literary works certainly have an ideological function, the “specialness” of literary experience cannot and should not be entirely subsumed by socio-political critique.⁷⁵

In contrast to the modest aims of these studies, more recent critical works on “the new aestheticism” have attempted to place aesthetics at the center of the modern critical project. These readings often frame their case for the aesthetic as a “third way” between the opposing critical extremes of Marxist materialism and Derridean deconstruction. Yet by under-theorizing the critic’s role as a mediator between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, these scholars recreate the very binary between theory and practice that lies at the heart of postmodern rejections of the aesthetic. It was, in fact, precisely this spurious distinction between theory and *praxis* that members of the Aesthetic Movement militated against in their accounts of the role of mediation in the critic’s aesthetic experience. One of the goals of this dissertation is thus not only to elaborate upon the mediatory role of eroticism in the Aesthetic Movement’s philosophical considerations of art, but also to suggest ways in which aestheticism’s critical procedures can contribute much to contemporary modes of literary study.

A sense of political urgency motivates Isobel Armstrong's reconsideration of the role of aesthetics in literary criticism. She attempts to curtail the extremes of both cultural materialist and deconstructive thought by theorizing a "radical aesthetic" that can resist cooptation by reactionary cultural critics. In order to account for dual nature of the aesthetic—a mode of experience that is removed from, yet bears a direct relevance to, everyday life—Armstrong looks to four quotidian activities that she characterizes as fundamentally aesthetic in nature: playing, dreaming, thinking, and feeling.⁷⁶ She describes these activities as means of gathering critical knowledge of the world through acts of creativity. In order to describe how these aesthetic acts function as active and dynamic approaches to knowing the world, she turns (as the aesthetes did) to the philosophy of Hegel. In contrast to the stasis of Kant's figuration of the aesthetic, Armstrong focuses on Hegel's theory of aesthetic mediation, which she refers to as the act of "being grounded in the unstable middle" between subject and object.⁷⁷ Despite her turn Hegelian philosophy, however, Armstrong's ostensibly "aesthetic" readings of literary texts rely heavily on psychoanalytic theory. Given the emphasis she places on aesthetic mediation, it is worth noting that Armstrong does not grant any reciprocal consideration to the specifically *aesthetic* qualities of psychoanalytic discourse. By attempting to ground her account of the aesthetic in an ostensibly non-aesthetic discourse, Armstrong's criticism abandons the unstable middle ground of mediation that she places at the heart of artistic experience.

Whitney Davis, by contrast, asserts that "[s]exuality often requires analysis *in terms of* aesthetics." He attempts to perform just such an analysis through a historicist argument that traces the origins of psychoanalysis to the homoerotic art-historical writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Davis finds in "Winckelmann's account of the aesthetic swerves of ancient art, of

its historical movements around the ideal,” what “might be regarded as a pre-Freudian theory of the erotic historicity of aesthetic judgment (and vice versa) [...]”⁷⁸ More specifically, Davis believes that Winckelmann is an “*anti-Platonic* Platonist” who “did not really believe that the artistic realization of an ideal involves *transcendence* of erotic desire, its wholesale conversion into a love of the good, the just, and the beautiful, as the strict-constructionist Platonist tended to suppose.” Instead, Winckelmann imagined “that there is something to be sensed beyond the ideal and as it were by way of the ideal and even if it is difficult to realize this horizon or to represent this condition *in* the ideal: namely, the continuous movements of desire toward ideality, in ideality, and around ideality. It is these movements that constitute the primal conditions of knowing in a human being.”⁷⁹ Although Davis makes a compelling case for the aesthetic origins of psychoanalytic discourse, this historical argument does not establish why it is especially useful to use psychoanalysis to discuss the aesthetic mediation of erotic experience. As Davis himself asserts, psychoanalysis has a tendency to “reduce aesthetics to sexuality” such that it has articulated a conceptual vocabulary that “*reaffirms* a division” between sexuality and aesthetics “that had long been accepted anyway.”⁸⁰ As I do in chapter one of this dissertation, Walter Pater was capable of authoring a compelling account of Winckelmann’s homoerotic idealism and its relevance for modern aesthetic contemplation without recourse to the vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis.

In contrast to Armstrong’s and Davis’s reliance on psychoanalysis, Elaine Scarry attempts to ground her critical methodology solely on the subjective experience of beauty. In her Kantian meditation on the aesthetic, Scarry identifies five qualities inherent to the individual experience of beauty that “prove” its universality: the desire to reproduce the experience, the feeling that beauty is “sacred and life-giving,” the impulse to compare the beautiful object to

other objects, the experience of the beautiful object as something that rises from the neutral background of everyday life, and the sense that beauty can give one access to a more perfect world.⁸¹ She also discusses the structurally constitutive role of “error” in the experience of beauty. According to Scarry, we error when we fail to recognize the beauty of everyday objects, but when we recognize that error by becoming aware of the beauty of the quotidian, we become radically “de-centered,” and thus receptive to an ethical encounter with otherness.⁸² For Scarry, this de-centering connects the experience of beauty with the desire for fairness: by taking us out of ourselves, beauty makes us more attentive to the injustices of the world around us, makes us more interested in the plight of others, and gives us an appreciation of justice as a form of beauty in itself. Despite these provocative conclusions, however, Scarry’s analysis falters due to her reliance on Kant’s conception of the fundamentally ineffability of aesthetic experience. Consequently, her discussion proceeds through continual reference to her own subjective experiences: for example, her discussion of aesthetic universality and errors of beauty relies primarily on the fact that she did not recognize that palm trees were beautiful, until one day she did. She reinforces this point by including hand-drawn illustrations of palm trees. While it is clear that Scarry intends her study to be not just an abstract meditation on aesthetic theory, but an aesthetic experience in and of itself, she also stumbles in the unstable middle space of aesthetic mediation. By crafting an argument that is completely “aestheticized,” Scarry collapses the distance between perceiving subject and aesthetic object that is necessary for aesthetic criticism, rather than maintaining the dynamic tension of Hegelian mediation.

A similar tension between subject and object can be found in Angela Leighton’s examination of aesthetics, aestheticism, and form in modern poetry. In this loosely essayistic study, Leighton looks at texts by Alfred Tennyson, Walter Pater, and Vernon Lee, as their legacy

in the modernist writings of Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and W.S. Graham. She does so in order to discuss “the principle of irrelevance” in modern literature. Leighton’s essays position themselves against “ideological readings” of the aesthetic by focusing on the “something” that “constantly pulls against relevance, and reference” in the text. This “something,” which can go by the names “form, style, beauty, music,” is the textual element that, in Leighton’s assessment, exists “for nothing.” Leighton’s critical method thus attempts to exonerate the aspects of poetic language that “fend off the very things literary criticism might want to bring in: argument, message, meaning, relevance.”⁸³ Yet despite the avowed aim of her essays, which she intends to lead “not to a point proved, but an ‘insecurity’ achieved,” Leighton’s writing does not shy away from making explicit judgments about the literary works she examines: namely, that these works are primarily about form.⁸⁴ Instead of conducting a formal analysis of aesthetic writing, her essays actually address “form” as a recurring *theme* in aestheticism. Leighton’s study thus gets caught up in a version of the performative contradiction. Although she claims that her study recreates the formal “nothingness” lying at the heart of aestheticism, Leighton’s analysis ultimately ends up being about “something.”

While these studies provide sophisticated accounts of the aesthetic as a mode of mediation between subject and object, they falter by providing rather thin accounts of their own roles as critical mediators of the aesthetic. A similar problem can be found in the writings of Jacques Rancière, whose aesthetic theories have recently become prominent among scholars in the humanities.⁸⁵ Although he comes from the same poststructuralist lineage as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan, Rancière believes in the fundamentally political nature of the aesthetic. He detects a structural similarity in both aesthetic and political discourse, which he calls the “distribution of the sensible.” For Rancière, the way a culture determines what is and

what is not art at a particular historical juncture relates to how a culture determines what is and what is not permissible to enter into political discussion. Consequently, when radically new works of art insist on their being perceived *as* art rather than being absorbed into other aspects of existence (i.e. when they insist on their aesthetic autonomy), they enact a “redistribution of the sensible” that transforms the structure of political discourse. Yet Rancière’s account of the relationship between the aesthetic and political is overly idealistic. The examples works of art he uses in his argument, such as Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, were mostly consumed and discussed by members of a cultural elite.⁸⁶ Yet Rancière, much like the other “new aesthetes,” gives no account of how the redistribution of the sensible becomes mediated between high cultural aesthetic discourse and the perceptual capacities of the culture more generally.

These critics, by under-theorizing the specifically mediatory role of the aesthetic, ultimately rely on an implicitly Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment’s universality. Thus, the “return to aesthetics” in contemporary criticism often recapitulate the very same universalizing tendencies that characterized the Victorian critical mainstream. As I show in chapter one, it was precisely this lack of self-consciousness that led mid-Victorian critics like Matthew Arnold to make spuriously universalizing aesthetic judgments on “the best which has been thought and said” in Western culture, and which inspired aesthetes like Walter Pater to articulate a theory of critical subjectivity founded upon the idiosyncrasies of erotic difference.

In order to understand with how the aesthetes used negativity to create a self-reflexive critical stance that also managed to avoid the universalizing tendencies of the critical mainstream, I turn to Fredric Jameson’s radical rereading of the Hegelian dialectic and to Jonathan Loesberg’s revisionary account of aesthetic philosophy. Recently, Fredric Jameson has synthesized the insights of Frankfurt School theorists and recent work in continental philosophy

to propose an “open-system” reading of Hegel. Rather than understanding Hegel as a system-based theorist with a tendency towards totalization and teleological thinking, Jameson focuses on what Adorno termed Hegel’s inclination in the direction of a “preponderance of the object.”⁸⁷ Jameson asserts that we must “read Absolute Spirit as a symptom rather than a prophecy, and thereby rescue the *Phenomenology* from its stereotypical reading as an out-of-date teleology,” and that “the most authentic way of grasping the dialectic will be the one able to think Hegel ‘without positive terms.’”⁸⁸ By reading him primarily as a theorist of negativity, Jameson opens the door to understanding Hegel as a theorist of difference (including erotic difference), rather than universalizing sameness.

Similarly, Jonathan Loesberg rejects the poststructuralist assumption that idealist aesthetic thought is merely an extension of the rationalism and foundationalism characteristic of the Enlightenment project. Instead, he traces the aesthetic theories of Kant, Hegel, and their successors to a skeptical Counter-Enlightenment tradition, one that has roots in eighteenth-century natural theology’s attempt to interpret nature as the embodiment of a moral order that lies beyond the purview of science. According to Loesberg, it is from this tradition that Kant derived his notions of the beautiful and the sublime, modes of experience that are relevant to our understanding of human existence yet cannot be subjected to rational analysis. Consequently, the major concepts developed by idealist aesthetics, such as autonomous form, disinterest, and embodiment, are not extensions of the Enlightenment’s rationalism, but instead an embedded counter-narrative to it. Understood in this context, the artistic experience allows for a reflective freedom that cannot be made subject to any rationalist discourse, such as science, economics, or socio-political analysis. The aesthetic thus provides the necessary preconditions for the intellectual autonomy that makes criticism possible. Through readings of Pierre Bourdieu and

Michel Foucault, Loesberg shows that *any* critique of post-Enlightenment modernity, poststructuralist or otherwise, must ground itself in the reflective freedom that is enabled by aesthetic experience.⁸⁹

In this dissertation, I argue that the aesthetes used the reflective freedom provided by aesthetic experience to articulate the relationship between homoeroticism and cultural critique. In the writings of Pater, Wilde, and Lee, subjects undergo a profound transformation when they encounter homoeroticism in art. Through the experience of sexual desire elicited by these representations, critics undergo an encounter with the negative that fundamentally transforms their consciousness. This transformation creates a sense of individual difference that enables the critic to escape modernity's disabling rationalism and to enter into the aesthetic space of reflective freedom. It is only by entering into this space that the aesthetes gain the autonomy necessary for them to make meaningful commentary on the dominant cultural order—appraisals that include fierce critiques of society's homophobia and heterosexism.

This dissertation argues, in other words, that the writings of the aesthetes demonstrate that any significant critique of heteronormative discourse must be grounded in a strong theory of the aesthetic. Yet despite recent critical work that has attempted to recuperate aesthetic theory for social critique, and the fact that scholars of sexuality often turns to works of art and literature for evidence, the “return to aesthetics” has not yet had a significant impact on queer studies. This is because queer theory is tied to a particularly anti-humanist strain of poststructuralist theory, one that exhibits profound skepticism of all gestures toward subjective autonomy.

Queer Theory and Aesthetic Eroticism

Queer theory is notoriously difficult to define. Broadly speaking, it refers to a set of critical practices that began taking shape during the 1990's, growing out of feminism, gay and

lesbian studies, and poststructuralist theory. Inspired by the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Teresa de Laetis, and above all, Michel Foucault's writings on the discursive construction of subjectivity, queer theory exhibits radical skepticism toward the notion of sexual identity and, by extension, the very concept of identity itself. Consequently, queer theory's use of the term "queer" does not refer to any particular form of identity, or even to any specific set of sexual practices. Instead, "queer" refers to any mode of critique that actively militates against whatever the dominant culture constructs as "normal."⁹⁰

Yet this resistance to the normative does not mean that queerness is solely defined by its relationship to the social mainstream. In the words of David M. Halperin,

Resistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive; it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural formations.⁹¹

Given Halperin's characterization of queerness, it would seem that my discussion of the "erotic negativity" of aestheticism as a discourse arising in creative opposition to the Victorian critical mainstream is very much a queer project.

Yet I hesitate to use the term "queer" in this dissertation. This is because, despite Halperin's claims to the contrary, the creative impulse of queerness reaches a conceptual impasse when it confronts the issue of subjectivity. Queer theory's origins in Foucault's emphatically anti-humanist brand of poststructuralism have made it very receptive to the poststructurally-inflected psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's theories, which constituted a

critique of Ego psychology by way of Saussurean linguistics, propose that our life-long attempts to construct a stable, ideal ego are self-defeating because subjectivity is not a fixed entity, despite our (mis)recognition of it as such. For Lacan, then, the ego is not autonomous, but subordinated and alienated to the objects it identified with during its development.⁹² Lacan's writing have inspired a particular strain of thought that has risen to dominance in the past decade, which critics have referred to the "turn to the negative" or the "anti-social thesis" in queer theory. In contrast to the Hegelian negation found in the writings of the aesthetes, the queer theoretical conception of negativity fundamentally resists the redemptive logic of the dialectic. The anti-social thesis began with Eve Sedgwick's work on shame as structuring element of queer subjectivity, and continues through Leo Bersani's Lacanian description of the fundamental anti-sociality of homosexuality, Lee Edelman's discussion of queerness' resistance to futurity as the embodiment of Western culture's "death drive," and Heather Love's injunction to honor the implacable despair of queer history.⁹³ These studies call on queers to resist the impulse to transform the negative aspects of their experience (i.e. homophobia) into something positive or redemptive, because doing so would be a capitulation to the normalizing imperatives of heterosexist society. These studies claim, in essence, that any "properly" queer subject must give up all pretensions to autonomy in its resistance to heteronormativity.⁹⁴

As I discuss above, however, the aesthetes were much more moderate in their appraisal of autonomous subjectivity than recent queer theorists. While the aesthetes opposed the pretensions to universality of the Victorian critical mainstream, they also recognized that some form of autonomous subjectivity was a necessity for any meaningful form of critique. In contrast to queer theorists, the aesthetes did not believe that transgressive sexualities, such as homoeroticism, fundamentally undermined the coherence of one's subjectivity. Instead, they

relied on Hegel's notion of aesthetic *Bildung* to demonstrate how the individual's recognition of his or her sexual difference is necessary step on the path toward the development of one's reflective freedom.

Consequently, I use the term "eroticism" to distinguish aesthetes' particular figuration of sexual desire from the poststructuralist-psychoanalytic inflections associated with the term "queer." "Eroticism," which designates the specifically artistic and literary use of erotic or sexually arousing imagery, first appeared in print in late-Victorian Britain. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term first appeared in the July 1881 issue of the *Saturday Review*, in a description of the "religious eroticism of [St. Teresa of] Redi."⁹⁵ I thus use "eroticism" for multiple reasons: it not only come into English usage during the same time period examined in this dissertation, but it also stands in distinction to "queerness" by referring exclusively to the artistic *representations* of sexual desire. In addition, "eroticism" derives from the philosophically inflected term "erotic" (which itself ultimately derives from the name of the Greek god "Eros"), which famously appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue, Socrates proposes a distinction between two kinds of love: erotic love, which leads to the pursuit of physical pleasure, and the philosophical pursuit of truth through the "love of ideal forms." Socrates contrasts the "fleshliness" of erotic love with the ideality of philosophical love, yet at the same time maintains that erotic love can set one down the path to the "higher" love of ideal forms, specifically through the rejection of the ultimately inferior physical pleasures of sexuality.⁹⁶ Thus, even at this foundational moment in the history of western aesthetic thought, Plato figures eroticism as a philosophically significant form of otherness that is not entirely dissimilar to negation's role in the dialectical logic of British aestheticism.

Indeed, the first two chapters of this dissertation show how Pater's writing found a place for erotic otherness within the Victorian critical mainstream's rationalist demand for sameness. Chapter One, "Negation in Walter Pater's Early Essays," begins with an analysis of Pater's critical reception in the academy, which shows how scholars of aestheticism have reiterated the Platonic opposition between eroticism and aesthetics. It then examines Pater's early essays on aesthetic impressionism, up to and including *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). I look at two of Pater's earliest pieces, "Diaphaneitè" (1864/95) and "Coleridge" (1866), which attempt to undermine the search for identity within difference characteristic of the Kantian-cum-Coleridgean tradition of nineteenth-century British critical writing. I then focus on "Winckelmann" (1867), which stands as aestheticism's most elaborate and influential explication of negative homoeroticism. I end this chapter with a brief discussion of Pater's famous description of *La Gioconda* in "Leonardo da Vinci" (1869) as his exemplary attempt to put into practice the critical precepts outlined in "Winckelmann." I argue, however, that Pater's description founders when he is forced to confront the possibility that erotic negativity is more than simply a resource for aesthetic creativity, but also has the capacity for violence and destruction.

Chapter Two, "Pater, Erotic Violence, and Anthropological Aestheticism," examines the frequent appearance of erotic violence in Pater's post-*Renaissance* writings, along with his growing preoccupation with the historicity of the aesthetic object. I show that both of these impulses can be attributed to his turn to early anthropology, his investigation of the racialist and imperialist ideologies underlying that nascent discipline. I trace this shift in Pater's thought through a reading of "Wordsworth" (1874) and the studies of myth from the late 1870s, especially "A Study of Dionysus" (1876), both of which display the influence of anthropologist

E.B. Tylor's theory of primitive "survivals." In Pater's novel, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), we see how Dionysian erotic violence, rather than undermining autonomous subjectivity, actually enables the creation of that subject through an aesthetically mediated homoerotic encounter with the negative. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of Pater's anthropological account of the aesthetics of Eros in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), where he suggests that the pursuit of rational truth is not universal, but is instead based upon the individual vagaries of erotic desire.

In Chapter Three, "Oscar Wilde and Lyric Performativity," I turn to Pater's most famous intellectual disciple. Even though Wilde's writings ostensibly celebrate Pater's theories, they represent a radical revision of his aesthetic impressionism. I discuss the anti-essentialist understanding of identity expressed in the essays and dialogues on aesthetics that were eventually collected in the volume *Intentions* (1891), focusing especially on "The Critic as Artist" (1889/91). Wilde explores this radical subjectivism in his novella "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (1889/1921), which celebrates the creative potential of non-essentialist forms of identity, yet cautions against jettisoning humanist notions of selfhood entirely. I contend that Wilde explores Hegel's performative theory of lyric negativity to advance a homoerotic reading of Shakespeare's sonnets. By embedding this interpretation within a complex frame narrative, Wilde expresses the insight he gains from Hegel's theory: namely, that language's limited ability to capture the "truth" of erotic desire need not undermine the fundamental autonomy of the subject. In contrast to much recent work in queer theory, Wilde's novella demonstrates homoerotic desire's ability to ground, rather than undermine, a notion of subjective autonomy.

Vernon Lee's fantastic tales, as I show in Chapter Four, "Vernon Lee's Supernatural Eroticism," deploy negative eroticism to invoke a reconfigured notion of history, one that collapses the relationship between sexuality and sequentiality characteristic of post-

Enlightenment modernity. The negativity of Lee's supernatural fictions reconfigures historical experience in order to create a non-derivative understanding of feminine sexual subjectivity, one that includes the possibility of same-sex attraction. Her essay "Faustus and Helena" (1880) places the aesthetic in opposition to the supernatural, insofar as art restricts impressions and sensations to the limits of form, while the supernatural allows modern individuals to access pre-modern, non-rationalist forms of consciousness. In the story "Oke of Okehurst" (1886/90), Lee presents women's supernatural encounters with history as erotically charged experiences that create new forms of female sexual subjectivity. Later stories, such as "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896), show that it is unknowable "feminine" otherness of the aesthetic object that elicits the subject's psychological and erotic development, rather than the discernment of objective form. Lee's feminist revision of masculine homoerotic negativity thus indicates the theory's ability to move beyond the divide between humanist and anti-humanist accounts of homoerotic subjectivity.

The theory of erotic negative espoused by the Aesthetic Movement arose at a particular historical moment, and in response to a very specific set of cultural and intellectual conditions. Yet in this dissertation, I ultimately want to suggest that the aesthetes' theory has the potential to be a viable critical method, even in the context of modern literary scholarship. Erotic negativity provides an intellectual framework for understanding the psychic displacement characteristic of powerful artistic and erotic experiences, one that nevertheless also provides an account of the relative autonomy and reflective freedom required to make aesthetic-critical judgments. By synthesizing the erotic and artistic aspects of literary experience, erotic negativity may make us realize that, in the words of Pater, profound aesthetic encounters "are really our moments of play,

[...] because at such times, the stress of our servile, everyday attentiveness being relaxed, the happier powers in things without are permitted free passage, and have their way with us.”⁹⁷

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19.

² Kirk Willis, “The Introduction and Critical Reception of Hegelian Thought in Britain 1830-1900,” *Victorian Studies* 32.1 (1988): 100.

³ James Hutchison Stirling, “De Quincey and Coleridge Upon Kant,” *Fortnightly Review* 8 (1867): 390.

⁴ Stirling, “De Quincey and Coleridge,” 392.

⁵ Stirling, “De Quincey and Coleridge,” 396.

⁶ Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 70.

⁷ Pater, *Appreciations*, 82.

⁸ Freedman, *Professions*, 8.

⁹ See Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism: Collected Essays* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 218; Ruth Z. Temple, “Truth in Labeling: Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence, Fin-de-Siècle,” *English Literature in Transition* 17 (1974): 218.

¹⁰ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 8-9.

¹¹ Freedman, *Professions*, 5, 6.

¹² Freedman, *Professions*, 11. For additional discussions of aestheticism’s influence on literary modernism, see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 151-224; Regenia Gagnier, “The Victorian *fin de siècle* and Decadence” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30-49; David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

¹³ The first philosophical theory of negation can be found Aristotle’s *Logic*. See Robin Smith, “Aristotle’s Logic,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2011 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/>.

¹⁴ See Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2005 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>.

¹⁵ In later commentaries on Hegel's dialectic and in the popular imagination, these stages are sometimes referred to as the "thesis," the "antithesis," and the "synthesis."

¹⁶ Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), 335. Bosanquet's was the first history of aesthetic philosophy to be written in English.

¹⁷ Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6, 2.

¹⁸ Coole, *Negativity*, 135.

¹⁹ Willis, "Introduction," 85-111.

²⁰ For a detailed account of German culture's introduction to early nineteenth-century Britain, see Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Also see Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

²¹ Willis, "Introduction," 89.

²² George Henry Lewes, "Hegel's Aesthetics," *British and Foreign Review* 13 (1842): 3.

²³ Willis, "Introduction," 91.

²⁴ Willis, "Introduction," 97-8.

²⁵ Willis, "Introduction," 100-1.

²⁶ Willis, "Introduction," 100.

²⁷ Willis, "Introduction," 101.

²⁸ James Hutchison Stirling, "Tennyson," *Jerrold, Tennyson, and Macaulay* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1868), 98-9.

²⁹ See Bruce Robbins, *The British Hegelians, 1875-1925* (New York: Garfield Publishing, 1982).

³⁰ Despite idealism's dominance during this period, there continued to be a number of philosophers oriented toward empiricism in the late nineteenth century. See Sandra M. Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

³¹ See Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and His Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1964).

³² Mrs. Humphry Ward (Mary Augusta Ward), *Robert Elsmere*, 3 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1888). See also Denys P. Leighton, *The Greenian Moment: T.H. Green, Religion, and Political Argument in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2004).

³³ Henry James, "Mrs. Humphry Ward," *English Illustrated Magazine* 9 (1892): 399.

³⁴ Mrs. Humphry Ward (Mary Augusta Ward), Review of *Marius the Epicurean*, *Macmillan's Magazine* LII (1885): 132-9. Also see Laurel Brake, "Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle," in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 40-57.

³⁵ Kit Andrews, "Walter Pater as Oxford Hegelian: *Plato and Platonism* and T. H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72.3 (2011): 440.

³⁶ Walter Pater, "Robert Elsmere" in *Essays from "The Guardian"* (London: Macmillan, 1920), 70, 74.

³⁷ Andrews, "Oxford Hegelian," 440-1.

³⁸ Andrews, "Oxford Hegelian," 437. For the German Idealism's role in winning Pater his Brasenose fellowship, see Thomas Wright, *Life of Walter Pater* (London: Everet, 1907), 2: 211.

³⁹ See Anthony Ward, *Walter Pater: The Idea in Nature* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), 43-77; F. C. McGrath, *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1986); William F. Shuter, "History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel," *PMLA* 86 (1971): 411-21, and Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Stefano Evangelista, "The German Roots of British Aestheticism: Pater's 'Winckelmann', Goethe's Winckelmann, Pater's Goethe," in *Anglo-German Affinities and Antipathies*, ed. Rüdiger Görner (Munich: Iudicium, 2004), 57-70; and Giles Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (London: Legenda, 2010).

⁴⁰ Philip Smith, "Philosophical Approaches," in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 146; Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 443-44.

⁴¹ Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of a Mind in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53; Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977).

⁴² Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 17-34. Julia Prewitt Brown deemphasizes Hegel's influence on Wilde in favor of integrating Wilde into a critical tradition that privileges the writings of Kant and Arnold, which causes her to dismiss the manifest importance of dialectical argumentation in Wilde's writings. See *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

⁴³ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 176.

⁴⁴ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*. (London: Satchell, n.d. [1880]), 5.

⁴⁵ Den Otter, *British Idealism*, 30.

⁴⁶ See the Lacanian version of negativity offered in Marie Jaanus Kurrik, *Literature and Negation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) and the deconstructive readings offered in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁴⁷ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 30.

⁴⁸ John H. Smith, "U-Topian: Dialectic and Its Other in Poststructuralism," *German Quarterly* 60.2 (1987): 238. According to Smith, "Prior to the 1930's, Hegel had little influence on intellectual life in France." I would like to thank Christopher Vitale for calling my attention to Hyppolite's role in the development of poststructuralist thought.

⁴⁹ Hyppolite supervised Derrida's doctoral thesis on Husserl, Deleuze's thesis on Hume, and Foucault's *diplôm* thesis on Hegel. He also sat on the committee to which Foucault defended *Madness and Civilization*. In addition, Hyppolite was one of Lacan's major interlocutors during his early seminars. See Leonard Lawlor, preface to *Logic and Existence* by Jean Hyppolite, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ Smith, "U-Topian," 239.

⁵¹ Lawlor, preface, viii.

⁵² Hyppolite, "Logic," 42.

⁵³ Lawlor, preface, ix.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 235. Cited in Lawlor, preface, xv.

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- ⁵⁵ Jere Paul Surber, *Culture and Critique: An Introduction to the Critical Discourses of Cultural Studies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 189.
- ⁵⁶ The definitive historical account of poststructuralism's rise to prominence in American literary studies can be found in Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- ⁵⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1932).
- ⁵⁸ See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973) and *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- ⁵⁹ For representative examples, see Paul De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- ⁶⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- ⁶¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3.
- ⁶² Eagleton, *Ideology*, 9.
- ⁶³ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).
- ⁶⁴ Freedman, *Professions*, 65.
- ⁶⁵ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Body's Beauty: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- ⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), 43.
- ⁶⁷ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1.
- ⁶⁸ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 1.
- ⁶⁹ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality at Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- ⁷⁰ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994).

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- ⁷¹ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- ⁷² Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- ⁷³ Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ⁷⁴ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- ⁷⁵ George Levine (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.
- ⁷⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 2
- ⁷⁷ Armstrong, *Radical*, 67.
- ⁷⁸ Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21-2.
- ⁷⁹ Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 29-30.
- ⁸⁰ Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 2-3.
- ⁸¹ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3-10.
- ⁸² Scarry, *On Beauty*, 111.
- ⁸³ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-6.
- ⁸⁴ Leighton, *On Form*, 29.
- ⁸⁵ See, for example, Samuel A. Chamber and Michael O'Rourke, "Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory," *Borderlands* 8:2 (2009) (Special issue on Rancière and Queer Theory): http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol8no2_2009/chambersorourke_intro.htm
- ⁸⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006).
- ⁸⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010).

⁸⁸ Jameson, *Hegel Variation*, 4, 48.

⁸⁹ Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics: Irony, Indifference, and Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁹⁰ See Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

⁹¹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 66-7.

⁹² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 412-444.

⁹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1:1 (1993): 1-16; Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁹⁴ In response to these devastating critiques, much recent work in queer studies has attempted to move beyond the concept of subjectivity altogether by turning to the radically materialism of Gilles Deleuze, another poststructuralist thinker deeply indebted to poststructuralist anti-humanism. See, for example, Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Up Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹⁵ "Eroticism, *n*." in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64083/>.

⁹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. C.J. Rowe (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁹⁷ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 119.

CHAPTER ONE

Negation in Walter Pater's Early Essays

In March 1873, Walter Pater received what must have been an unpleasant letter from John Wordsworth, nephew to the poet and chaplain of Brasenose College, Oxford, as well as one of Pater's fellow tutors. Wordsworth, who had formerly been a member of Oxford's Old Mortality Society along with Pater, as well as one of his private pupils as an undergraduate, reproached the "Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873, hereafter referred to as *The Renaissance*) for asserting the "philosophy [...] that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment and that probably or certainly the soul dissolves at death into elements which are destined never to reunite."¹ In calling attention to the "dangers" into which he was "likely to lead minds weaker than [his] own," Wordsworth informed Pater that "the difference of opinion which you must be well aware has for some time existed between us must, I fear, become public and avowed, and it may be my duty to oppose you, I hope always within the limits of courtesy and moderation, yet openly and without reserve."²

It could not have been unexpected that John Wordsworth, the man who would eventually become the Bishop of Salisbury, would find Pater's rejection of the immortality of the soul in the "Conclusion" objectionable. Yet, as Wordsworth goes on to say, it was not the content of Pater's philosophy *per se* that ultimately motivated his decision to break publicly with Pater, but rather the publication of that philosophy under his own name:

I am aware that the concluding pages [of *The Renaissance*] are, with small exceptions, taken from a review of Morris's poems published in 1868 in the *Westminster Review*.

But that article was anonymous, whereas this appears under your own name as a Fellow

of Brasenose and as the mature result of your studies in an important period of history. If you had not reprinted it with your name no one would, I presume, have had a right to remonstrate with you on the subject, but now the case appears to be different; and I should be faithless to myself and to the beliefs which I hold, if in the position in which I find myself as tutor next in standing to yourself I were to let your book pass without word.³

Wordsworth's public condemnation came as the direct result of Pater's transformation into a public intellectual figure with the publication of *The Renaissance*. While "Poems of William Morris" as well as his earlier essays "The Writings of Coleridge" and "Winckelmann" were all published anonymously in the *Westminster Review*, according to the standard editorial practices of the mid nineteenth-century periodical, the title page to the first edition of *The Renaissance* affirms that Pater decision to affix his name to the "dangerous" philosophy articulated in the "Conclusion" was effectively a decision to present those opinions to the public as a representative of Brasenose College. Although "a difference of opinion [had] for some time existed" between Wordsworth and Pater, implying that Wordsworth was in some sense aware of the views presented in the "Conclusion" before 1873, the publication of Pater's study made it necessary for him to use his position as chaplain of the college to distance Brasenose publicly from Pater's irreligious opinions.⁴

Soon after the writing of this letter, in February 1874, Wordsworth would become a key player in the political maneuverings leading to Pater's being passed over for a University Proctorship in the wake of his involvement in a homosexual scandal. Although such an incident would suggest that, in the intellectually tendentious atmosphere of mid-Victorian Oxford, Pater's philosophical unorthodoxy was somehow associated with his sexual unorthodoxy, most modern

critics of Pater's writings focus either on his place in mid- and late-Victorian intellectual history, or his place in the history of sexuality, as if these were two separate realms of inquiry. Although most Pater scholars today acknowledge both his probable homosexuality and his deep engagement with cutting-edge theological and scientific inquiry, critics have tended to focus on one aspect of his career to the exclusion of the other.

This critical divide can, in some ways, be attributed to shifting cultural attitudes towards homosexuality, specifically the homophobic reaction against Paterian aestheticism in the wake of the Oscar Wilde trials, and the subsequent counter-reaction against institutionalized homophobia by late twentieth-century literary critics. Beyond this historical contingency, however, I argue in this chapter that critics have long struggled to reconcile the sexual and philosophical aspects of aestheticism because they reiterate a traditional discursive opposition between eroticism and aesthetics: either the erotic becomes sublimated into an idealized appreciation of aesthetic form, or the language of aesthetics is merely a code used to express otherwise unspeakable forms of desire.

I suggest that, by bringing these discourses of sexuality and aesthetics back into dialogue with one another, one can see how the theory and practice of Paterian aestheticism, originating from his idiosyncratic interpretation of post-Kantian idealist philosophies, fundamentally relies upon Pater's unique conceptualization of the aesthetic import of male homoerotic desire. Specifically, I argue that Pater's writing found a place for erotic otherness within the Victorian critical mainstream's demand for aesthetic sameness. I begin by surveying the critical history surrounding Pater, in order to demonstrate the unique difficulties his writing poses for those critics who would attempt to separate consideration of the aesthetic from consideration of the homoerotic, and vice versa. I then examine Pater's early essays on aesthetic impressionism, up

to and including *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). I look at two of Pater's earliest pieces, "Diaphaneité" (1864/95) and "Coleridge" (1866), which attempt to undermine the search for identity within difference characteristic of the Kantian-cum-Coleridgean tradition of nineteenth-century British critical writing. I then focus on "Winckelmann" (1867), which stands as aestheticism's most elaborate and influential explication of negative homoeroticism. I end this chapter with a brief discussion of Pater's famous description of *La Gioconda* in "Leonardo da Vinci" (1869) as his exemplary attempt to put into practice the critical precepts outlined in "Winckelmann." I argue, however, that Pater's description founders when he is forced to confront the possibility that erotic negativity is more than simply a resource for aesthetic creativity, but also has the capacity for violence and destructiveness. This engagement with erotic violence, I argue, revealed to Pater the limitations of aesthetic impressionism when it is practiced as a form of historiographic analysis, and inaugurated the preoccupation of anthropological accounts of human subjectivity that came to dominate the second half of his literary career.

The Problem with Pater

In order to discuss the particular problems that confront critics of aestheticism—namely, their inability to theorize the relationship between sexuality and aesthetics—I turn to the critical history surrounding Walter Pater's writings. I do so because Pater plays a unique role in the academic reception of British aestheticism. In contrast to a figure like Oscar Wilde, whose personal flamboyance and sensational downfall have made an over-determined figure in discussions of homoeroticism in literature, as well as to the many "minor" aestheticist writers who have only begun to receive serious critical attention in the past two decades, Pater's manifestly homoerotic but somewhat subdued and donnish eroticism has received a consistent

amount of critical attention since his death in 1894. This makes him a key figure for understanding the intellectual *impasse* that had made it impossible for critics to discuss the aesthetic aspects of sexual desire, and vice versa.

Suspicious of “sexual disequilibrium” began to attach themselves to Pater soon after the publication of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873, as the result of his supposed affair with William Money Hardinge in 1874, as well as his appearance as the lascivious “Mr. Rose” in W.H. Mallock’s satirical novel *The New Republic* (1877). These allegations would haunt Pater not only for the rest of his career, but also his posthumous literary reputation. Although a few homoerotically inclined authors writing in the early twentieth century, such as W. Somerset Maugham, Rupert Brooke, and E.M. Forster, praised Pater’s aesthetic theories and literary style in their works, many modernist writers self-consciously sought to distance themselves from Pater, leading to a precipitous decline in his reputation among both the literary avant-garde and academic literary critics influenced by modernist aesthetics.⁵ Lesley Higgins notes that, among the “masculinist modernist” writers in the wake of the Oscar Wilde trials at the end of the nineteenth century, “Wilde’s professional enthusiasm and personal misfortunes [...] guaranteed that, posthumously, Pater and his writings could not be read separately from Wilde, or, more accurately, from *The Scandal* that dared to speak its name. Instead, the two men were often deliberately conflated, two disparate lives and canons distilled into one repugnant figure from which the greatest possible distance must be secured.”⁶ Thus, although “the substance of modernity permeates Pater’s writings,” modernists such as T.E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, and T.S. Eliot rejected Pater as an intellectual precursor in order “to protect modernist discourse (and most especially its enunciators) from the doubly-tainted undertones of effeminacy and homosexuality so often associated with Pater and Wilde.”

T.S. Eliot's 1930 essay "The Place of Pater" represents perhaps the most succinct expression of this modernist dismissal when Eliot asserts that he "do[es] not believe that Pater [...] has influenced a single first-rate mind of a later generation." Eliot's essay, which attempts "to indicate a direction from Arnold, through Pater, to the 'nineties, with, of course, the solitary figure of Newman in the background" regarding the attempt in the late nineteenth century to replace traditional Christianity with the "worship of art," also contains the famous assertion that Pater's aesthetic theories have "not been wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives"—a reticent, yet all but explicit, reference to W.B. Yeats's idea of the "tragic generation" of the 1890s, of whom Oscar Wilde had perhaps the "untidiest" life of all.⁷ Eliot, it should be remembered, was not only one of the foremost practitioners of literary modernism in his poetry but also one of the most influential literary tastemakers and critics of the first half of the twentieth century. The opinions expressed in essays such as "The Place of Pater" were both formative and representative of a general critical consensus that either ignored or dismissed "the place of Pater" in the history of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, often in either implicitly or explicitly homophobic terms. Thus, even a sympathetic critical assessment such as Geoffrey Tillotson's 1946 essay, "Pater, Mr. Rose, and the 'Conclusion' of 'The Renaissance,'" explains the conceptual "holes" to be found in the "Conclusion" by referring delicately to Pater's "moral restraint, a constraint operating with great completeness in life, if not with a firm-minded completeness in the writings. The prose-poem of the 'Conclusion', therefore, may be partly seen as the sort of lyric poem that exists to make a personal confession [...] a discreet self-revelation." This implicitly homophobic dismissal of the supposed incoherence of Pater's aesthetic theories remained the dominant critical attitude towards Pater until as late as 1965, when René Wellek could claim in the authoritative *History of Modern Criticism* that "today Pater is under a cloud."⁸

By the mid-1960s, however, literary critics would again begin to characterize Pater's writings as representative of "that ultra-culture and academical contemplation of the world" that could be found at Oxford in the mid-1860s. Yet just as the mid-Victorian reviews of Pater's writing were often polemical in their use *The Renaissance* to assess broader intellectual trends at Oxford, so too did the revival of Pater studies in the mid-twentieth century focus on intellectual history not only to illuminate the philosophical context and provenance of Pater's thought, but also to decouple Pater from the "perverse" associations attached to the aestheticist and decadent movements he helped to create, and with which he had been associated throughout the early twentieth century. By the middle of the twentieth century, critics seeking to rescue Pater from the disrepute he had fallen into in the first half of the century sought to remove this "cloud" by examining on the complex intellectual context that informed his aesthetic philosophy, focusing especially on Pater's place within the tradition of Victorian religious humanism as an intellectual genealogy in many ways less disreputable than that of Wildean aestheticism or decadence. This movement to recuperate Pater arguably began with U.C. Knoepfelmacher's *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Samuel Butler* (1965), and was solidified by David DeLaura's *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* (1969). DeLaura's seminal study did much to reinvigorate the academic study of Pater's writings by performing the meticulous archival work necessary to "detail the intellectual and personal relations existing among" John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Walter Pater in order to "emphasize their adaptation of the traditional religious culture to the needs of the later nineteenth century."⁹ By expanding upon and modifying T.S. Eliot's "conception of continuity and diminution among the three—that Arnold's 'degradation' of religion was 'competently' continued by Pater," DeLaura initially stakes his claim against that of Graham Hough in *The Last Romantics*, which placed

Pater in the context of “the increasing dominance of the ‘aesthetic’ norm in English art, religion, and life,” with DeLaura asserting that “Pater seems distinctly out of place in this scheme.”¹⁰

Ultimately, DeLaura’s rigorous influence study helped to rescue Pater from the disrepute he had fallen into with critics writing under the influence of Eliot by explicitly decoupling Pater from his association with aestheticism. In many ways, this imposing study set the agenda for subsequent Pater criticism, which primarily took the form of intellectual history. These attempts to separate Pater’s reputation from that of Wilde can be found especially in scholarly work done on Pater’s writings leading up to and including *The Renaissance*, which critics have often investigated in the context of the various scientific, philosophical, and religious sources and debates Pater engaged with in his formative years at Oxford. Gerald Monsman’s work on Pater’s early writings contextualizes them through his involvement with the “avowedly ‘radical’” Old Mortality Society.¹¹ Arising from the “distinctive [...] set of mind” of Balliol College in its combination of “[c]ontinental metaphysics and Arnoldian liberalism,” the Society included in its membership future Oxford luminaries such as A.C. Swinburne, John Addington Symonds, and T.H. Green. The Society’s meetings centered around the reading of essays written by group members, many of which discussed authors who would become important touchstones for Pater’s early writings such as Fichte, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Browning, as well as recent developments in the history of art.¹² Similarly, Billie Andrew Inman’s “The Intellectual Context of Walter Pater’s ‘Conclusion’” discusses how “[r]eadings in philosophy and Goethe dating 1860-3, readings in aesthetics and Renan dating 1863-5, and recent readings in belles lettres and contemporary science,” including John Tyndall’s 1866 treatise “On the Relations of Radiant Heat to Chemical Constitution, Colour, Texture,” “all came to bear on the brief Conclusion,”¹³

before concluding that Pater's "originality [in the 'Conclusion'] is in the unique synthesis and the compelling expression" of these various intellectual sources."¹⁴

This portrait of Pater as a critic whose primary importance lies in his unique synthesis of the diverse intellectual concepts circulating in mid-Victorian Oxford finds its most expansive articulation in F.C. McGrath's study *The Sensible Spirit*, which dubs Pater "one of the great intellectual synthesizers of the nineteenth century. With a voracious appetite for contemporary thought he read widely in the two dominant philosophical traditions of his time—British empiricism and German idealism—and he absorbed in one form or another many of the cultural and intellectual currents of the last half of the century," thereby creating the intellectual conditions that made possible the development of literary modernism.¹⁵ This concept of Pater as the "great synthesizer" also informs Carolyn Williams' expansive formalist account of Pater's literary practice in *Transfigured World*, where she asserts that, for Pater, "the simplest act of perception is an aesthetic act" and that "history itself is in part the result of an aesthetic reconstruction." Williams calls this Pater's "aesthetic historicism," a term she uses to "name [...] the complex interactions through which [...] aestheticism and historicism stabilize, support, supplement, and correct each other."¹⁶ By referring to the influence of Hegel and Darwin in Pater's early years at Oxford as "the more proximate sources for Pater's genetic and evolutionary views of art history," Williams claims that "Pater's aesthetic historicism is in the mainstream of the Victorian reaction against romanticism and the consequent attempt to reconstruct a sense of objectivity. But even more than by virtue of its negative reaction, aesthetic historicism is decidedly postromantic by virtue of its positive and thorough absorption of romantic techniques of self-consciousness." By performing rigorous close-readings of Pater's prose as it formally mediates between the demands of aestheticism and historicism as "strategies of epistemological

self-consciousness and representation” that “both begin in skepticism, questioning the very possibility of knowledge” and “turn that epistemological doubt against itself in a dialectical revision of the ground of knowledge,”¹⁷ Williams’ study in many ways represents the *telos* of the synthetic intellectual history approach to Pater’s writings. Williams crafts an exhaustive literary account of how Pater’s prose “works” on the page that derives from the scientific, literary, and philosophical speculations of a mid-Victorian intellectual elite as it reacted to the increasingly untenable authority of traditional Christian belief.

These inquiries into Pater’s intellectual context serve as powerful testaments to the explanatory force of formalist critical accounts informed by influence studies in Pater scholarship. Even Williams’ *Transfigured World*, which glances only briefly at the influence of the Higher Criticism, German Idealism, and evolutionary theory before launching into her *tour-de-force* analyses of how Pater’s aesthetic historicism “works” on the level of literary form, finds itself on the solid base of intellectual history provided by critics such as DeLaura, Monsman, and Inman. These studies, however, create an image of Pater as the very embodiment of a rarefied world of Oxford intellectuals. This image of Pater is the ultimate consequence of the impetus to rehabilitate his reputation in the wake of implicitly and explicitly homophobic attacks launched against him by early twentieth-century writers and critics. For instance, Monsman’s 1977 study only briefly addresses the evidence for Pater’s homosexuality before hastily concluding that “there is no biographical evidence to indicate abnormal behavior”: “All one can say is that the lack of information about Pater’s relationships will make any verdict on his psychology tentative. What, for example, should be done with the rumor which circulated Oxford that Pater had a metaphysical sin on his soul?”¹⁸ This is, of course, not to say that the aforementioned intellectual history accounts of Pater’s writings themselves somehow reproduce

the homophobia of the early twentieth century—Billie Andrew Inman’s authorship of the definitive account of the Hardinge affair stands as eloquent testament to this fact¹⁹—but rather that the desire to defend Pater from homophobic dismissal at the hands of modernist critics set Pater studies on a track to analyze his connections to the high intellectual culture of Victorian “religious humanism” at the expense of exploring his manifest interest in diverse forms of eroticism.

This critical inattention to eroticism in Pater’s writings has been corrected by the advent of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in the academic study of literature. Such studies have often responded to intellectual history accounts of Pater’s writings by focusing on how sexuality served as a definitive marker of “difference” for Pater. For example, Dellamora cites the letter by Jonathan Wordsworth quoted at the beginning of this chapter as evidence that “Wordsworth was not prepared to tolerate the mixing of nonconformity with Oxford discourse—yet to object on this ground, as Pater himself was painfully aware, was to object precisely to his position at, but in resistance to, Oxford.” Pater thus occupied an “ambiguous position at Oxford” as both a member of a male elite and advocate of “a form of desire whose overt expression could only occur at the expense of the moral and practical authority of that elite” that “placed him in a highly self-conscious relation, at once complicitous and antagonistic, to literary expression.”²⁰ Beginning with Dellamora’s *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, critics interested in examining the intersection of Pater’s aesthetic theories and his sexuality have looked to the writings of Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in order to think about Pater’s place in the “history of sexuality”—what Dellamora terms the “micropractices that show how individual subjects respond at the very moments when codes of sexuality are being induced and/or imposed.”²¹

These studies, which include notable work done by Dellamora, Linda Dowling, James Eli Adams, and Heather Love (among many others) use Foucault's and Sedgwick's theories as a base from which to launch their accounts of Pater's place in the history of sexuality as an innovator of what might be called a "queer sensibility" in literature. Yet what is striking in these otherwise diverse accounts of Pater's sexuality is the extent to which these critics use a similar methodology to define and analyze the erotic content of Pater's writings, through recourse to the ambiguities, subtleties, and complexities of his prose style as either "coded" language or, borrowing Sedgwick's phrase, a form of "queer performativity." Dellamora discusses the "social and intellectual environment" at Oxford "that helped foster a climate in which a cultural ideal expressive of desire between men comes into existence." Accordingly, Pater's early essays are "discreetly coded so as to 'miss' some of Pater's listeners while reaching men sympathetic to expressions of desire between men. Hence a good deal of my reading [...] will consist in decoding references."²²

Similarly, Dowling explicitly states that the "focus" of her book "is on the way Greek studies operated as a 'homosexual code' during the great age of English university reform, working invisibly to establish the grounds on which, after its shorter-term construction as a nineteenth-century sexual pathology (Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis), 'homosexuality' would subsequently emerge as the locus of sexual identity for which, today, such late-Victorian figures as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde are so often claimed as symbolic precursors."²³ And although a critic like Heather Love would perhaps eschew using the term "coded" to describe Pater's prose, her characterization of Pater as a queer writer who was "exiled" from Oxford intellectual culture includes the assertion that "the agentless action [...] Pater describes [in the "Conclusion"] recalls the dynamic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies in her work on Henry James as 'queer

performativity,” which “describes a combination of reticence and virtuosic stylistic performance” creating an “investment in recoil” that “is matched rhetorically by the delicious secreting of the subject in the text,” still suggests that the form of Pater’s prose is in some way the effect of a form of desire that preexists the act of writing itself.²⁴

James Eli Adams, who in his study *Dandies and Desert Saints* defines Victorian masculinity as itself a rhetorical transaction at once both personal and social that he terms a “style,”²⁵ summarizes this critical perspective in his introduction to the collection *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*. Describing Pater’s “many-sided audacity, his widespread recognition as a dangerous—which is to say, seductive—influence, which (with varying emphases) has figured prominently in Pater’s reception since the first publication of *The Renaissance* in 1873,”

²⁶ Adams calls attention to Pater’s “contemporaries” who

seem to have been offended in the first instance by Pater’s bold affronts to the traditional moral burdens of art and aesthetic experience. For at least a few attentive readers, however, that danger seems to have been compounded by the unmistakable homoeroticism in Pater’s evocative prose. Victorian sexual decorums make it hard to know how clearly or widely this quality was recognized in early responses.

What Adams describes is a move typical to studies of aestheticism and sexuality informed by works of queer theory such as D.A. Miller’s influential “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets” from *The Novel and the Police* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet* (referenced in Love’s analysis of Pater quoted above).²⁷ In the accounts of Miller and Sedgwick, the textual ambiguities, obliquities, and silences of nineteenth-century literary texts become charged with potential homoerotic meaning because there was no language to describe homosexual desire (“the Love that dare not speak its name,” in the words of Alfred Douglas’

poem) apart from the punitive disciplinary discourses of law and medicine.²⁸ This tendency to read Pater's ambiguities as specifically "queer" ambiguities, or in other words, the *effect* of his sexuality is so deeply engrained in Pater studies that even attempts to break away from Foucauldian accounts of the history of sexuality, such as Michael F. Davis' Lacanian reconsideration of Pater's "attempt to describe a queer subjectivity" makes mention of the "complex historical and philosophical reasons had become both culturally imperative and culturally possible, though, of course, not culturally—or conceptually—easy. Pater had to write in oblique and coded ways."²⁹

A brief examination of Adams' own prose reveals some of the problems of applying "homosexual coding" and "queer performativity" models of interpretation to Pater's writings. When Adams asserts that "[f]or at least a few attentive readers," the "danger" of Pater's aesthetic philosophy "seems to have been compounded by the unmistakable homoeroticism in Pater's evocative prose," his use of the term "unmistakable" is ambiguous. By using this adjective to impute "unmistakability" to Pater's prose itself, Adams obscures the subject for whom Pater's prose is, in fact, "homoerotic." Although at first glance he appears to refer to those "few attentive readers" who, for various reasons, had the ability to recognize the homoerotic overtones of Pater's writing, this construal makes Adams's statement incoherent: if only an "attentive few" were aware of the homoeroticism of Pater's prose, it follows that Pater must have been "mistakenly" read as non-homoerotic by the majority.

The other possible way of reading Adams's sentence is to interpret "unmistakable" as referring to contemporary readers who are more attuned to a homoeroticism that, although it seems obvious today, was only apparent to an "attentive few" among Pater's early readers. This seems to be the intended meaning, as Adams goes on to assert that "Victorian sexual decorums

make it hard to know how clearly or widely this quality was recognized in early responses” to Pater’s writing. Yet, by mentioning “Victorian sexual decorums,” Adams confuses the issue further through implicit reference to the “repressive hypothesis” of Victorian sexuality that post-Foucauldian critics explicitly reject in their determination to read the textual obliquities and ambiguities of Victorian literature as “unmistakable” indicators of homoerotic meaning.

D.A. Miller’s “aegis-defining” essay “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets” is exemplary in its reading of the “open secret” of homoeroticism in the Victorian novel.³⁰ Adams himself usefully summarizes Miller’s argument “that secrecy in the Victorian novel is ‘radically empty,’ because it embodies a character’s vain effort to affirm autonomy in the face of a disciplinary order that the subject internalizes in the very act of keeping secrets. Hence the closely guarded secrets of Dickens’s characters, for example, frequently turn out to be mere clichés, the platitudes of the society against which the characters are struggling to defend themselves.”³¹ The “secrets,” therefore, of the Victorian novel are not to be found in the actual *content* of the often unremarkable secrets held by individual characters, but rather in the “open secret” that defines the modern subject as a subject that possesses secrets about him- or herself that must be kept hidden, therefore effecting the self-disciplining of the subject Foucault describes in the *History of Sexuality*. Miller, who follows Foucault in his characterization of sexuality as the open secret *par excellence*, maintains that the secret that is never revealed fully because it would then “attain public recognition; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer effect a general surveillance of aberrant desire.”³² Consequently, “Victorian sexual decorums” do not simply repress the articulation of socially disruptive homoerotic desire, but rather deploy in oblique and coded ways the suggestion of homoerotic desire as a means of

policing that desire in the form of an open secret that functions “not to conceal knowledge, as much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge.”³³

Ultimately, Adams’s description of the homoeroticism of Pater’s prose and its reception is incoherent, insofar as his reference to “Victorian sexual decorums” as a repressive force implicitly discards the “open secret” model of Victorian literary discourse that authorizes reading Pater’s prose as “unmistakably homoerotic.” This incoherence is not simply the effect of ambiguous prose, but is rather indicative of the extent to which queer models of reading do not account for the unique situation presented by Pater’s writing as it alternates between oblique and explicit homoeroticism, and the fact that this homoeroticism apparently went entirely unnoticed by his early readers. This problem centers on the concept of “style,” which plays a preeminently important role both in queer theory and in Pater’s writings.

While queer interpretations of nineteenth-century literature such as Miller’s “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets,” depend upon close readings informed by a Foucauldian reinterpretation of Roland Barthes’s definition of style, the “style” of Pater’s writings operates quite differently from the paradigm described in works such as *Writing Degree Zero*. Miller’s readings of a select number of canonical Victorian novels in *The Novel and the Police*, including the famous interpretation of Dickens’ *David Copperfield* that forms the foundation of his account of the novelistic formation of the closeted social subject, implicitly rely on a reinterpretation of Barthes’s assertion that “under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author’s personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place, where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed.”³⁴

In a later essay, Miller explicitly articulates and authorizes this reinterpretation by applying the concept of the “open secret” formulated in *The Novel and the Police* back onto Barthes’s prose itself. According to Miller, although Barthes might say “that style, allied to the body, to the personal mythology of the author, to the ‘secret’ of both, is intrinsically closed to social signification, and as such irrelevant to the assigned intellectual themes of the day—and of the rest of Barthes's text [...],” nevertheless “the nothing-to-say of Barthesian style [...] never fails to speak a little something which is the negation of its negations, the remainder and reminder of what it has foreclosed. Far from standing outside ‘History and the stand we take in it,’ Barthesian style is precisely the place where both those things are best registered, as the intensity and inventiveness of a desire to circumvent the socio-intellectual doom that, but for this intervention, they would otherwise spell for its author.”³⁵

Most notably, Barthes registers this desire to “circumvent socio-intellectual doom” through “his general horror of the Name, his fear of the immobility that he sees the Name inflicting on whomsoever it touches.”³⁶ Referencing a passage where Barthes criticizes the use of the term “homosexuality [...] to proclaim yourself something [...] at the behest of a vengeful Other,” Miller states that this particular horror of the Name actually reveals that “contrary to Barthes’s account, this one attribute does not quite function in the way that the attribute in general is said to do”:

For where the Homosexual is concerned, society’s principal demand has never been that he should proclaim himself one, the better to facilitate the social management of an identifiable type, or even that, to this end, he should be proclaimed one by somebody else. Rather, it has been that he and everyone else should *refrain* from doing so, or do so only ‘in secret,’ lest the nominal recognition of his desire cause the latter to expand and

multiply, recruit and destroy. We call this demand the Closet, and it has been constructed through a taboo on nomination that is as persistent as it has been loquacious [...].

Barthes's utopian suggestion that we do away with the Name (*that* name) is an already accomplished social fact: in countless, if not all respects, no name has ever been tolerated. [...] Make no mistake: Barthes's line of thought here may be turned to many ends, not excluding that of thinking through the constraints and aims of a gay politics, but—let there be no mistaking this either—it also quite vigilantly does the work of the Closet, in perpetuating, in concealing the fact of its perpetuating, the long tradition of the *quod non nominandum* which the homosexual has been asked to personify ever since he emerges *as* a person in the 19th century [...].³⁷

This passage reveals as much about the first principle of Miller's arguments regarding the operations of the open secret and the closet as it does Barthesian style.³⁸ In calling attention to the importance of namelessness in Barthes's concept of style as that which “does the work of the Closet,” Miller reveals the extent to which his concept of nineteenth-century homosexuality as an “open secret” depends upon homoerotic desire remaining “nameless” in literary works that focus on secrets that must never “attain public recognition; yet [...] must not disappear altogether.” Such a method of reading depends upon the assumption that literary style rebels against the public nominative function of language, that style is ineluctably private and therefore “always a secret,” inevitably existing in tension with language's capacity to bring concepts into articulation through acts of naming. Hence, Barthes states in *Writing Degree Zero* “what stands firmly and deeply beneath style, brought together harshly or tenderly in its figures of speech, are fragments of a reality entirely alien to language.”³⁹ For Barthes, the fundamental privacy of style renders it irrelevant to social and political concerns; for Miller, the “secret” of style is its ability to carry

out the disciplinary imperative that homoerotic desire remain publicly “nameless” while simultaneously coaxing the reader into internalizing the panoptic gaze by appearing to appeal to his or her private psychology. Style, rather than being immune to social and political concerns, actually performs the social and political work of “the Closet” by continually suggesting yet refusing to explicitly name homoerotic desire, thereby sustaining homosexuality’s status as an “open secret” in literary discourse.

This association of literary style with the open secret of closeted homoerotic desire had created a powerful legacy in queer literary studies, many of which rely on the implicit assumption that the formal ambiguities and obliquities of a writer’s style can be read as the repository for closeted desires that cannot be explicitly articulated in the text, and which exists in tension with the explicitly “named” concerns of the writer’s prose: for example, the “combination of reticence and virtuosic stylistic performance” that defines Sedgwick’s and Love’s concept of “queer performativity.” Yet, as Adams’s prose above demonstrates, such queer stylistic readings are inadequate to account for the particular situation presented by Pater’s “unmistakably” homoerotic prose style. Most notably, while Pater’s “Winckelmann” essay is explicit in its articulation of the homoeroticism underlying Winckelmann’s Hellenism, as evidenced by his “romantic fervent friendships with young men,” early reviewers took apparently took no notice of this explicit nomination of homoerotic desire, and in fact often singled out the “Winckelmann” essay for praise and directed most of their attention of the “Conclusion.”⁴⁰ This peculiar situation does not fit into the conceptual paradigm of the “the Closet” that Miller articulates. The homoeroticism of Pater’s essay, rather than inhering in the complexities of his prose style as an “open secret,” was instead explicitly articulated, yet remained invisible to his reviewers.

Rather than discussing the obvious homoeroticism of Pater's writing as a form of "closeted" desire, in the rest of this chapter I will examine Pater's three earliest extant essays—"Diaphaneité" (1864), "The Writings of Coleridge" (1866), and "Winckelmann" (1867), as well as the slightly later "Notes on Leonardo Di Vinci" (1869)—in order to understand how his earliest attempts at formulating his "aesthetic impressionism" represent an attempt to understand the central importance of difference, and especially *homoerotic* difference, in conceptualizing the role and function of the modern aesthetic critic. My analysis of "Diaphaneité" examines how Pater's discussion of a "basement type" that would "be the regeneration of the world" represents his attempt to theorize a form of difference that would stand in contrast to the rationalist demand for sameness characteristic of the Victorian critical mainstream that, for Pater, was embodied by the writings of Matthew Arnold. I argue that Pater conceives of this absolute difference as a form of *erotic* difference, one that is informed by a concept of negation derived from post-Kantian idealist thought, one that conceives of the aesthetic critic as the inhabitant of a genderless, sexually non-reproductive body. Subsequently, my analysis of "The Writings of Coleridge" and "Winckelmann" reveals how Pater's deployment of the concept of negation as the fundamental force driving the progressive development of human subjectivity and its aesthetic representation makes his case for the necessary "moral sexlessness" of the modern aesthetic critic. Finally, I discuss the famous description of *La Gioconda* in "Notes on Leonardo Di Vinci" as Pater's first attempt to practice the erotically-attuned form of aesthetic criticism articulated in his early essays, as well as a demonstration of the limitations of Paterian aesthetic criticism when it is practiced as a form of historiographic analysis.

Framing the Negative: "Diaphaneité"

Soon after his death in 1894, Macmillan released two volumes of Pater's previously uncollected writings: *Greek Studies* (1895), containing his essays on ancient Greek art, mythology, and poetry; and *Miscellaneous Studies* (1895), consisting for the most part of previously uncollected essays published in periodicals. Pater's literary executor Charles Shadwell remarks in his introduction to this second work that "[i]t is with some hesitation that the paper on *Diaphaneitè*, the last in this volume, has been added, as the only specimen known to be preserved of those early essays of Mr. Pater, by which his literary gifts were first made known to the small circle of his Oxford friends."⁴¹ Originally read in front of the Old Mortality Society in July 1864, the paper titled "Diaphaneitè" is Pater's remarkable attempt to describe the sort of individual who could serve as a "basement" or fundamental "type" that would "be the regeneration of the world" (MS 221-222). Scholars of Pater's work concur that "Diaphaneitè" holds the key to understanding Pater's evolving concept of the "aesthetic hero," which for was embodied by historical figures such as Winckelmann in *The Renaissance*. Moreover, Pater explored this particular "basement type" through the protagonist of *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, the novel he published in 1885.⁴²

Nonetheless, "Diaphaneitè"—no matter how much influence it exerted on Pater's later writings—remains one of the most difficult works to interpret in his corpus of writing. Anne Varty points out that Pater's paper "tempts the critic by seeming to offer a kind of manifesto for Pater's subsequent work [...] but it does not easily yield its meaning."⁴³ The noted difficulty of "Diaphaneitè" becomes alleviated, however, when one recognizes that the essay is not simply a description of "the basement type" Pater identifies (what I will call in this essay the "diaphanous being"), but is also a self-reflexive act by which Pater performs himself into being as an aesthetic critic with a unique and distinct critical perspective. Specifically, he does this by attempting to

define the qualities that inhere in the “diaphanous being” while simultaneously embodying those qualities in his prose itself, conjuring himself into being as an aesthetic critic by applying a self-created ideal to himself.

In doing so, Pater reveals his indebtedness to philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s concept of the “‘I’ that posits itself absolutely.” According to Gerald Monsman, prior to “Diaphaneité” Pater delivered a talk on “Fichte’s Ideal Student” to the Old Mortality in 1863. Although this paper is supposedly now lost, Monsman has pieced together first- and second-hand accounts of the talk in order to reconstruct “Pater’s position on the relationship of self-culture to subjective immortality.” Monsman speculates that Pater derived his concept of self-culture from “The Nature of the Scholar”: a series of lectures delivered by Fichte in 1794, where he describes the “scholar” as the “instructor of mankind” who “hopes to lead mankind to the knowledge of the ascertained part of the Divine Idea” which manifests itself in the “Learned Culture of the age.”⁴⁴ Fichte’s first British champion was Thomas Carlyle, who used Fichte’s concept of the “Divine Idea” to express the “heroic” function writers and poets serve as leaders of cultural development.⁴⁵ According to Donoghue, however, Pater had recourse to Fichte’s concept of culture specifically as an alternative to Matthew Arnold’s understanding of self-culture as the development of one’s “best self” in a public, historical sense, instead placing “the Divine Idea within the self and declar[ing] its realization to be the achievement of diaphaneity.”⁴⁶

Fichte’s founds his concept of self-culture on the base of the “self-positing ‘I’” or “absolute ‘I’” formulated in his philosophy. In Anne K. Mellor’s account, Fichte’s concept of the “absolute ‘I’” is an attempt to solve the epistemological problem of the absolute (the *Ding-an-sich*, or “noumenal world”) that Kant’s critical philosophy characterizes as fundamentally unknowable by humans:

In his *Theory of Knowledge*, Fichte asserted Kant's noumenal world does not exist, that human consciousness creates its own universe (the Ego posits itself). Further, the Ego itself creates its antithesis, the Non-Ego (what I am not) or finite world, in order to stimulate the Ego to greater creativity and an expanding consciousness that alone constitutes the experience of freedom, [...] thereby deny[ing] the reality of an external, non-self-created, objective world."⁴⁷

By comparison, Curtis Bowman asserts that Fichte expresses "the concept of a rational agent that constantly interprets itself in light of normative standards that it imposes on itself, in both the theoretical and practical realms, in its efforts to determine what it ought to believe and how it ought to act."⁴⁸ Fichte therefore stands at the beginning of a post-Kantian philosophical tradition that will eventually include Schlegel, Schelling, and Hegel, all of whom, in the words of M.H. Abrams, "begin with an undifferentiated principle which at once manifests itself in the dual mode of subject and object, whose interactions (in and through individual human selves) bring into being the phenomenal world and constitute all individual experience."⁴⁹

For Pater, the Fichtean concept of a self-culture founded in the absolute 'I' entailed the creation of a literary style adequate to embody the dynamic, agonistic quality of the relationship between subject and object in Fichte's philosophy. Rather than simply describe the diaphanous being, "Diaphaneité" dramatizes the Fichtean ego's "vocation" in order—in Radslav Tsanoff's words—to "engage in the unremitting struggle to repair the breach in being signified, by the opposition of subject and object. [...] In every moral action spirit molds nature as it resists nature, and nature is aroused to manifest spirit; the two are radically, that is, at root, one."⁵⁰ In the case of Fichte's "true-minded Scholar," this takes the form of a struggle to

not admit of any life and activity within him except the immediate life and activity of the Divine Idea; [...] he suffers no emotion within him that is not the direct emotion and life of the Divine Idea which has taken possession of him [...] His person, and all personality in the world, have long since vanished from before him, and entirely disappeared in his effort after the realization of the Idea.⁵¹

In placing the Divine Idea within the self, Pater sets himself the task of crafting a style that is able to express the struggle between ego and the non-ego that, for Fichte as well as himself, provides the foundation for the distinction between subject and object, as well as human creativity generally. “Diaphaneité” therefore embodies Pater’s struggle to use language to establish the critical distance necessary to describe a being notable for its capacity for negation—what Wolfgang Iser has identified as Pater’s understanding of the aesthetic sphere as a space “in-between,” where “reconciliation was not a dialectic movement toward synthesis; it was, rather, an interaction of opposites, a telescoping of incompatibles.”⁵² As Winfried Fluck summarizes, for Iser this in-between state represents an “application of the idea of negation, one that also embraces negation itself.”⁵³ As such, the difficulty of “Diaphaneité” stems from the radical instability of Pater’s critical position as he attempts to represent the complex interplay of assertion and negation entailed in being a “true-minded scholar”—a critical position that Pater ultimately associates with the specifically genderless, non-reproductive body of the diaphanous being.

“Diaphaneité” begins by forcing us to reconsider the supposed dialectical opposition between “worldliness” and “unworldliness,” calling attention to the hierarchical power structure inhering in this apparent antithesis. The first sentences of the essay assert: “There are some unworldly types of character which the world is able to estimate. It recognizes certain moral

types, or categories, and regards whatever falls within them as having a right to exist. The saint, the artist, even the speculative thinker, out of the world's order as they are, yet work, so far as they work at all, in and by means of the main current of the world's energy" (*MS 215*). Pater's assertion complicates the opposition suggested by the terms "unworldly" and "the world," reminding us that those "types of characters" that we declare "unworldly" nevertheless have some sort of commerce with the world. In his description, the world has the agency to "estimate" unworldly types of character, implying both that unworldly types of character can be at least partially perceived by the world ("estimate" used in the sense of "approximation"), and that these unworldly types of character are subjected to evaluation by the world ("estimate" used in the sense of "judgment").

Pater further emphasizes the connection between perception and power in his next sentence, asserting that the world "recognizes certain moral types" and regards what falls into those categories as having "a right to exist." Here Pater puns on the meaning of the verb "to recognize" as indicating both the act of perceiving an object to be identical to a previously known type or category, as well as the act of devolving authority within a hierarchical power structure. When Pater states that unworldly types of character such as the "the saint, the artist, and even the speculative thinker" can be "out of the world's order" yet "operate in and by means of the main current of the world's energy," he means that, even though unworldly types of character *appear* not to have anything to do with the quotidian "work" of the world, they owe their very existence to the relations of domination and subordination flowing throughout this dialectical system of thought, "the main current of the world's energy" that insists on perceiving the world in terms of hierarchically opposed "types" or "categories."

On the surface, these opening sentences largely mimic the tone, rhetoric, and argumentative style of much of Matthew Arnold's writings, such that David DeLaura dismisses "Diaphaneité" as a mere "pastiche of Arnold's phrases."⁵⁴ The logic of this opening statement follows the logic of the archetypical Arnoldian dialectical argument, taking "the form of thesis-antithesis-synthesis" yet "tending to use hierarchical antithesis [...] so that the third term is already included in one of the first two. Rather than a conciliation of terms, what synthesis produces is a state in which one term is already subordinated to the other."⁵⁵ In essence, what Pater does here is appropriate Arnold's argumentative structure in miniature, introducing the antithetical concepts of "unworldliness" and "worldliness" and subsequently demonstrating the subordination of "unworldly types of character" to "the main current of the world's energy"—a concept that falls into the category of "worldliness." Yet by appropriating Arnold's language and logic, Pater creates what I would term a meta-Arnoldian argument that both exposes and dismisses not only the hierarchical antithesis hidden within the Arnoldian dialectic, but also an entire argumentative structure associated with aesthetic criticism written under the influence of Coleridge's appropriation of Idealist philosophy (fittingly, the subject of Pater's next essay). As David Lloyd argues,

It is a crucial index of the Romantic legacy in Arnold's thinking that the process by which [...] reconciliation is to be produced should appear as a *prefiguration* of what is to be produced; that, namely, the act of knowing things "as they really are" in order to isolate the "tendency" of our natural affinities should already contain in it the kind of relationship with the object that is its tendency to produce, thus constituting, in Coleridge's phrase, "the progressive transition without breach of continuity."⁵⁶

Hence Arnold's interest in philological criticism, where "[a]ctual difference is formally reduced to a mode of identity by way of a similar differentiation out of the same root. Thus, even when concerned with differentiation, this science of origins knows always that it is 'at bottom' concerned with the reproduction of an identity, and is governed by a 'law of fusion' which operates at once retroactively and projectively."⁵⁷ This argumentative structure is thus not only associated with Arnold, but also with an entire tradition of nineteenth-century aesthetic criticism written in the tradition of Coleridge and his importation of "Romantic" German philology into British critical discourse.⁵⁸

Thus, when Pater asserts that unworldly types of character such as the saint, the artist, and the speculative thinker work in and by means of the main current of the world's energy, he calls attention to language's ability to reproduce hierarchic structures of dialectical thought. When certain types of character acquire the name "unworldly," they become conceptually subordinate to "worldliness" by sharing an identical linguistic origin in "the world." Pater demonstrates that to discuss these supposedly contrasting types as if they were truly opposed to each other is to enter into a facile dialectic where apparent difference is only an illusion masking the actual presupposition of identity.

This illusion of identity is, of course, not the reparation of the breach between subject and object sought by the Fichtean "true-minded scholar." Pater opens "Diaphaneitè" with a dismissive appropriation of the Arnoldian dialectic in order to establish a radically different kind of argument, one that attempts to engage with a form of difference that is not subordinate to identity. To do so, Pater focuses on crafting a language adequate to the expression of this concept of difference, one that moves beyond the hierarchical nominations of the post-Coleridgean aesthetic critic by using negations to create a description of the diaphanous being

focused primarily on what it is *not* and what it *lacks*. In contrast to unworldly types of character, Pater declares that “[t]here is another type of character which is not broad and general” and “does not take the eye by breadth of colour,” one that embodies the “colourless, unclassified purity of life” for which “the world has no sense fine enough;” a type of character the world “can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal” (*MS* 215-216). As opposed to those unworldly types of character who ultimately “work [...] in and by means of the main current of the world’s energy,” Pater describes a being that truly has no commerce with “the world” as an object of the world’s perception and, consequently, as an instrument for use in the world’s “service” or as a subject for its “contemplat[ion] as an ideal.” In order to avoid the unequal power dynamics inherent in the language of perception as it applies to “unworldly types of character,” Pater enumerates the various ways the diaphanous being resists being perceived by the world and, consequently, positive representation within language.

As Pater continues his description, however, this focus on the negative aspects of the diaphanous being transforms into a negation that has a definite shape and purpose of its own as a vital part of the structure he calls “the moral world.” Pater metaphorically describes the diaphanous being as

that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades, which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of characters—delicate provision in the organisation of the moral world for the transmission to every part of it of the life quickened at single points! (*MS* 215-216)

Pater characterizes the diaphanous being as remarkably self-sufficient, yet at the same time not absolutely autonomous, invested with a moral purpose that must be realized within an organized system. On the one hand, the diaphanous being possesses a self-reflexive energy that perpetually renews itself as the diaphanous being “refines itself to the burning point”— an image that suggests Fichte’s concept of the self-positing ego as a rational agent that continually interprets itself in light of the normative standards it imposes on itself, as well as anticipates the image of the “hard gem-like flame” that famously appears in the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. On the other hand, in Pater’s metaphor, this self-refining diaphanous being appears as a “fine *edge* of light,” a light that appears only in contrast to an enveloping darkness, indicating the gaps, fissures, and limit points of the un-illuminated figures that surround it as it “fill[ing] up the blanks between contrasted types of character.” By stating that this fine edge of light “crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life,” Pater indicates that, although diaphanous beings do not participate in the life of the world or “work in and by means of the main current of the world’s energy,” they nevertheless meaningfully intersect with it, if only to illuminate and make perceptible the world’s discontinuities (“filling up the blanks”). Although the diaphanous being has no commerce with the world as an object of perception, it nevertheless serves a purpose in the “moral world” as it works in tandem with the world to transmit “to every part of [the moral world] the life quickened at single points.”

Although Pater’s description of the interlocking structure of world and not-world that makes up the totality of the “moral world” is remarkably similar to Hegel’s description of the antithesis in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Diaphaneitè” does not yet demonstrate the complex engagement with Hegel’s dialectical theory of aesthetic and cultural development that will occur in the “Winckelmann” essay.⁵⁹ Rather, Pater only briefly mentions the concept of the “moral

world” in this essay in order to provide a theoretical foundation for his distinctly Fichtean understanding of a diaphanous being whose negations of and otherness from the world have moral import *for* the world. Pater spends the majority of “Diaphaneité” describing the diaphanous being in terms of its contrast to various “worldly types of character,” and through this process articulates the overarching purpose of a being that often appears merely “neutral or “indifferent” to worldly affairs. Pater gradually articulates what he understands to be the necessary connection between the diaphanous being’s moral “neutrality” and the diaphanous being’s body—specifically, a body that does not enter into the binary logic of gender difference and consequently does not seek to reproduce itself, taking the form of what he calls “moral sexlessness” (*MS* 220).

Thus does Pater attempt an ingenious argumentative double-move: In rejecting the hierarchical dialectics of post-Coleridgean aesthetic criticism, Pater rebuts an argumentative structure fundamentally concerned with the “law of fusion” and the reproduction of identity. By yoking together the diaphanous being’s theoretical negation of the hierarchical binaries subtending dialectical reproduction to its physical negation of the gender binaries subtending sexual reproduction, Pater attempts to accomplish two things. First, by characterizing “moral sexlessness” as the necessary physical manifestation of the diaphanous being’s theoretical negation of “the world,” he attempts to provide concrete, perceptible evidence of that individual’s idealist negations in the material world. Second, by characterizing the diaphanous being’s rejection of gender difference and sexual reproduction as the necessary consequence of its moral difference from the world, Pater implicitly makes his particular “diaphanous” concept of negation available as a moral justification for a non-reproductive form of eroticism that is unattached to binary notions of gender.

Pater accomplishes this move from the ideal to the material and establishes the necessary connection between the diaphanous being's moral and bodily negations through the metaphor of the "outline." In "Diaphaneitè" outlines stand as markers, both intellectual and physical, of negative spaces that are nevertheless invested with meaning. Pater's unique definition of the outline first manifests itself in his discussion of the diaphanous being's "simplicity," when he asserts that "[a]s language, expression, is the function of intellect, as art, the supreme expression, is the highest product of intellect, so this desire for simplicity is a kind of indirect self-assertion of the intellectual part of such natures. Simplicity in purpose and act is a kind of determinate expression in dexterous outline of one's personality" (*MS* 217). By comparing simplicity to language and art, Pater attempts to express a concept of simplicity as "determinately" interpretable as an expression of the diaphanous being's "intellect" that is yet not directly ascribable to any sort of willed intentionality. Because the diaphanous being's simplicity "is a kind of prophecy [...] coming as it were in the order of grace, not of nature, by some happy gift, or accident of birth or constitution, showing that it is indeed within the limits of man's destiny," the diaphanous being cannot *intend* to convey this simplicity, because to do so would betray the supposed effortlessness that defines the diaphanous being's status as a "prophecy" of human "perfection"—a perfection Pater defines, somewhat tautologically, as a state where no effort of will is necessary to externally express one's interior psychological subjectivity, where "the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner" (*MS* 217). The figure of the outline becomes a way of indicating the "negative interpretability" of the diaphanous being's simplicity—a simplicity readable only as an indicator of the diaphanous being's absolute difference from "the main current of the world's energy," insofar as its

effortless psychological transparency carries no interpretable content in and of itself, perceptible only as an “outline” against the contrasting background provided by “the world.”

This concept of the negatively interpretable “outline” becomes the means by which Pater associates the diaphanous being’s theoretical negations with its bodily rejection of gender distinction and sexual reproduction, as Pater characterizes the diaphanous being’s “moral sexlessness” as the transparent indicator of “an outer life [...] simply expressive of the inward.” In order to express this understanding of the diaphanous body, Pater turns to the model of “moral sexlessness” provided by classical Greek sculpture, comparing the diaphanous being to “a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere. It has something of the clear ring, the eternal outline of the antique. Perhaps it is nearly always found with a corresponding outward semblance” (*MS* 219). In these sentences, which he would later reuse almost word for word in “Winckelmann,” Pater relies on an implicitly Hegelian understanding of classical sculpture to express how the transparency he associates with the “eternal outline of the antique” becomes embodied in “a corresponding outward semblance.” In a passage from “Winckelmann” that explicitly restates Hegel’s theory of classical Greek art in the *Aesthetik*, Pater asserts classical sculpture is in no sense “a symbol, a suggestion, of anything beyond its own victorious fairness. The mind begins with a finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive. The motive is not lightly and loosely attached to the sensuous form, as is 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” (*W* 95). By associating the “dexterous outline” of the diaphanous being’s personality, which conveys nothing but its own transparent nature, to the “eternal outline of the antique,” Pater implicitly relies on an understanding an concept of classical sculpture where artistic “motive [...] saturates and is

identical with” the “sensuous form,” anchoring his claim regarding the diaphanous being’s psychological transparency to the formal transparency found in the form of ancient Greek sculpture and, by extension, the bodily form of the diaphanous being itself.

The association Pater makes between the diaphanous body and “the eternal outline of the antique” has two direct consequences: first, it establishes the diaphanous being’s bodily form as a concrete indicator of its psychological simplicity and transparency; second, it renders explicit what had heretofore remained implicit regarding the status of the diaphanous being’s body as a specifically *aesthetic* object in the Kantian sense. As Williams observes, “the fact that [the diaphanous being] remains ‘unclassified’ testifies to its aesthetic value, for the world cannot ‘use’ it, even for contemplation.”⁶⁰ Williams’s definition of the aesthetic refers to Kant’s famous definition of “beauty” in the *Critique of Judgment* as “purposiveness without purpose.”⁶¹ Similarly, Pater states early in “Diaphaneité” that “the spirit which” the diaphanous being “forms is the very opposite of that which regards life as a game of skill, and values things and persons as marks or counters of something to be gained, or achieved, beyond them” (*MS* 216). Hence, even as the diaphanous being’s “spirit” does not understand things and people of the world in terms of their utility as means to an end, so too does the diaphanous being’s body not seek to achieve anything apart from the expression of its own effortless transparency, just as classical sculpture displays nothing beyond the absolute identity between its inner and outer meaning.

Pater expresses the aesthetic “purposiveness without purpose” of the diaphanous being’s body in specifically erotic terminology, describing its rejection of practical utility in favor of aesthetic “wholeness” as a rejection of the imperative to gender distinction and sexual reproduction, which he explicitly associates with the calm repose and otherworldliness characteristic of classical Greek sculpture: “The beauty of the Greek statues was a sexless

beauty; the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of impotence, an ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a divine beauty and significance of its own” (*MS 220*). This physical description of Greek sculpture, which exhibits Pater’s characteristic use of negation to express absolute difference, ascribes “moral sexlessness” and “impotence” as physical indicators of the diaphanous being’s refutation of the gendered eroticism of reproductive human sexuality, which serves as a transparent indicator of the diaphanous being’s negation of the reproductive imperative expressed by the hierarchical dialectics of the post-Coleridgean idealist aesthetic critic.

Moreover, just as the diaphanous being’s theoretical negations render it both remarkably self-sufficient (as the place “where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point”) while simultaneously endowing it with an antithetical purpose in the larger realm of “the moral world,” so too does the diaphanous body’s erotic rejection of sexual reproduction in favor of “an ineffectual wholeness of nature” renders its body both self-sufficient as a aesthetically “purposeless” object, possessing “a divine beauty and significance of its own,” while simultaneously endowing it with a *negative* purpose in the larger realm of world-historical development. This diaphanous body finds its ultimate expression in Charlotte Corday, the murderer of Marat and one of the most iconic figures of the French Revolution. Pater’s description of this revolutionary homicide is mostly a direct quotation from Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* (1837):

Over and over again the world has been surprised by the heroism, the insight, the passion, of this clear crystal nature. Poetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send. “What,” says Carlyle, of

Charlotte Corday, “What if she had emerged from her secluded stillness, suddenly like a star; cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-demonic splendour; to gleam for a moment, and in a moment be extinguished; to be held in memory, so bright complete was she, through long centuries!” (*MS* 220-221)

What is perhaps most striking about this passage are the similarities between the imagery Carlyle uses to describe Charlotte Corday and the images Pater uses to describe the diaphanous being: her emergence from a “secluded stillness” appears to be the natural environment of one who embodies the “colourless, unclassified purity of life,” her star-like “gleam” suggests something of the “fine edge of light,” her “bright completeness” echoes the “wholeness of nature,” her “half-angelic, half-demonic splendour” hints at non-reproductive “impotence” characteristic of hybrid beings.

Carlyle’s description of Charlotte Corday, however, resonates quite differently in *The French Revolution*.⁶² Carlyle’s characterization of Corday expresses his concept of “heroism” as she acts as a self-determining agent of historical change, an individual who stands over and above the common run of humanity, endowed the semi-divine authority and autonomy of a woman whose potential “to impart a sense of order to life was perverted, in Carlyle’s view, into an anarchic force.”⁶³ By contrast, in Pater’s essay Corday’s “heroism” is passive rather than active, as the “victim” whom “humanity” has chosen to “send to her grave” as a sacrifice to the forces of historical change. Dellamora has called attention to the extent to which this description of Corday as a “human victim”

suggests that when Pater speaks of the passion of the diaphanous type he has in mind not only desire but also what elsewhere he refers to as ‘sympathy,’ an outgoing concern for others. [...] Corday witnesses an excess of generosity when, during her trial, she asserts

“I killed one man to save a hundred thousand; a villain to save innocents; a savage wild-beast to give repose to my country. I was a Republican before the Revolution; I never wanted energy.”⁶⁴

Pater’s recasting of Corday as a passive victim of transcendent historical forces provides a figure for his “self-negating” relationship to the “clerical” concept of critical authority embodied in the thought of nineteenth-century British critics writing in the tradition of Coleridge. The quotation from *The French Revolution* represents not only Pater’s engagement with Carlyle’s characterization of Charlotte Corday but also an implicit engagement with Carlyle’s position as preeminent British interpreter of Fichte and his arrogation of Fichtean thought to support the distinctly British idea of the “national clerisy.” As stated previously, Carlyle was one of the first champions of Fichte’s thought in Britain, using his concept of “the Divine Idea” and the scholar as “instructor of mankind” to support his characterization of writers and poets as “the dispensers and living types of God’s everlasting wisdom, to show it in their writings and actions, in such particular form as their own particular times require it in” and “the priest[s] of Literature and Philosophy, to interpret their mysteries to the common man.”⁶⁵ Carlyle is thus firmly within the tradition of what Dowling calls “Coleridge’s vision of a national clerisy”: “that ‘permanent, nationalized, learned order,’ one part of which was to ‘remain at the fountain heads of the humanities, in cultivating and enlarging the knowledge already possessed,’ and the other larger portion of which was to ‘be distributed throughout the country, so as not to leave even the smallest integral part or division without a resident guide, guardian, and instructor.’ And behind Coleridge’s notion there lies, once again, the authority of that organic conception of language and culture” that he absorbed from Romantic philology.⁶⁶

Thus the concept of the national clerisy, founded upon Romantic philology and its hierarchical dialectics, became the intellectual foundation for the “Victorian ideal of civilization” that would find its articulation not only in the writings Pater’s critical predecessors such as Coleridge, Carlyle, and Arnold, but also among many members of the Old Mortality Society itself who “shared [...] the ideal of a national clerisy” with Broad Churchmen writing under the direct influence of Coleridge’s theological thought.⁶⁷ Most significantly, Pater’s early renown at Oxford was due to his status as protégé of Benjamin Jowett, professor of Greek and future Master of Balliol College, who would become famous for revamping the classical *literæ humaniores* course of study at Oxford. As Frank M. Turner states, Arnold and Jowett’s “vision of Hellenism was directly rooted in idealist philosophy and in turn served to establish philosophic idealism as one of the chief intellectual bonds of the late century university-educated generation. [...] Jowett was also very much at one with the entire British idealist tradition stemming from Coleridge and Carlyle.”⁶⁸

Pater’s quotation of the passage from Carlyle’s *French Revolution* therefore not only represents an engagement with Carlyle’s iconic representation of Corday or his authority as an interpreter of Fichte, but also reveals his engagement with the concept of clerical authority. This is the form of authority that defines the idealist critical tradition that Pater attempts to enter, stemming from the early nineteenth-century writings of Coleridge and Carlyle to the later writings of Arnold. Yet it is a critical tradition that reproduces itself by the very means of hierarchical dialectics and Romantic philology that he militates against throughout “Diaphaneité.” Pater therefore returns to German idealism to discover to discover a theory of negation that has not yet been articulated in British criticism, but in some sense haunts the thought of earlier idealist critics.

Inhabiting the Negative: “Coleridge,” “Winckelmann,” and *Bildung*

Although Pater had won some renown at Oxford for the essays delivered to the Old Mortality Society, his public literary career truly began with the anonymous publication of “The Writings of Coleridge” in the January 1866 issue of the *Westminster Review*, and “Winckelmann” in the January 1867 issue of the same publication. In “The Writings of Coleridge,” Pater critiques Coleridge’s conservative, anti-modern “struggle against the application of the relative spirit to moral and religious questions” and consequently celebrates of his aesthetic theories and poetic achievements.⁶⁹ Pater’s discussion intervened in two related mid-Victorian critical discourses. First, Pater’s discussion of Coleridge’s struggle against the relative spirit characteristic of modernity as, indeed, a “struggle against the increasing life of the mind itself,” a comment that indicates Pater’s allegiance to evolutionary theories of social and scientific development advocated by the radical *Westminster*. Secondly, Pater’s condemnation of Coleridge’s over-reliance on the systematic philosophies of Kant and Schelling, which nevertheless receive praise for their capacity to inspire Coleridge’s aesthetic theories and poetic practices. Here, Pater implicitly responds to thinkers such as John Hutchinson Stirling, Matthew Arnold, and Benjamin Jowett, whose attempts to arrogate Kantian and Hegelian idealism in support of liberal Christian belief were quickly gaining traction at Oxford in the mid-1860s.

With the background of the Old Mortality essays in mind, however, one can also see “The Writings of Coleridge” as a transitional piece, returning to some of the distinct concerns introduced in “Diaphaneité” and setting the stage for the extended reconsideration of those concerns in “Winckelmann.” “The Writings of Coleridge” *prima facie* represents the continuation of Pater’s complex negotiation with the clerical intellectual authority embodied by the Coleridgean tradition of aesthetic criticism and its dependence on the hierarchical forms of

dialectic argumentation associated with post-Kantian idealism.⁷⁰ Further, and most important, Pater's excursions on the Higher Criticism near the end of the essay returns to the analysis of the relationship between human subjectivity and aesthetics initially explored in "Diaphaneitè," thereby setting the stage for the "Winckelmann" essay's exploration of the relations among human subjectivity, homoeroticism, and negation.

While in "Diaphaneitè" Pater explains that the un-gendered, non-reproductive, aesthetically purposeless body of the diaphanous being serves as a transparent indicator of its psychological "simplicity," in "The Writings of Coleridge" Pater asserts that, in a post-Christian era, the subjective states of "those who are capable of a passion for perfection," characterized as an "inward longing, inward chastening, inward joy," can only be represented or elicited by the "modern artist or philosopher" (C 126-127). Pater critiques Coleridge's view that the waning of belief in the supernatural elements of Christianity inevitably leads to the "evapora[tion]" of "the spiritual element in life [...], that we shall have to accept a life with narrow horizons, without disinterestedness, harshly cut off from the springs of life in the past." He also claims that the subjective experiences that constitute "the delicacies of the higher morality of the few" are, in fact, permanent mental states articulated within the particular intellectual framework available to the culture at a particular historical moment (C 127). Consequently, one of the hallmarks of the "relative" modern spirit is the gradual replacement of religion and theology by art and philosophy as the means of externally representing refined forms of "inward" human subjectivity.⁷¹

Pater's reconsideration of the relationship between human subjectivity and aesthetics in "The Writings of Coleridge" seems, at first glance, to be a retreat from the radical implications of his discussion of the "eternal outline of the antique" embodied by the diaphanous being. While

“Diaphaneité” attempted to give a transcendental account of the “basement type” that could effect “the regeneration of the world” through a *metaphorical* comparison between the body of the diaphanous being to the “the eternal outline of the antique” embodied in Greek sculpture, in “The Writings of Coleridge” Pater calls attention to the aesthetic productions of “the modern artist or philosopher” and their *literal* ability to represent heightened states of human subjectivity. Pater accomplishes this move from the figural to the literal by presenting a historical argument about the progressive evolution of the aesthetic and its capability to express human subjectivity, indicating his embrace of a “relative,” immanent account of the evolving, dynamic relationship between subjectivity and aesthetics.

This immanent account of aesthetic development finds its most elaborate articulation in Pater’s 1867 “Winckelmann” essay. In this piece, Pater presents an account of the life of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the late eighteenth-century German art historian famous for his critical studies of ancient Greek sculpture and as an initiator of the “Hellenic revival” in German literary culture. Although Pater’s essay is ostensibly a review of Henry Lodge’s 1850 translation of Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art among the Greeks* and Otto Hahn’s *Biographische Aufsätze*, Stefano Evangelista notes that “it is also a biographical study of Winckelmann in its own right; it is a critique of ancient Greek art and a critique of Winckelmann’s critique of ancient Greek art, [and] it is itself written in the style of Winckelmann’s *History of Ancient Art among the Greeks*, using the study of aesthetic questions to offer a total characterisation of the culture a past age.”⁷² Winckelmann’s art historical writings also provided the foundation for Hegel’s theoretical account of the historically evolving relationship between aesthetics and culture—a philosophy that was highly influential on Pater’s own aesthetic theories. As Pater states, “Hegel can give us theoretical reasons why not poetry but sculpture should be the most sincere and exact

expression of the Greek ideal. By a happy, unperplexed dexterity, Winckelman [*sic*] solves the question in the concrete. It is what Goethe calls his *Gewahrwerden der Griechischen Kunst*, his *finding* of Greek art” (*W* 84).

Pater’s essay presents a narrative of the life of Winckelmann, describing his “finding” of classical Greek art and the development of his aesthetic ideal at the end of the eighteenth century. Pater focuses on what late-Victorian aesthetic philosopher Bernard Bosanquet calls Winckelmann’s “appreciation of organic development in art,” and what Pater himself describes as Winckelmann’s understanding that “the Hellenic manner is the blossom of the Hellenic spirit and culture, that spirit and culture depend on certain conditions, and those conditions are peculiar to a certain age” (*W* 107).⁷³ He describes Winckelmann’s aesthetic theory in terms borrowed from Hegel’s *Aesthetik*:

As the mind itself has had an historical development, one form of art, by the very limitations of its material, may be more adequate than another for the expression of any one phase of its expression of any one phase of its experience. Different attitudes of the imagination have a native affinity with different types of sensuous form, so that they combine easily and entirely. The arts may thus be ranged in a series which corresponds to the series of developments in the human mind itself. (*W* 97)

Pater insists that “[t]his [...] is what we have to ask about a work of art—Did it at the age in which it was produced express in terms of sense, did it present to the eye or ear, man’s knowledge about himself and his relation to the world in its most rectified and concentrated form?” (*W* 94). Consequently, he uses the theory of “organic development” in order to describe the historically evolving relationship between aesthetic form and human subjectivity. This theory of organic development, or *Bildung* in its German iteration, gives an account of how and

why particular aesthetic forms evolve into the preeminent medium for the expression and experience of “remote, refined and intense” forms of psychological interiority.

The concept of *Bildung*, which can be loosely translated into English as “development,” “education,” or “cultivation,” originated in sixteenth-century German Pietistic theology and was given two of its most influential definitions in the late eighteenth century by Winckelmann and by Johann Gottfried von Herder. Winckelmann defined *Bildung* as the acquisition of knowledge of the classical past, while Herder defined it as the individual’s development, by means of philosophical reflection, towards an organic unity that develops the individual’s abilities to their fullest, and therefore drives social progress or social *Bildung*.⁷⁴ In Victorian Britain, *Bildung* was most famously associated with Goethe, the most renowned literary advocate of the specifically Herderian understanding of *Bildung*. Like the concept of the clerisy, *Bildung* was imported into Victorian aesthetic thought through the writings of Coleridge, Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and, by the late 1860s, Matthew Arnold. In “Winckelmann” Pater offers an account of *Bildung* strongly influenced by the writings of Winckelmann, Herder, and Hegel. In his account, development occurs when the disintegration of the individual’s subjectivity—what Hegel calls the “encounter with the negative”—allows for the reformation of consciousness through the reinterpretation of knowledge already immanent *within* consciousness.

Bildung plays a crucial role in both the form and the content of “Winckelmann.” Pater demonstrates that in the post-Christian, post-supernatural world of Victorian modernity, the negations that cause the disintegration of selfhood as a means towards personal and social *Bildung* manifest themselves primarily through the individual’s imaginative encounter with particular works of art from the past—what he terms the “negative quality” of Winckelmann’s “handling of the sensuous side of Greek art.” Specifically, Pater asserts that it is the aesthetic

work's ability to arouse homoerotic desire that enables the *Bildung* of the aesthetic critic, bringing into being a consciousness capable of intellectual sympathy with a historically distant culture. "Winckelmann" therefore represents Pater's attempt to represent a homoerotic consciousness adequate to the task of being an aesthetic critic within a modernity that embraces the "relative spirit" and rejects attempts to find absolute truth, and one that favors immanent over transcendental knowledge.

DeLaura has shown that the "Winckelmann" essay was a direct response to Arnold's "Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment". Arnold's essay expresses a hierarchical dialectic argument, where he opposes the classical and pagan "religion of pleasure" to the Christian "religion of sorrow," and consequently subsumes both concepts into a "synthetic" third term, "imaginative reason." Similar to the "Diaphaneitè" essay, Pater uses "Winckelmann" to question Arnold's dialectical understanding of the relation between pagan and medieval religious culture. Instead, Pater insists on the importance of Winckelmann's Hellenic revival for the development of Goethe's "romanticism," and the consequent traces of pagan religious sentiment in modern culture. Bearing this point in mind, Dellamora asserts the importance of *Bildung* in Pater's description of Winckelmann's death at the hands of the thief Arcangeli:

[T]he debate that Pater engages with Arnold [in "Winckelmann"] is fought over the remains, so to speak, of German literary tradition, especially Goethe. Because the German writer seemed to include within himself the whole range of possibilities of a modern hero of culture, from the time of Carlyle's identification with Goethe in the 1820s, he is a pervasive presence in British discussions of cultural ideals. [...] He is seen as the greatest living exponent of *Bildung*, of "self-development" and "self-cultivation,"

to use Victorian terms; of what Carlyle refers to in an essay of 1827 as” harmonious development or [*sic*, of] being.”⁷⁵

“Winckelmann” is, in many ways, a rewriting of “Diaphaneité” that foregrounds the concept of *Bildung* in its account of how Winckelmann’s “contemplation of the ideal works of the ancients received a sort of inspiration through which he opened a new sense for art” (*W* 80).⁷⁶ In both of these essays, Pater engages with Arnold as a way of positioning his own critical voice within the larger tradition of nineteenth-century British aesthetic criticism, and both contain a radical reconsideration of a term associated with German Romantic thought that had been imported into British critical discourse in the early nineteenth century. “Winckelmann” even includes many phrases and sentences originally used in “Diaphaneité,” including his description of Winckelmann possession of a “moral sexlessness,” leading Francis Roellinger to assert that Pater had the figure of Winckelmann specifically in mind when describing the diaphanous being.⁷⁷

Most significant, however, is Pater’s return to the concept of negation first introduced in “Diaphaneité,” and his addition of a specifically homoerotic inflection to the concept of “moral sexlessness.” In “Winckelmann,” Pater identifies a “negative quality” in “Winckelmann’s handling of the sensuous side of Greek art,” making use of the concept in its specifically Hegelian iteration (*W* 103). He does so to reconfigure the process of *Bildung* vis-à-vis the aesthetic—how the contemplation of works of art catalyzes the process of individual *Bildung*, and how, in turn, individual *Bildung* catalyzes the organic development of aesthetic form.

Dellamora asserts that Pater’s account of Winckelmann’s death at the hands of the thief Arcangeli “might be considered in light of *Bildung*, as Hegel had discussed the term in the *Phenomenology of Mind* [alternatively known as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, due to the double meaning of the word “*Geist*” in German], a book read by Pater already in 1862 [...] Hegel

argued that an individual needed to undergo an experience of personal disintegration [in Hegel's terms, "undergoing the encounter with the negative"] if he or she were to overcome the limits of their prescribed existence."⁷⁸ I want to emphasize that Pater's narrative of the death of Winckelmann notably dramatizes a concept of negation that suffuses Pater's description of the critic's aesthetic *Bildung*.

Scholars such as M.H. Abrams regard Hegel's discussion of *Bildung* in the *Phenomenology* as a *Bildungsroman*, insofar as this work offers an account of the growth and development of "spirit" over time towards absolute consciousness of both itself and the world, placing the concept of negation at the very center of its account of individual and social progress.⁷⁹ Hegel defines "negation" as an obstacle that an individual encounters and engages with on his or her path towards self-development and self-knowledge: "The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair. For what happens on it is not what is ordinarily understood when the word 'doubt' is used: shilly-shallying about this or that presumed truth, followed by a return to that truth again, after the doubt has been appropriately dispelled—so that at the end of the process the matter is taken to be what it was in the first place."⁸⁰

Negation, therefore, is Hegel's way of explaining how a system can "organically develop" without the necessity of introducing external influences into the system. As C.J. Arthur explains,

Hegel's method depends [...] on the dialectical point that when a given claim to knowledge is to be rejected as untrue "the exposition of the untrue consciousness in its untruth is not merely a negative procedure," because if the result of the argument is properly understood as a determinate negation of the original thesis, "a new form has

thereby immediately arisen.” That is to say, to refute is not simply to deny, but to find relevant grounds for such rejection. Every claim to knowledge has its specific refutation, and this involves consciousness in a new set of commitments. [...] Validity appears here not in relation to an external measure but in accordance with what consciousness provides “from within itself” at each stage.⁸¹

In Hegel’s account of *Bildung*, development occurs when negation, by eliciting the disintegration of the individual’s subjectivity, allows for the reformation of consciousness through the reinterpretation of knowledge already immanent *within* consciousness. In other words, an individual comes to greater self-awareness not through the introduction of knowledge external to the self, but rather through an encounter with the negative that causes one to have a radically different relationship to the knowledge already present in one’s consciousness. This Hegelian conception of negation plays a crucial role in both the form and content of the “Winckelmann” essay. Pater demonstrates that in Victorian modernity, the negations that bring about the disintegration of selfhood as the means towards personal and social *Bildung* manifest themselves primarily through the encounter with the aesthetic object—specifically, the “negative quality” of Winckelmann’s “handling of the sensuous side of Greek art.”

For Pater the encounter with the negative is of a particular kind. He asserts that it is ancient Greek sculpture’s eroticization of male body that creates a relationship of identification between the observer and the creator of the aesthetic object across historical time—what he nominates Winckelmann’s “reconciliation with the spirit of Greek sculpture” (*W* 87). More than any previous biographer of Winckelmann, Pater placed particular emphasis on the specifically homoerotic quality, or “temperament,” of Winckelmann’s art-historical writings. He states that Winckelmann’s

[a]ffinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men. He has known, he says, many young men more beautiful than Guido's archangel. These friendships, bringing him in contact with the pride of human form, and staining his thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation with the spirit of Greek sculpture. (*W* 87)

After making this assertion, Pater quotes an impassioned letter sent from Winckelmann to a "young nobleman, Friedrich von Berg" about "the beauty of *man*": "As it is confessedly the beauty of *man* which is to be conceived under our general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inform instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female" (*W* 87-88).

Critics have continually ascribed Pater's decision to write on Winckelmann to their shared receptiveness to the male homoeroticism suggested by ancient Greek sculpture. However, the relationship Pater's essay articulates between the critical subject and aesthetic object is much more complex than the simple recognition of a shared sexual orientation.⁸² "Winckelmann" articulates a complicated circuit of trans-historical identifications existing between Winckelmann and Greek sculpture, as well as between Winckelmann and Pater himself—a relay driven by a shared homoerotic "temperament" that is aroused by the aesthetic object. Pater explicitly equates this experience of desire with the disintegrative encounter with the negative: "One result of this temperament is a serenity, a *Heiterkeit*, which characterizes Winckelmann's handling of the sensuous side of Greek art. This serenity is, perhaps, at bottom,

a negative quality; it is the absence of any sense of want, or corruption, or shame.” As Alex Potts states, “The Greek Arcadia that Pater evokes is [...] framed by death and dissolution. It is of itself insistently imbued with a disturbing absence [...]. While on one level the sensuous plenitude of the antique is being set against its absence in the modern world, lack, loss and absence are seen to already reside within the very ideal being conjured up.”⁸³

Yet it is precisely the negative aspect of the Winckelmannian Greek ideal that allows for the disintegration and reorganization of the aesthetic critic’s consciousness under the imperatives of Hegelian *Bildung*. The recognition of a shared homoerotic “temperament” does not add new knowledge to the individual’s consciousness *per se*, but rather enables greater self-knowledge by forcing the individual to pass through the negative encounter in order to form a new interpretation of one’s own subjectivity. Thus Pater finds in Winckelmann “a wistful sense of something lost to be regained, [rather] than the desire of discovering anything new,” and approvingly quotes Goethe’s assertion that the “secret [...] influence” of Winckelmann’s writings is that “[o]ne learns nothing from him, but one becomes something” (*W* 81, 84).

Pater’s association of homoeroticism with the negative aspect of *Bildung* seems, at first glance, rather arbitrary. There appears to be no necessary connection between same-sex desire and the disintegration of personality necessitated by Hegelian *Bildung*. However, I want to suggest that the relationship between homoeroticism and negation can be understood by turning to the concept of “public secrecy” offered by anthropologist Michael Taussig in his study *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (1999). According to Taussig, the public secret is a negative form of cultural knowledge, defined as “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated.”⁸⁴ As summarized by Kenneth Surin, “[t]he public secret involves among other things the creation of social subjects who ‘know what not to know,’

thereby instituting a pervasive ‘epistemic murk’ whose core is an ‘uncanny’ dialectic of concealment and revelation, though the secret revealed in this case is, qua public secret, not really a secret.”⁸⁵ Because the public secret is not really a secret, it can never be exposed as such, only reconstituted into different forms within a dialectic of concealment and revelation, through what Hegel calls “the labor of the negative.”

Consequently, the existence of a “public secret” cannot be positively proven as such, insofar as it exists as a negative form of knowledge productive of a “pervasive epistemic murk,” and therefore cannot be proven by recourse to empirical evidence. However, “Winckelmann” enables a reading of a specifically “aesthetic” homoeroticism as a form of public secrecy in mid-Victorian culture. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the very explicitness of Pater’s homoerotic references in “Winckelmann” complicates models of the history of sexuality offered by contemporary queer theorists writing under the influence of Foucault and Barthes. Although scholars have been unable to find records of the reaction to the initial appearance of Pater’s essay in the *Westminster*, “Winckelmann” was reprinted in *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* with all references to the art historian’s “romantic, fervent friendships with young men” intact.

Although *The Renaissance* caused a considerable amount of controversy and scandal upon its initial publication, most critical ire was directed towards the supposedly “hedonistic” and “atheistic” “Conclusion,” rather than “Winckelmann.” Donald L. Hill, in his critical edition of *The Renaissance*, makes the following observation:

Although Winckelmann was more than twice as long as any of the other essays and surely among the most interesting, reviewers let it pass without much comment. In Colvin’s opinion it was ‘completely excellent from beginning to end,’ the one essay in

which the reader would find “most of those well mediated and perfectly expressed views of comparative criticism, and descriptions of various phases of culture in their relations to each other, which are one of the great strengths of the book.”⁸⁶

Indeed, with the notable exception of John Addington Symonds’s assessment in the *Academy*, nearly all reviewers of *The Renaissance* refrained from remarking on the homoerotic aspects of the essay.⁸⁷

This is not to say, however, that mid- and late-Victorian discussions of same-sex desire shared Pater’s seemingly unabashed candor. Richard St. John Tyrwhitt’s infamous 1877 review of Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets* states that “Greek love and nature and beauty went frequently against nature” and makes reference to Symonds’s embarrassing displays of “phallic ecstasy and palpitations at male beauty.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, as Frank M. Turner points out, in the 1860s “clerical interpreters” of Plato’s works “were frequently perplexed by the morally troubling passages” of the dialogues:

Although Shelley had written a tolerant essay on the subject [of Greek homosexuality], his views did not set the tone for educated mid-Victorians. [...] W.H. Thompson, a respected Cambridge classical scholar and master of Trinity College, stated his incredulity in regard to certain remarks in the *Phaedrus*. “It seems impossible that Plato can seriously have entertained the paradox that [love between males] was a necessary step towards moral perfection. All that can fairly be gathered from his words is, that those who struggle victoriously with appetite, will come out of the conflict the stronger and happier than they were before it commenced—that the trials of the soul are the occasions of its triumphs.” Thompson in his anxiety had simply fled from the text.⁸⁹

Furthermore, Turner points out that Benjamin Jowett's *Dialogues of Plato* (1875) contain a long and tortured account of Platonic homoeroticism that "acknowledges that Plato had said what he said about love between men without admitting that Plato had meant what he said in the way that he had said it. Jowett's idea, shared with other Hegelian commentators, that a later age was able to comprehend more fully the thought of past epochs provided one ground of his reading of these troubling passages."⁹⁰

Pater's references to homoerotic desire were not, therefore, particularly scandalous in and of themselves. What makes Pater's essay remarkable is his lack of embarrassment regarding Winckelmann's responsiveness to "the beauty of *man*," and his discussion of homoerotic desire as a definitively *modern* rather than classical phenomenon. This is not to say, however, that "Winckelmann," is merely a protest against a mid-Victorian academic discourse that censured same-sex desire. To argue, as some have done, that "Winckelmann" is an instance of what Michel Foucault has famously called the late nineteenth century's "reverse discourse" of homosexuality, the moment when homosexuality "began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was [...] disqualified," is ultimately misguided.⁹¹ To speak of Pater's essay as an attempt to tell the "truth" about Winckelmann's homosexuality would, indeed, simply reproduce the naïve theory of truth that Hegel's theory of negativity specifically repudiates.⁹²

Instead of arguing for the open recognition of Winckelmann's homosexuality, then, Pater uses the logic of negation to describe how it was precisely the *hidden* nature of Winckelmann's homoerotic desires that rendered him capable of transcending the limitations of his "tarnished" and "colorless" era, and becoming the originator of modern aesthetic criticism (*W* 93). By virtue

of its relative social invisibility in the modern world, Pater suggests, homoerotic desire can exist as a determinate absence in the mind that, when it is finally revealed to the self, ruptures and radically transforms individual consciousness.

As we have seen, Pater associates the experience of homoerotic desire with the Hegelian “encounter with the negative” that creates a new interpretation of the knowledge that is immanent within consciousness and enables the development of individual *Bildung*. This encounter with the negative depends upon the existence of immanent knowledge that is *withheld* from consciousness—that is to say, knowledge that exists within consciousness in the form of a determinate absence—a knowledge that is culturally “hidden” through a socially instantiated homophobia that either ignores or marginalizes discourses expressing same-sex desire. Of course, the fact of the withholding only becomes apparent when one is finally aware of the presence of the knowledge that had heretofore been hidden. This revelation creates a situation where what had once been mere absence retrospectively transforms into a meaningful or significant absence, such as Winckelmann’s discovery of the “hidden” presence of same-sex eroticism in ancient Greek sculpture. Anthropologist and critical theorist Michael Taussig’s description of this negative revelation calls attention to

the truly complex and yet marvelous notions of time compression and time expansion thereby involved in the events and material objects that occupy the memory as the past careens into the shocked present-time, such that time itself is suspended out of time. [...] [This experience] amounts not only to a first approximation, if not ‘solution,’ to age-old questions about symbolism and the nature of the connection between a symbol and what it stands for, but also establishes a “new reality.”⁹³

This “shock,” which Taussig associates with the Hegelian encounter with the negative, is at once both intellectual and visceral, creating a “new reality” for consciousness—in other words, enabling the evolution of individual *Bildung*.

Similarly, Pater judiciously quotes from Plato’s *Phaedrus* to characterize Winckelmann’s especial attunement to the formal ancient Greek sculpture. He does so in order to express how Winckelmann’s critical insights depend upon his ability to use ancient art as a means to uncover “forgotten” erotic knowledge “hidden” within his own consciousness, rather than the gradual acquisition of new knowledge about the intellectual and spiritual culture of the Hellenic period:

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 is *en rapport* with it; it penetrates him, and becomes part of his temperament. He remodels his writings with constant renewals of insight; he catches the thread of a whole sequence of laws in some hollowing of the hand, or dividing of the hair; he seems to realize that fancy of the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself, as if the mind of one

φιλοσοπηεσσασ ποτε μετ ερετος [Transliteration: philosophêsas pote met' erêtos.

Translation: seeking knowledge alongside (erotic) love], fallen into a new cycle, were beginning its intellectual culture over again, yet with a certain power of anticipating its results” (*W* 88-89).

Pater focuses his attention squarely on the *effect* ancient artworks had upon Winckelmann—they “call out new senses” from within Winckelmann that are “fitted to deal with” the sensuality of Greek sculpture, they “penetrate” his consciousness. The “constant renewals of insight” Winckelmann gleans from sculptural details seem not to come from the sculpture, but rather from *inside* him as “the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind

itself.” As such, the true subject of Winckelmann’s criticism is not actually Greek sculpture in and of itself, but rather its ability to provide the occasion for “constant renewals of insight” through the uncovering of “forgotten,” “hidden,” *withheld* knowledge.

Furthermore, Pater characterizes this “hidden” knowledge as at once both intellectual and erotic, “*philosophêsas*” and “*erêtos*.” Elsewhere in the essay, Pater also calls attention to Winckelmann “enthusiasm” which “in the broad Platonic sense of the *Phaedrus*, was the secret of [Winckelmann’s] divinary power over the Hellenic world. This enthusiasm, dependent as it is to a great degree on bodily temperament, gathering into itself the stress of the nerves and the heat of the blood, has a power of reinforcing the purer motions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement” (*W* 87). Winckelmann’s insight into ancient Greek sculpture, founded as it is upon the recovery of hidden self-knowledge, has the ability to “call out new senses” in Winckelmann because it imbues the analytical power of the intellect with the visceral force of erotic desire, creating what Taussig refers to as the apocalyptic “shock” of the negative that “suspends time itself out of time,” or in Pater’s words, creates a mind “fallen into a new cycle, [...] beginning its intellectual culture over again, yet with a certain power of anticipating its results.”

Ultimately, Winckelmann’s insight into ancient Greek sculpture came as the direct result of its ability to arouse his homoerotic desires. By experiencing the “almost physical excitement” aroused by these sculptures, Winckelmann arrived at the literally “shocking” realization that his erotic desires for other men had been “hidden” within his consciousness. He not only gains sympathetic insight into Hellenic culture, but also develops a new form of critical consciousness. Pater expands upon observations made in “Diaphaneité” and “Coleridge” by calling to Winckelmann’s language, which has a “form” that is “express, clear, objective,” gaining

inspiration from “direct contact with the spirit of youth,” rather than asserting its own form upon the other in a bid for reproducing its own intellectual authority.

The “Winckelmann” essay as a whole represents Pater’s attempt to describe a critical consciousness adequate to the task of being an aesthetic critic within a modernity that embraces the “relative spirit” and rejects attempts to find absolute truth, one that favors immanent rather than transcendental knowledge: “It is easy to indulge the common-place metaphysical instinct,” Pater states, “but a taste for metaphysics may be one of those things which we must renounce if we mean to mould our lives to artistic perfection. Philosophy serves culture not by the fancied gifts of absolute or transcendental knowledge, but by suggesting questions which help one to detect the passion and strangeness and dramatic contrasts of life” (*W* 109). In this wholesale rejection of metaphysics, Pater explicitly repudiates the Coleridgean model of criticism as the attempt “to arrest every object in an eternal outline” (*C* 107), defining the aesthetic critic of immanent modernity as one who can “detect the passion and strangeness and dramatic contrasts of life”—one who is viscerally aroused by homoeroticism in art, and one whose *Bildung* is characterized by the cultivation of homoerotic self-knowledge.

Pater’s essay, however, stops just short of elaborating upon the specific literary practice required of the aesthetic critic who attempts to offer an immanent, “modern” account of both individual and social “organic development.” Although he praises Winckelmann’s “express, clear, objective” style, as well as Robert Browning’s definitively “modern [...] poetry of situations,” Pater does not offer a theoretical account of the appropriate literary form for the modern aesthetic critic (*W* 100). As such, he ends “Winckelmann” with a brief consideration of literary language, or “poetry,” and its status as the preeminent aesthetic form for the

representation of modern subjectivity. Defining poetry as “all literary production which attains the power of giving joy by its form as distinct from its matter,” Pater declares:

Only in this varied literary form can art command that width, variety, delicacy of resources, which will enable it to deal with the conditions of modern life. What modern art has to do in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom. [...] Can art represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent sense of freedom?

Pater’s famous question leaves one pondering both the specific meaning he assigns the word “freedom,” and how the seemingly rarefied concerns of literary form can possibly give “the sense of freedom.” Through this process, however, we begin to see how and why Pater began moving away from historicism as a way of engaging with negative erotics of the aesthetic object. Pater provides no further elaboration of the aesthetic critic in “Winckelmann,” preferring instead to “solve the question in the concrete,” through literary *practice*, in the process of writing critical accounts of aesthetic objects such as his famous description of “La Gioconda.” It is this attempt to put into practice the critical precepts outlined in “Winckelmann,” and the failures that emerge in his doing so, to which the next section turns.

Lady Lisa and the Fate of the Aesthetic Object

The intellectual stakes of Pater’s gradual shift from an idealist to a materialist understanding of cultural development can perhaps be seen most clearly in the description on *La Gioconda* found in the “Leonardo da Vinci” essay, originally published in the November 1869 issue of the *Fortnightly Review* and republished in *The Renaissance*. This famous passage represents Pater’s exemplary attempt to articulate an account of the aesthetic object from the

immanent perspective of the modern critic defined in the “Winckelmann” essay. In many ways, “Leonardo da Vinci” continues Pater’s preoccupation with the dialectical, progressive, and teleological Hegelian model of aesthetic development: Pater repeats the legend of Leonardo’s surpassing of his mentor Verrochio, calling it “one of those moments in which the progress of a great thing—here, that of the art of Italy—presses hard on the happiness of an individual, through whose discouragement and decrease, humanity, in more fortunate persons, comes a step nearer to its final success” (L 80). Pater also discusses late Renaissance art as the material embodiment of the larger intellectual shifts occurring in culture in a manner that clearly displays the influence of the *Aesthetics*, defining Leonardo’s “problem” as “the transformation of ideas into images” (L 88): “The movement of the fifteenth-century was two-fold; partly the Renaissance, partly also the coming of what is called the ‘modern spirit,’ with its realism its appeal to experience. It comprehended a return to antiquity, and a return to nature. Raphael represents the return to antiquity, and Leonardo the return to nature” (L 86).

Richard Dellamora has observed continuities between “Diaphaneitè,” “Winckelmann,” and “Leonardo,” characterizing the latter essay as Pater’s preeminent attempt in *The Renaissance* to embody “in the concrete” the critical practices described in the earlier essays: “Pater, tracing Leonardo’s position as subject of the essay, likewise traces the position he has devised for himself in such earlier essays as ‘Diaphaneitè’ and ‘Winckelmann.’ The Leonardo essay epitomizes the critical approach, usually termed impressionist, that Pater sets out in the preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [...]” Dellamora argues that one of the key aspects of the impressionist critical approach towards Leonardo lies in the fact that Pater “is interested as much or more in the legend of Leonardo and his school as he is in the painter himself. Accordingly, while biography and painterly autobiography do matter, Pater reads the

significance of Leonardo in terms of a tradition of critical response.”⁹⁴ Williams also notes Pater’s interest in the legendary aspects of Leonardo’s biography, stating that “Pater objects [...] to a scientific criticism that reduces the body of Leonardo’s work and the story of his life instead of constructing both as broadly and generously as possible. [...] Pater fights against the practice of restricting the historical ‘data’ to historical ‘facts.’ [...] Pater believed that past responses to a life and work offer a legitimate ‘first step’ in the approach towards the object of research ‘as it really is.’”⁹⁵

Consequently, the task Pater sets himself in crafting his description of *La Gioconda*, the painting that “is, in the truest sense, Leonardo’s masterpiece, the revealing instance of his mode of thought and work,” is not only to describe the immediate impression the painting makes upon the viewer by virtue of its formal elements, but the way that impression is fundamentally intertwined with the “element in it given to, not invented by, the master,” the way in which the individual experience of the painting is preconditioned by the viewer’s knowledge of the history of the painting’s critical reception (*L* 97). As Hill notes, “The mystery and charm of the Mona Lisa had been remarked and celebrated by many writers before Pater,” including famous descriptions in Michelet’s *Histoire de France* (1855), Gautier’s “Léonard de Vinci,” (1858), Clément’s *Michel-Ange, Léonard de Vinci, Raphael* (1861), and Houssaye’s *Histoire de Léonard de Vinci*” (1869), so that by the time Pater writes his account of the painting, *La Gioconda* is famous enough that he can confidently assert, “We all know the face and hands of the figure, set in its marble chair, in that circle of fantastic rocks, as in some fainted light under sea” (*L* 97). Within this context, therefore, the critic who attempts to provide an immanent account of *La Gioconda* must consider not only the aesthetic effect produced by the painting’s formal elements, but also the aesthetic effect created by the historicity of the painting itself.

Yet when Pater looks critically at the Mona Lisa, attuned to the effects elicited by the accretion of interpretations layered upon the image, he discovers that *La Gioconda* is already “expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire,” the formal concrescence of the entire history of eroticism in Europe leading up to the creation of the painting (L 98). He asserts that the “beauty” of *La Gioconda* is “wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions” drawn from the entirety of Western history: “All the thoughts and experiences of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have the power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias” (L 98-99). By interpreting the aesthetic object immanently, Pater sees *La Gioconda* is embedded within preexisting discourses that condition its reception in the present. Looked at in this way, he sees that the aesthetic object itself performs much the same work as the aesthetic critic, only in a different material form. The aesthetic effect Pater of the Mona Lisa derives its power through the objective formalization and expression of the various ways human erotic desire has manifested itself throughout Western history. The Paterian aesthetic critic comes to understand this by maintaining a self-conscious awareness of the way in which the critical history of the object conditions his perception of the painting in the present. To put it another way, when the critic performs a particular set of historicizing procedures upon the aesthetic object, the critic comes to understand that a work such as *La Gioconda* performs the same set of procedures upon human history itself.

This recognition calls attention to the oddly mimetic relationship between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object that inheres in Pater’s immanent critical method, one that places

him in a particularly fraught theoretical double-bind. The critic must confront the possibility that his attempt to engage with the artwork immanently, as an erotically-attuned, “modern” aesthetic critic, simply results in the projection of his own subjectivity upon the aesthetic object itself. Alternately, he must confront the equally problematic proposition that his critical subjectivity has disappeared entirely within the object, and that his critical account of the artwork is not really criticism at all, but simply a reproduction of the work in a different medium, that of prose. In either event, the aesthetic critic is in danger of subsuming difference into a totalizing identity, and thus reproducing the transcendental and hierarchical aspects of the Kantian argumentative structure that the Paterian aesthetic critic expressly seeks to avoid.

He navigates this potentially treacherous dialectic by crafting a description of the Mona Lisa that focuses on its representation of eroticism as a form of negativity, and in the process creates one of the most famous moments of *ekphrasis* in English prose:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and 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 hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern age. (99)

William Shuter has analyzed the description of *La Gioconda* within the context of what he sees as the recurring trope of “palingenesis,” or “rebirth,” that Pater derived from Hegelian thought: “From Pater’s point of view the essence of [Hegel’s] insight [into human culture] was embodied in Hegel’s imagery of cultural palingenesis. There is therefore no better way of demonstrating the creative influence of Hegel on Pater than by tracing the pattern of rebirth images that runs throughout his work.”⁹⁶ In the case of *La Gioconda*, Shuter maintains: “In the varied cultural perspectives reflected in this painting, Pater discerns an imaginative prefiguration of the conception of history as an all-inclusive synthesis.”⁹⁷

Both Williams and Peter Allan Dale have demonstrated that an engagement with the concept of history is a consistent theme in Pater’s writing, taking the form of a self-conscious and, indeed, creatively productive concern with the epistemological and aesthetic possibilities and limitations entailed by attempts to gain knowledge of the past. Williams in particular has identified a distinct repertoire of rhetorical moves in Pater’s historicist writings. Yet these revisionary understandings of Pater’s historicism run into certain limitations *vis-à-vis* Pater’s preoccupation with the relationship between historicism and eroticism. For example, in their discussions of the Leonardo essay, Dale dismisses Pater’s famous description of Da Vinci’s *La Gioconda* as a lurid and unjustly famous purple passage, while Williams’ detailed close reading of that same passage subordinates the erotic content of Pater’s *ekphrasis* to Mona Lisa’s status as a symbol of aesthetic historicism, “a profound historical paradox, a specifically embodied ‘figure’ of the transhistorical *Geist*” where “[t]he *Geist* is [...] figured as a person, and correlatively the modern person encompasses the present state of consummate development of *Geist*.”⁹⁸

However, Pater's description of *La Gioconda* is notable for its emphatic denial of the possibility of regeneration, its explicit rejection of any form of redemption. His description of the Mona Lisa as a "vampire" who has "been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave" characterizes her as a creature who is explicitly not "reborn" in either the pagan or Christian understanding of the term, but rather one who is "born" into a state of eternal death. Mona Lisa is not created anew throughout history but rather persistently carry what she has "learned" from "the secrets of the grave" into each new manifestation of her existence. Pater explicitly contrasts Mona Lisa with "Leda" and "Mary" as icons of reproductive femininity—icons which she vampirically incorporates into her own image, in the "mould" of her "changing lineaments." What Pater describes is emphatically not a form of rebirth or regeneration, but an endless cycle of negations recurring throughout history.

The particular set of images Pater uses are specifically chosen to negate any interpretation of Mona Lisa that might read her as a symbol of historical rebirth or redemption in the form of motherhood—in other words, any reading that attempts to interpret her metaphorically, within the context of heterosexual reproduction. Instead, the Pater's presentation of the Mona Lisa as vampiric and non-reproductive casts her as an erotic object that neither reciprocates nor produces anything in response to sexual desire, but rather gains its aesthetic power by absorbing and subsequently projecting back upon the viewer the "strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" that have manifested themselves throughout human history. In this way, *La Gioconda* becomes, in a sense, the diaphanous being's malevolent double, the embodiment of a "morally sexless" transparency now transformed into a non-reproductive erotic vampirism that, by virtue of its intransigent difference figured as a

continually birth-into-death, avoids either absorbing or being absorbed by the consciousness of the aesthetic critic.

Consequently, Pater's Mona Lisa comes across as an eroticized figure of Hegel's description of "the tremendous power of the negative" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength. [...]. But the life of Spirit is not the life what shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it. [...] Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.

Pater suggests that we consider his encounter with the Mona Lisa as a "tarrying with the negative" that ultimately "converts" the negative "into being" in his summation of the picture as "the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern age." In these lines, the aesthetic critic seems to have redeemed the destructive, vampiric eroticism of Mona Lisa by interpreting it as a Hegelian form of cultural diagnosis: Lady Lisa's destructive eroticism becomes historicized as the aesthetic embodiment of a particularly modern form of thought, "the symbol of the modern age." The aesthetic critic "converts into being" the negative erotic energies of the image when he described *La Gioconda* as representative of a specific, historically locatable form of the *Zeitgeist*.

Ultimately, however, Pater's gesture towards redemption at the end of his description of *La Gioconda* is merely a feint. The last lines of Pater's description suggest that the relationship between past and present is fundamentally unstable: "Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern age." Beginning with the adverb

“Certainly,” Pater either overcompensates for or ironically calls attention to the ambiguous relationship between the parallel clauses. On the one hand, Lady Lisa is the “symbol of the modern age” *because* she is “the embodiment of the old fancy;” the picture signals the moment when an actual supernatural belief became interpretable as a metaphorical account of human historical development. On the other hand, Pater’s description might also suggest that the picture sincerely embodies the “old fancy,” and is now metaphorically interpretable only from the perspective of the modern viewer who knows that the “modern philosophy” was originally derived from the “old fancy.”

While Williams believes that the ambiguity of these lines reflects the productive contradiction that lies at the heart of “aesthetic historicism,” I maintain that the uneasy relationship between past and present in these lines stems from the fundamental ambivalence of Pater’s immanent critical relationship to *La Gioconda*. Pater’s “absolute historicism” renders it impossible to make a definitive statement about the aesthetic object that does not somehow implicate the critic himself. Pater calls our attention to the aesthetic critic’s ambivalent relationship to the aesthetic object, one that is caused by his self-consciousness of his own particular historical situation—a critical uneasiness that comes when the critic knows that his knowledge of the aesthetic object is only true “relatively, and under conditions.” Hence, Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa indicates that the modern aesthetic critic, concerned as he is with maintaining an immanent relationship towards the aesthetic object, is always “tarrying with the negative,” yet might not be able to “convert it into being.”

In his description of *La Gioconda*, Pater runs against the limitations of Hegelian historicism for his particular form of aesthetic criticism, and his need to conceptualize a form of negativity existing apart from the all-absorbing operations of the *Geist*. In the next chapter of

this dissertation, I will argue that developments in late nineteenth-century anthropology enabled Pater to discover a set of literary forms and methods he could use to “tarry with the negative” *vis-à-vis* the historical aspect of the aesthetic object. Pater’s post-*Renaissance* mythological studies and his historical novel both attempt to erase the distinction between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object (between criticism and poetry), and are both fundamentally inspired by and trace their origins to the anthropological turn in post-Kantian idealist thought.

¹ Gerald Monsman, “Old Mortality at Oxford,” *Studies in Philology* 67.3 (1970), 359-390; W.E. Watson, ‘Life of Bishop John Wordsworth’ (1915); quoted in R.M. Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 61-62.

² Seiler, *Critical Heritage*, 62.

³ Seiler, *Critical Heritage*, 62.

⁴ Although Pater’s authorship of the early *Westminster Review* essays was not necessarily known to his Oxford colleagues, his philosophical and aesthetic views were well known at Oxford due his involvement in the Old Mortality Society as an undergraduate in the early 1860s as well as his prominence as the protégé of Benjamin Jowett—Humphry Ward recalled that by 1864 Pater was “vaguely celebrated [...] to have a new and daring philosophy of his own” A.C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 22.

⁵ See, for example, Christopher Hassall’s *Rupert Brooke: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) and Philip Carey’s decision to save Pater from the proposed “bonfire of the Great Victorians” in Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* (New York: George H. Doran, 1915).

⁶ Lesley Higgins, “No Time for Pater: The Silenced Other of Masculinist Modernism,” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams. (Wilmington, NC: ELT Press, 2002), 37-38.

⁷ “The Tragic Generation” was the title of Book IV of William Butler Yeats’ *Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

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- ⁸ René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, vol. 4 *The Later Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 381.
- ⁹ David DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1969), ix.
- ¹⁰ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, x; T.S. Eliot, "The Place of Pater," *Bookman* 70 (1930).
- ¹¹ Gerald Monsman "Old Mortality"; "Pater, Hopkins, and Fichte's Ideal Student," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 70 (1971): 365-76; *Walter Pater* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 29-39.
- ¹² Monsman, "Old Mortality," 366, also *Walter Pater*, 26.
- ¹³ Billie Andrew Inman, "The Intellectual Context of Pater's 'Conclusion'" *Prose Studies* 4:1 (May 1981), 12.
- ¹⁴ Inman "Intellectual Context," 28. Inman's exhaustive account of Pater's early intellectual influences can be found in *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of His Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858-1873* (New York: Garland, 1981).
- ¹⁵ F.C. McGrath, *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press, 1986), 1.
- ¹⁶ Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 4.
- ¹⁷ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 3.
- ¹⁸ Monsman, *Walter Pater*, 47.
- ¹⁹ "Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge," in *Pater in the 1990s*, eds. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1991), 1-20. William F. Shuter questioned Inman's conclusions, as well the critical impulse to "out" Pater's sexuality in "The 'Outing' of Walter Pater," *Nineteenth Century Literature* 48:4 (March 1994), 480-506.
- ²⁰ Dellamora, "Critical Impressionism," 128.
- ²¹ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 1.
- ²² Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 58.
- ²³ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), xiii. Dellamora and Dowling's practice of reading Pater's writings as "encoding" covert forms of homoerotic

meaning has its origin in Dowling's "Ruskin's Pied Beauty and the Constitution of a 'Homosexual' Code," *Victorian Newsletter* 75 (April 1989), 1-8.

²⁴ Heather K. Love, "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Queer Modernism," in *Bad Modernisms*, eds. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); similarly in *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁵ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

²⁶ James Eli Adams, "Transparencies of Desire: An Introduction," in *Transparencies*.

²⁷ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁸ Alfred Douglas, "Two Loves," *The Chameleon* 1.1 (December 1894). D.A. Miller's recent work on Jane Austen has moved away from this model by interpreting Austen's textual silences as a form of "celibacy." See *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Michael F. Davis, "Walter Pater's 'Latent Intelligence' and the Conception of Queer 'Theory,'" in *Transparencies of Desire*, 267.

³⁰ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 67.

³¹ Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 204.

³² Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading* (Oxford, U.K.: Routledge, 2005), 47. Sinfield summarizes Miller's overall argument in *The Novel and the Police*.

³³ Miller, *Novel and the Police*, 206

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 10.

³⁵ D.A. Miller, "Foutre! Bougre! Ecriture!," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14:2 (2001), 503.

³⁶ Miller "Foutre!" 505

³⁷ Miller "Foutre!" 505-6.

³⁸ Miller "Foutre!" 503.

³⁹ Barthes *Writing* 12.

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- ⁴⁰ Walter Pater, "Winckelmann," *Westminster Review* n.s. XXXI (January, 1867), 87. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *W*. See the notes on "Winckelmann" in Donald L. Hill's critical edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
- ⁴¹ Walter Pater, *Miscellaneous Studies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1895), v. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *MS*.
- ⁴² See, for example, Monsman's "Pater's Aesthetic Hero," Dellamora's *Masculine Desire*, and especially Williams's *Transfigured World*, where she refers to "Diaphaneitè" as the "key-signature of Pater's work" (173).
- ⁴³ Anne Varty, "The Crystal Man: A Study of "Diaphaneitè," in *Pater in the 1990s*, 205.
- ⁴⁴ *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, trans. William Smith (London, 1889), vol. 1, 210-11, 284-85. Quoted in Monsman, "Pater, Hopkins, and Fichte's Ideal Student"
- ⁴⁵ For example, in "The State of German Literature," Carlyle references Fichte's concept of the "Divine Idea" when describing the "perpetual priesthood" of writers and poets. See Gregory Maertz, "Fichte, Johann Gottlieb" in *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*, ed. Mark Cumming. (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004).
- ⁴⁶ Donoghue, *Lover*, 114-115.
- ⁴⁷ Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 26.
- ⁴⁸ Curtis Bowman, "Johann Gottlieb Fichte," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>, July 8 2008).
- ⁴⁹ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973), 91.
- ⁵⁰ Radoslav A. Tsanoff, "Fichte, Johann Gottlieb," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) 195, quoted in Tucker, "Pater As 'Moralist'"
- ⁵¹ Fichte, *Popular Works*, 285
- ⁵² Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*. European Studies in English Literature. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 39.
- ⁵³ Winfried Fluck, "The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser's Literary Theory," *New Literary History* 31:1 (2000), 181.
- ⁵⁴ DeLaura notes the preponderance of distinctly Arnoldian locutions in Pater's essay, such as "perfect intellectual culture," "nearer and nearer to perfection," "to value everything at its eternal worth," "just equipoise," "unmusical

predominance,” “intellectual throne,” “*lighted up* morality,” and “a mind lighted up by some spiritual ray within.” *Hebrew and Hellene*, 193.

⁵⁵ William A. Madden, *Matthew Arnold: A Study of the Aesthetic Temperament in Victorian England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), chapter 8; referenced in Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 102.

⁵⁶ David Lloyd, “Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics,” *Cultural Critique* 1 (1986), 148.

⁵⁷ Lloyd, “Aesthetic Culture,” 149.

⁵⁸ An elaborate discussion of the influence of the philological study of language in late nineteenth-century British literature can be found in Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin-de-Siecle*.

⁵⁹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 94-98.

Interestingly, as philosophers have often interpreted Fichte’s philosophy as a transitional moment between the “major” figures of Kant and Hegel, so too does Pater’s essay appear to recapitulate this development by moving from the Fichtean self-positing ‘I’ to a tentative engagement with the Hegelian dialectic.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 176.

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 168.

⁶² Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

⁶³ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 66.

⁶⁴ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 65.

⁶⁵ Thomas Carlyle “The State of German Literature,” *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1900-01), 57

⁶⁶ Dowling *Language and Decadence* 28-29, see also Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 10: 69, 43.

⁶⁷ Dowling, *Language and Decadence*, 28; Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 60; see also Ben Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁶⁸ Frank M. Turner, “The triumph of idealism in classical studies,” *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 349, 353.

⁶⁹ Walter Pater, “Coleridge’s Writings,” *Westminster Review* n.s. XXIX (January 1866), 108. Further references will be cited parenthetically within the text as *C*.

⁷⁰ Pater’s decision to characterize this debate as a struggle over the Coleridgean heritage echoes the debate between idealism and positivism staged in John Stuart Mill’s own essay on Coleridge (1840).

⁷¹ My analysis of “The Writings of Coleridge” owes much to DeLaura’s discussion of the “religious aestheticism” of Pater’s essay. See *Hebrew and Hellene*, 195.

⁷² Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

⁷³ Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904), 240.

⁷⁴ Herder articulated this view in works such as “How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People” (1765), “This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity” (1774), “Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity” (1784-91), and “Letters for the Advancement of Humanity” (1793-1797). See Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷⁵ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 105. Dellamora is, in turn, indebted to DeLaura’s writings on the influence of Goethe on British culture, especially “Heroic Egotism: Goethe and the Fortunes of *Bildung* in Victorian England,” in *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Continuing Vitality*, ed. Ulrich Goebel and Wolodymyr T. Zyla (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1984).

⁷⁶ Pater quotes Hegel’s *Aesthetik* in his own translation.

⁷⁷ Francis Roellinger, “Intimations of Winckelmann in Pater’s Diaphaneitè,” *English Language Notes* 2 (1965), 277-82.

⁷⁸ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 115; see also Billie Andrew Inman, *Pater’s Reading*, 9 and 32-34.

⁷⁹ Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 225-237; Abrams’ literary analysis of the *Phenomenology* as *Bildungsroman* was inspired by Josiah Royce’s discussion of the influence of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* on Hegel. See Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 147-49.

⁸⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 49.

⁸¹ C.J. Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and His Relation to Hegel* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1986), 75.

⁸² The “identification” theory permeates the analysis of “Winckelmann” found in Kenneth Clark’s introduction to the Meridian edition of *The Renaissance* (New York: Meridian, 1961), as well in Hall’s edition of *The Renaissance*, Dellamora, Donoghue, and Evangelista.

⁸³ Alex Potts, *Flesh and Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 239.

⁸⁴ Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Surin, “The Sovereign Individual and Michael Taussig’s Politics of Defacement,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 2.1 (2001), 206.

⁸⁶ Hall, *Renaissance*, 411.

⁸⁷ Symonds, whose *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891) stand as two of the earliest defenses of male homosexuality in the English language, stated that Pater’s essay “is full of good criticism of the Greek in contrast to the modern spirit. What is said [...] regarding about the way in which Winckelmann was privileged to approach Greek art is perfect. See R.M. Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 58.

⁸⁸ Richard St. John Tyrwhitt, “The Greek Spirit in Modern Literature.” *Contemporary Review* 29 (March 1877), 552-66, cited in Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 87.

⁸⁹ Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 424. Turner quotes from William Hepworth Thompson, *The “Phaedrus” of Plato with English Notes and Dissertations* (London: Whittaker & Co, 1868), 163n.

⁹⁰ Turner, *Greek Heritage*, 426.

⁹¹ See, again, the “identification” theorists of Paterian sexuality: Clark, Hall, Dellamora, and Evangelista.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), 100.

⁹³ Taussig, *Defacement*, 135.

⁹⁴ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 130.

⁹⁵ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 84.

⁹⁶ William Shuter, “History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel,” *PMLA* 86.3 (May 1971), 412.

⁹⁷ Shuter, "Palingensis," 413.

⁹⁸ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 116.

CHAPTER TWO

Pater, Erotic Violence, and Anthropological Aestheticism

When Emilia Pattison, Pater's friend and Oxford neighbor, anonymously reviewed *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* for the *Westminster* in 1873, her criticism of the book differed from that of most other reviewers. Focused neither on Pater's relationship to Oxford's intellectual avant-garde, nor the supposedly "hedonistic" philosophy to be found in the "Conclusion," Pattison's quarrel was with the title of the book, which she declared to be "misleading": "The historical element is precisely that which is wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book [...] the work is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance." Declaring him to have rejected the "true scientific method" of writing history, Pattison's criticism of Pater's impressionistic approach to the history of art seems to have registered.¹ It is probably no coincidence that when Pater began corresponding with Macmillan regarding a new edition of the work in the fall of 1876, he suggested that the title of work be changed to *The Renaissance, a Series of Studies of Art and Poetry*, later shortened to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*.²

As discussed in the previous chapter, Pater's early essays, including those found in *The Renaissance*, expressed his initial enchantment and subsequent dissatisfaction with historicism as the predominate method guiding his aesthetic criticism. In this chapter, I argue that Pater's revision of idealist historicism fundamentally transformed the concept of negative eroticism formulated in his earliest essays. In his writings up to and including *The Renaissance*, Pater describes a distinctly modern form of critical consciousness—one that favors an immanent rather than transcendental engagement with the aesthetic object, and one whose embrace of immanence is elicited by the encounter with the negative. Pater specifically associates this negativity with

artistic representations of male homoeroticism. This observation returns us to the noteworthy inquiry with which Pater ends “Winckelmann”: Can art “represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent sense of freedom?” Throughout the rest of his literary career, Pater continually attempts to answer this question in the concrete by devoting his creative energies to the writing of critical essays and historical fiction, all of which were composed in critical conjunction with his study of recent advances in the anthropological study of myth.

The importance of myth for Pater as a tool for correcting, expanding, and revising his understanding of aesthetics, history and their relationship to eroticism can be seen as early as the opening essay on “Two Early French Stories” in *The Renaissance*. In this study, Pater uses the story of the erotically charged friendship between Amis and Amile (later known as Aucassin and Nicolette) as a way of describing “in the concrete” the historical transformation from medieval to Renaissance intellectual and aesthetic concerns.³ Robert Crawford has argued that “Two Early French Stories” describes “a pagan tradition re-emanating from surviving folk tradition and entering into the Renaissance the following centuries where it is continually refined,” and that the essay was inspired by Andrew Lang’s anthropological study of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which Pater had recommended to be published in the *Westminster*.⁴ Yet many critics have noted that Pater’s understanding of myth’s relationship to history changed when he began to study anthropology in conjunction with ancient Greek mythology in the years following the publication of *The Renaissance*. William Shuter has analyzed the influences of Hegel and of German mythographer Ludwig Preller on the concept of “palingensis” to be found in Pater’s writings.⁵ Steven Connor has noted the importance of anthropological thought on Pater’s use of myth as a way of understanding the relationship between the present and the historical past, apprehending

that myth is “always in a state of Becoming, and it is into this flux of Becoming that the modern world is drawn.”⁶

These studies demonstrate that Pater’s writings drew extensively on anthropological thought in order to articulate the methods and the form by which his historicism was to proceed. Specifically, in this chapter I contend that, in “A Study of Dionysus” (1876), Pater’s turn late nineteenth-century anthropology enabled him to examine the constitutive roles of eroticism and negativity in the philosophical construction of the aesthetic object. This turn to an object-oriented criticism forced Pater to reconsider the function of eroticized forms of violence within the construction of the aesthetic object as those constructions developed throughout western cultural history, and which had been repressed in the subject-oriented aesthetic criticism of his early essays. In *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater identifies the historical development of this aesthetic violence with the historical development of the universalizing and absolutist tendencies of philosophical rationalism—a discourse that Pater implicitly believes to be epitomized by Kant’s philosophical humanism. Ultimately, however, in *Plato and Platonism* (1893) Pater turns to an anthropologically informed concept of erotic negativity in order to recuperate the humanist notion of autonomous subjectivity by understanding rationality to be a non-universalizing discourse that can allow for a multiplicity of intersubjectively communicable positions and expressions: in other words, by conceiving of rationality as a fundamentally *aesthetic* phenomenon.

The Anthropological Pater

While Pater’s embrace of the anthropological sciences in his post-*Renaissance* writings might appear quite a departure from the specifically aesthetic and literary concerns of his early essays, Pater (like most nineteenth-century intellectuals) did not maintain a strict distinction

between humanistic and scientific attempts to understand cultural development. On the contrary, as early as the essay on Coleridge, Pater asserted that the cornerstone of the modern “relative spirit” was the synthesis of scientific and philosophical modes of observation and interpretation:

The idea of “the relative” has been fecundated in modern times by the influences of the sciences of observation. These sciences reveal types of life evanescent into each other by inexpressible refinements of change. [...] Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life. Always as an organism increases in perfection the conditions of its life become more complex. Man is the most complex product of nature. Character merges into temperament; the nervous system refines itself into intellect. His physical organism is played upon not only by the physical conditions about it, but by remote laws of inheritance, the vibrations of long past acts reaching him in the midst of the new order of things in which he lives. (C 107)

Carolyn Williams’ analysis of this passage notes that Pater metaphorically applies the principles of evolutionary biology to the problem of historicism as a means of formulating the problem of interpreting historical change, “the difficulty of double relativity”: “Diachronically, any object is related to the past through ‘undefinable’ connections; synchronically the object is inextricable from its own historical context.”⁷ One might also observe the way Pater’s apparently seamless integration of the models of progressive development offered by Darwinian evolutionary theory and Hegelian dialectical historicism in this passage foregrounds the significance of “physical,” that is, *embodied* experience in the development of human culture. He foregrounds the importance of understanding man as a material “organism” in the world, one that has a “temperament” well as a “character,” a “nervous system” as well as an “intellect.”

This passage anticipates Pater's discussion of the centrality of Winckelmann's embodied homoerotic desire, or "temperament," in the development of his individual *Bildung*. In an explicit reference to Plato's *Phaedrus*, Pater calls this an "enthusiasm" that was "dependent [...] to a great degree on bodily temperament, gathering into itself the stress of the nerves and the heat of the blood," having "a power of reinforcing the purer motions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement." Yet this passage also indicates an implicit, yet significant departure from the Hegelian dialectic. While in Hegel's philosophy, physical experience gets subsumed within *Geist*, or "spirit," which is the motivating force and ultimate goal of historical *Bildung*, Pater's writings continually emphasize the significance of the stream of impressions created by the individual's encounter with the aesthetic object—"the perpetual motion" of "the physical life," as Pater calls it in the "Conclusion," as opposed to the "facile orthodoxy of Hegel, of Comte, or of our own."⁸ In order to emphasize the importance of both ideal and embodied experience for the development of the aesthetic critic, Pater borrows terms from chemistry, atomic theory, and the recent discovery of the nervous system in order to come to a new understanding of "the physical life."⁹

Yet immediately following the publication of *The Renaissance* in 1873, one can see a marked shift in the vocabulary Pater used to describe aesthetic experience. While the "Conclusion" is notable for its use of terminology borrowed from the biological and physical science to describe the "perpetual motion" of "our physical life," Pater's post-*Renaissance* essays describe aesthetic experience in terms borrowed from anthropology. This shift can be observed in the first essay Pater published after the debut of *The Renaissance*, the study "On Wordsworth" from the April 1874 issue of the *Fortnightly Review*. Although many critics, beginning with the initial reviewers of *The Renaissance*, have argued that the "Conclusion"

represented the most explicit articulation of Pater's materialist philosophy of aesthetics, his turn to anthropology in the "Wordsworth" essay indicates the beginning of his reconsideration of the development of the modern critical consciousness. This essay, which discusses Wordsworth's relationship to a natural world where "every natural object seemed to possess more or less of a moral or spiritual life," contains the assertion that this attitude "was like a 'survival' in him of that primitive condition, which some philosophers have traced in the history of human culture, in which all outward objects alike, even the works of men's hands, were believed to be endowed with life and animation, and the world was full of souls; that mood in which the old Greek gods were first begotten, and which had many strange aftergrowths."¹⁰

The "philosophers" who examine "the history of human culture," more properly speaking, are modern anthropologists involved in the study of comparative mythology. Crawford has noted that Pater's vocabulary in these lines explicitly references the theories of human cultural development described in Edward Burnett Tylor's seminal study, *Primitive Culture* (1871), one of the first major texts of modern anthropology.¹¹ Revolutionary in its methodology, which derived theory from the direct observation of the practices of "savage" peoples, *Primitive Culture* did much to establish the procedures and theoretical foundations of anthropology as the discipline was taking its institutionalized form in the late nineteenth century.¹²

Specifically, Pater's quoted use of the term "survival" in the singular (i.e. *a* survival) is a direct reference to Tylor's unique deployment of the term to describe the persistence of supernatural religious beliefs in modern culture. Tylor was the first person to use "survival" in a specifically anthropological sense, referring to a "continuance of a custom, observance, etc. after the circumstances or conditions in which it originated or which gave significance to it have

passed away.”¹³ Furthermore, Pater’s use of the word “animation” references the theory of “animism” described in Tylor’s account of the origins of religious belief. Tylor marshals evidence in support of the notion that “animism” formed the essential core and historical origin of all mythological and, ultimately, all religious beliefs. According to him, “primitive” people who in a pre-scientific society build their religious beliefs upon principles that are “essentially rational, though working in a mental condition of intense and inveterate ignorance.” In the attempt to make rational sense of the biological difference between living bodies and dead bodies, as well as the nature of the human figures who appear to them in dreams and in hallucinatory visions, primitive people draw “the obvious inference” that individuals have a “ghost-soul” existing apart from the physical body as “the cause of life or thought in the individual it animates,” one that is capable “of leaving the body far behind” and “continuing to exist and appear to men after the death of that body.”¹⁴

These “irrational” animistic beliefs persist in modern, “scientific” culture through the medium of rites and ceremonies, forming what Tylor calls “survivals”: “things that were originally rational in motive” that have become “meaningless or absurd as they persist [...] by the sheer force of conservatism into a new intellectual context.” These animistic modes of thought persist in the modern world in the form of religious belief, which has evolved “upwards from the simplest theory which attributes life and personality to animal, vegetable, and mineral alike [...] up to that which sees in each department of the world the protecting and fostering care of an appropriate divinity, and at last of one Supreme Being ordering and controlling the lower hierarchy.”¹⁵ As the quotes above might suggest, even as Tylor defends the essential “rationality” of primitive spiritual belief, he takes a rather dim view of their “survivals,” believing them to be in the process of being supplanted by “a slowly-growing natural science

which in one department after another substitutes for independent voluntary action the working out of systematic law”—an implicit criticism of modern religious belief.¹⁶

In the essay on Wordsworth, however, Pater suggests that it is precisely these “survivals” from earlier, pagan forms of consciousness that gives Wordsworth’s nature poetry its distinctiveness and aesthetic value: “[I]n Wordsworth this power of seeing life, this perception of soul, in inanimate things, came of an exceptional susceptibility to the impressions of eye and ear, and was at bottom a kind of sensuousness. At least it is only in a temperament exceptionally susceptible on the sensuous side that this sense of the expressiveness of outward things comes to be so large a part of life” (*WW* 458). This description of Wordsworth, which attributes the ability to see the objects of the natural world endowed with personal volition to a “sensuous temperament” held over from pagan forms of natural consciousness, strongly recalls the description of Winckelmann’s “enthusiasm,” his “bodily temperament” that had “a power of reinforcing the purer motions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement.”

In essence, Tyloorean anthropology provided Pater with historical and cultural paradigms for understanding the phenomena he identified, via aesthetic criticism, in the essays leading up to and including *The Renaissance*. By doing so, he comes to a new understanding of the importance of materiality for the development of the poet’s consciousness—a process that appears to be fundamentally different from that of the aesthetic critic. In Pater’s presentation of Winckelmann’s *Bildung*, the homoeroticism of ancient Greek sculpture elicits the formation of his modern critical consciousness by causing him to undergo the essentially intra-psychic process of “encountering the negative,” creating a newly self-conscious relationship to the homoerotic desire already within in his consciousness—a desire he implicitly represents as always already present within Winckelmann’s “temperament,” waiting to come into self-consciousness through

the aesthetic encounter with the negative. In Wordsworth's case, however, Pater not only suggests that the "sensuality" that gives aesthetic value to his poetry is detached from the specifically erotic meaning given to it in the "Winckelmann" essay, but also focuses on the specifically historical and material aspects of Wordsworth's "sensual temperament," as the particularly potent manifestation of a "pagan" form of consciousness that subtly persist in modern culture. The characteristic feature of this "pagan" consciousness is its relationship towards the natural world, which is based upon the intuitive and unselfconscious belief that material objects have sentient consciousnesses similar to our own. Although Pater recognizes that this belief is an unscientific fiction created by the poet's projection of his own psychic operations onto the external world, it also gives Wordsworth's poetry its singular power to "awaken" what Pater calls, quoting Percy Shelley, "a sort of thought in sense" (*WW* 458).¹⁷ The supreme aesthetic value of Wordsworth's poetry comes from its ability to use language to recreate the material and embodied "sensuousness" of animistic thought, to impress upon the reader how it might *feel* to live in a spiritually vivified natural world now lost to modern, scientific consciousness.

It might seem as if Pater's absorption of anthropological thought allows him to characterize Wordsworth as Winckelmann's exact opposite: Winckelmann examines the art of the past, Wordsworth examines the natural world of the present; Winckelmann sees his own desires reflected back to him when he looks upon ancient Greek sculpture, Wordsworth sees the embodiment of other consciousnesses when he looks upon objects in the natural world; Winckelmann struggles towards self-consciousness, Wordsworth attempts to maintain a state of unselfconsciousness; Winckelmann embodies a modern worldview, Wordsworth persists in a pre-modern worldview; Winckelmann writes criticism, Wordsworth writes poetry. Although

Pater's 1874 essay seems to solicit a comparison with the study of Winckelmann, it also appears that he has drawn the conclusion that the form, method, and style required to create an aesthetic object is fundamentally different from that required to write aesthetic criticism. Not only do the two practices follow different procedures, but also, more important, they require two radically different forms of consciousness: one formed by the development of the idealist *Bildung*, another by the maintenance of materialist "survivals."

If, however, we choose to see Winckelmann and Wordsworth as diametrically opposed figures in Pater's thought, we would ignore the element that unites them and suggested their comparison in the first place: the excitable "temperament" they both share. Although Winckelmann's homoerotic "enthusiasm" seems to be of a different sort than Wordsworth's natural "sensuality," with Wordsworthian sensuality understood historically through anthropological notions of "survival" and "animism," these authors' highly attuned somatic responsiveness to the world is a key element in the development of their respective consciousnesses. One of Pater's major goals in his subsequent writings will be to think through the ramifications of this somatic responsiveness in its most extreme form: the experience of bodily violence and the witnessing of suffering. In works such as the "Study of Dionysus" and *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater will explore violent manifestations of eroticism through the lens of anthropology in order to develop a more sophisticated version of erotic negativity that can account for the significance of violence and its aesthetic representation in the construction of modern subjectivity.

Paterian Anthropology: "A Study of Dionysus"

Pater's subsequent essay, "A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew" represents a sustained reconsideration of the status of the erotic within his aesthetic theory,

applying anthropological theory to pre-Classical Greek myths in order to address various aspects of Hellenism treated aesthetically in his previous essays. Pater turned to the study of myth for two reasons: first, contemporary anthropological thought allowed him to comprehend myths as aesthetic objects that contain their culture history within their very structure, thereby enabling him to break away from the subject-centered aesthetic philosophies of Kant and Hegel, avoiding the solipsism of the “Conclusion” and allowing him to discuss the aesthetic object *qua* aesthetic object. Second, by turning to pre-Classical Greek myths of eroticized violence, Pater could begin thinking about the violent aspect of sensuality and the role it necessarily plays in the encounter with the negative.

Originally appearing in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1876, “Dionysus” was Pater’s second mythological study to find its way into print. The first, on “The Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” was published in two parts in the *Fortnightly* earlier that same year. In both of these essays, Pater examines the origins of these myths in pre-Classical Greek culture, focusing on elements of “primitivism, irrationality, fluidity, murkiness, the grotesque” that stand in direct contrast to Arnold’s valorization of “the ‘Apollonian’ humanistic values of civility and culture associated with ancient Greece” in his description of Hellenism in *Culture and Anarchy*.¹⁸ In the nineteenth century, this stereotype of ancient Greek culture derived from and was most strongly associated with the Germany’s Hellenic revival of the late eighteenth century. Winckelmann’s art historical writings epitomized this vision of classical Greek culture in his homoerotically tinged description of the Apollo Belvedere, which he declares to embody the “highest ideal” of Greek art, representing an “incorporeal beauty” that embodies “blissful calm.”¹⁹

To understand why Pater turned to the study of mythology in general, and the figure of Dionysus in particular, to think through the complex relationship between the aesthetic subject

and aesthetic object in modern criticism, it is necessary to look briefly at his “three phases” theory of mythology outlined in the “Demeter and Persephone” essay. According to Pater, myth begins in a

mystical phase, in which, under the form of an unwritten legend, living from mouth to mouth, and with details changing as it passes from place to place, there lie certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the outward world. We may trace it next in its poetical or literary phase, in which the poets become the depositaries of the vague instinctive product of the popular imagination, and handle it with a purely literary interest, fixing its outlines, and simplifying or developing its situations. Thirdly, the myth passes into the ethical phase, in which the persons and the incidents of the poetical narrative are realized as abstract symbols, because intensely characteristic examples, of moral or spiritual conditions.²⁰

Although there is some debate regarding whether Pater derived his developmental theory of myth from John Ruskin’s *Queen of the Air* (1869), or from the theory of the “aesthetic state” found in Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), there is much to be said in support of Inman’s assessment that “Pater’s idea of the ‘development’ of a myth is more complicated than Ruskin’s [and] more in tune with the anthropology of his day.”²¹ Pater’s location of mythological belief in humanity’s “primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world” and the recurrence of the concept of “animism” in both of these essays place Pater’s “three-phase” theory firmly within the framework of Tylolean anthropology’s animistic understanding of myth.²²

More important, however, for Pater’s attempt to surpass the apparent dichotomy between subject and object in his aesthetic thought is the emphasis he places on the “ethical” phase of

myth, the moment when the myth transforms itself into an object of interpretation. Scholars of Pater's mythological studies have generally concurred that the essays themselves, especially "Dionysus," self-consciously form part of this last phase of development, where "the persons and the incidents of the poetical narrative are realized as abstract symbols." This stage occasions the moment when, in Yopie Prins's words, "the work of the 'weavers and spinners' [described in the "Dionysus" essay] is now transferred to his own finely woven text as Pater—'through the fine spun speculations of modern ethnologists and grammarians'—weaves together etymologies, mythologies, historical references, and poetic allusions to create a richly symbolic portrait of Dionysus."²³

Williams notes that Pater's three-stages theory represents progressively greater levels of generalization from the original, "primitive" impressions that form the foundation of myth.²⁴ Yet when examined within the context of the "Winckelmann" and "Wordsworth" essays, "A Study of Dionysus" becomes notable for two other reasons. First, it represents Pater's elaboration of a theory of *Bildung* for the aesthetic object cognate to the *Bildung* of the aesthetic subject elaborated in "Winckelmann." Secondly, Pater's developmental theory of myth locates agency within the aesthetic object itself rather than within the aesthetic critic, insofar as the "ethical phase" represents the moment when "the incidents of the poetical narrative are realized," when the inherent developmental trajectory of myth comes to fruition through the transformation of "characteristic examples" into "abstract symbols". This transformation involves a move from the literal to the figurative, an operation that is fundamentally literary in nature, in that it occurs at the level of the signification. At the same time, however, Pater locates the agency of this transformation within the myth itself, operating autonomously from the will or intentions of the

critical subjectivity, almost as if the author merely provides the occasion for this transformation to occur.

In Pater's mythological studies, therefore, the consciousness of the critic does not bring new or unique insight into the meaning of the myth per se. Instead, the critic becomes the medium through which the ethical imperatives immanent within the structure of myth actualize themselves, allowing Pater to rewrite his account of the Hegelian *Bildung* with a focus on the developmental trajectory of the aesthetic object rather than the critical subject. In other words, anthropology provides Pater with a way of obviating the problematic redoubling found in the "Winckelmann" essay, where he writes as an aesthetic critical subject about another aesthetic critical subject. Through Tylor's anthropology, Pater can finally write about the aesthetic object *as* an aesthetic object. Moreover, Pater uses anthropological forms of thought in order to conceive of the historical and material aspects of human eroticism, including its violent potential of that eroticism, and its role in the development of aesthetic consciousness.²⁵

As Wolfgang Iser has noted, Pater's turn to anthropological ways of thinking, construed more broadly to refer to any study that takes "humanity" as its primary object of inquiry and thus to include modern empirical anthropology as well as the philosophical anthropology out of which it grew, place him squarely within the mainstream of nineteenth-century thought, which "reduced all phenomena that claimed to be supernatural or religious to their human origins, as exemplified by [Ludwig] Feuerbach's anthropological reduction of Christianity."²⁶ While the immediate impetus for Pater's reduction of the supernatural to the human was provided by Tylor's anthropology, it is important to note that Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (*Das Wesen des Christentums*) provides a direct link between philosophical idealism and anthropological materialism. Van A. Harvey asserts that Feuerbach "along with Schopenhauer,

Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche, must be counted among those philosophical outsiders who rebelled against the academic philosophy of the nineteenth century and thought of themselves as reformers and prophets of a new culture.”²⁷ It should also be noted that Marian Evans (George Eliot) translated *The Essence of Christianity* into English in 1854; this translation would prove to be immensely influential in England, not only for Eliot’s own novelistic practices but also in the theological debates raging at Oxford and Cambridge throughout the 1850s and 60s, especially in the famous *Essays and Reviews* (1860) controversy that erupted during Pater’s undergraduate career.²⁸

Feuerbach, originally a devoted student of Hegel, had by the 1840s become a prominent member of the “young Hegelians” (also known as the “left Hegelians”) who turned Hegel’s dialectical thought to politically radical ends. It was Feuerbach’s stated aim to change “theologians into anthropologists [...], religious and political footmen of a celestial and terrestrial monarchy and aristocracy into free, self-reliant citizens of earth.”²⁹ According to Karl Barth,

Feuerbach views Kantian and Hegelian philosophies as sharing damnation with theology: only they dissolved the divine being who was separated from man in thought or reason: at the same time they separated essence all the more sharply from material, sensuous existence, from the world, from man [...]. His philosophy begins with the sentence: “I am a real, a sensuous, a material being; yes, the body in its totality is my Ego, my being itself.” His teaching aims to be a “frankly sensuous philosophy.” For “only where sensuousness begins do all doubt and conflict cease. The secret of immediate knowledge is sensuousness.”³⁰

It is thus that he famously develops “the true or anthropological essence of religion” in *The Essence of Christianity*, declaring the Christian notion of God to be nothing more the outward embodiment and idealization of man’s own inner nature.³¹

Pater’s turn to anthropology in an attempt to address the problematic relationship between subject and object in his aesthetic criticism thus follows the same general trajectory found in the thought of the major post-Hegelian philosophers in a specifically aesthetic framework, and it therefore places him within the company of Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, Kirkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche as one of those “reformers and prophets of a new culture.” Yet, as I argue in the rest of this chapter, the “new culture” that Pater prophesies in his later writings will not come about through the “hedonistic” worship of art, as suggested by the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. Rather, Pater focuses on the violent and destructive aspects of sensuality that undermine any humanism based upon the absolutist and universalizing rationalistic ideals derived from Hellenism’s appropriation of classical Greek culture.

In the “Study of Dionysus,” Pater initiates his reinterpretation of Greek culture by applying the concept of *Bildung* to the Dionysus myth, focusing on its origins in the primitive practice of aesthetic “enthusiasm.” As we have seen in the previous chapter, Winckelmann’s “enthusiasm [...] in the broad Platonic concept of the *Phaedrus*” played a pivotal role in his *Bildung* as an aesthetic critic. It endowed his aesthetic reflections on Greek sculpture with an erotic *frisson*, “dependent [...] to a great degree on bodily temperament, gathering into itself the stress of the nerves and the heat of the blood,” and having “a power of reinforcing the purer motions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement,” signifying a sublimated and internalized form of eroticism that “was the secret of his divinatorial power over the Hellenic world.” As his reference to the “broad Platonic concept of the *Phaedrus*” of enthusiasm makes

clear, Pater wishes to distinguish his use of the term from its original usage in ancient Greece to refer to cases of possession by a divine being. Both Pater and Plato use the term figuratively to describe the feeling of being “taken over” by a spirit that seems to come from outside one’s self, the biological and physical sensation that is the origin of aesthetic insight and creativity.

In “Dionysus,” however, Pater uses of the figure of the Greek god of the vine to conduct an anthropological investigation of the origins of the concept of enthusiasm in its literal usage, in the pre-Platonic/pre-philosophical age of animistic nature worship. There, Dionysus served as “the projected expression of the ways and dreams of this primitive people, brooded over, and harmonised, by the energetic Greek imagination.”³² Thus, the Dionysian religion, derived from primitive tree worship, “was, for those who lived in it, a complete religion, a complete sacred representation and interpretation of the whole of life.” Dionysus was

the inherent cause of music and poetry; he inspires; he explains the phenomena of enthusiasm, as distinguished by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, the secrets of possession by a higher and more energetic spirit of one’s own, the gift of self-revelation, of passing out of oneself through words, tones, gestures. A winged Dionysus, venerated at Amyclae, was perhaps meant to represent him thus, as the god of enthusiasm, of the rising up on those spiritual wings, of which we also hear something in the *Phaedrus* of Plato. (*D* 756)

Pater’s description of “enthusiasm” focuses on the physical, embodied practices that lead to a sense of being “possessed” through the repetitive and ritualized acts of performing “words, tones, gestures” that lead to “self-revelation” through the illusion of abandoning one’s will to another.

Furthermore, Pater indicates that, while the concept of divine possession might not be a scientifically accurate account of the psychological processes involved in the feeling of

“enthusiasm,” the earlier mythological understanding of the term is more effective aesthetically, conveying a stronger impression of how enthusiastic possession *feels*: “The body of man, indeed, was for the Greeks, still genuine work of Prometheus; and its connection with earth and air asserted in many a legend, not shaded down, as with us, through innumerable stages of descent, but direct and immediate; in direct contrast to our physical theory of our life, which never seems to fade, dream over it as we will, out of the light of common day” (*D* 63). In this direct reference to Darwin’s recently published *The Descent of Man* (1871), Pater grafts the concept of evolutionary “descent” onto Hegel’s historicist theory of aesthetic development in order to suggest that, while that science has provided empirical proof of the development of man from “primitive” origins, the mythological account of enthusiasm, in pre-classical Greek culture mythology conveyed much more strongly how enthusiasm *felt* to the ancient Greeks by giving a “direct and immediate” impression of the porous boundary between the human and divine.³³ He opposes this primitive understanding of enthusiasm to the modern, attenuated and diluted “physical theory of life” that comes to us “shaded down [...] through innumerable stages of descent.”

Considered in the context of Pater’s rendering of Tylolean anthropology, the primitive Greek sense of enthusiasm, in a sense, is simply more “enthusiastic” than our modern sense of the term. Furthermore, the legendary account is more anthropologically “accurate” in that it provides insight into how the ancient Greeks *felt* the continuity between their embodied, affective experience and the exterior world at this particular moment in human cultural development, as opposed to our more scientifically accurate (and less poetic) “physical theory of life.” This pre-Classical conception of aesthetic enthusiasm, by allowing one to “pass [...] out of oneself through words, tones, gestures,” provided Pater a way out of the solipsism of the

“Conclusion,” where he proclaimed that “Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without.”³⁴ By contrast, the “enthusiast” of the ancient world participates in the aesthetic creation of a communal rather than an individual body, conjuring into being a vision of selfhood as collective rather than individual. Pater uses his anthropological reading of pre-Classical Greek custom and tradition to discover the ancient communal aspect of myth, its ability to communicate intersubjective experiences that break through “that thick wall of personality.”

Yet this insight into the animistic, material, embodied origins of an enthusiasm that transcends solipsism also carries with it a much darker insight into the Dionysus myth and, moreover, troubles the association between Greek culture and nineteenth-century notions of humanism. Pater explicitly identifies a humanist genealogy for “enthusiasm,” the Dionysian understanding of divine possession as an early moment in the development of the concept, which over time transformed into a “spirit of a severe and wholly self-conscious intelligence,” eventually becoming “the perfectly humanised religion of Apollo,” and, ultimately, the philosophy of Plato (*D* 764). Yet Pater also implies that the earlier, Dionysian notion of enthusiasm maintains itself as a survival in these later cultural forms. The “Dionysus” essay’s anthropological account of enthusiasm presents a radical reassessment of Greek culture that highlights an anti-humanist impulse in pre-Classical Greek religion. The Dionysus myth provides Pater a conceptual framework to begin thinking about how the violent and destructive aspects of erotic “sensuality” undermine the stereotype of Hellenic rationality, most famously and succinctly articulated in Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-9). As David DeLaura argues, “Arnold’s Hellenic ideal of ‘reason, ideas, light’ shines with a cold and rather academic clarity;

most damagingly, it was, even in his generation, uninformed. Pater was far more alive, both temperamentally and for dialectical reasons of his own, to the "other" tradition—roughly, the Dionysian—in Greek art and religion.”³⁵

The “Dionysus” essay therefore represents a decisive turning point in Pater’s understanding of the role of humanist rationality in modern aesthetic culture. Although in “Winckelmann” Pater briefly describes the potentially erotically-motivated death of Winckelmann at the hands of Francesco Arcangeli, and anticipates the “Dionysus” essay by making mention of “[t]he Dorian worship of Apollo, rational, chastened, debonair, with his unbroken daylight, always opposed to the sad Cthonian divinities, is the aspiring element, by force and spring of which Greek religion sublimates itself,” in that essay he ultimately found the Hellenic ideal to embody “repose and generality.” In “Dionysus,” however, Pater focuses his full critical attention to the figure of Dionysus Zagreus (literally “Dionysus torn apart”) found in Orphic poetry. In this version of the myth, the god is the child of Zeus and Persephone, and is torn apart by the Titans under the direction of Hera, who was jealous of Zeus’ attention.

This process of “tearing apart” later became part of the ritualized worship of Dionysus. Pater makes mention of the maenads (literally “raving ones”), female worshippers of Dionysus known for “mystical ceremonies” where they “ate [...] raw flesh and drank blood” in commemoration of “the actual sacrifice of a fair boy deliberately torn to pieces,” as part of the reenactment of the death of Dionysus (*D* 770). In Greek mythology, the maenads were also known for combining this destructive frenzy with wild sexual abandon, as well as acts of physical transmutation meant to signify the regeneration of earth in spring—a violent, material, and embodied form of “enthusiasm” based upon a combination of elements significantly more anarchic and destructive than those characterized by Winckelmann’s specifically aesthetic

encounter with erotic negativity. In a later essay on “The Bacchanals of Euripedes” (1889), Pater cites Coleridge’s “refining” of “the German word for enthusiasm—*Schwarmerei*, swarming, as he says, ‘like the swarming of bees together’” to explain “how the sympathies of mere numbers, as such, the random catching on fire of one here and another there, when people are collected together, generates as if by mere contact, some new and rapturous spirit, not traceable in the individual units of a multitude.”³⁶ The maenads therefore represent the dangerous aspect of the enthusiastic communal body described in Pater’s earlier discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*—the inherent potential for violence that can come about through the loss of selfhood.

Pater reinforces this connection between eroticism and violence by mentioning of a painting of Bacchus made by “a young Hebrew painter.” The painter referred to here is Simeon Solomon, a Jewish Pre-Raphaelite artist recently arrested and disgraced for having sexual relations with another man in a public washroom.³⁷ Pater says of this painting that it represents “a complete and very fascinating realisation of such a motive [i.e. “a melancholy and sorrowing Dionysus” in the Orphic tradition]; the god of the bitterness of wine, ‘of things too sweet’; the sea-water of the Lesbian grape become somewhat brackish in the cup” (*D* 767-68). At this moment, we see Pater beginning to discriminate between different representational strategies for the depiction of homoerotic desire: the “melancholy,” “sorrow” and “bitterness” of Solomon’s painting appear quite different from the “repose” of Greek sculpture that so inspired Winckelmann. As we will see in *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater’s identification of different homoerotic aesthetics transforms into a distinct typology of homoerotic desire.³⁸

For the moment, however, it is sufficient to note that Pater, much like his contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, turned to Dionysus in order to challenge the supremacy granted to the figure

of Apollo in Winckelmann's humanist conception of the Hellenic ideal. Dennis Denisoff makes a similar point in his analysis of Pater's essay, claiming that Pater's focus on the Dionysus Zagreus goes so far as to undermine the very notion of liberal humanist selfhood itself:

The Apollonian self-conscious intelligence—that is, rational mental thought—is juxtaposed explicitly [in the “Dionysus” essay] with an instinctual sense of being that is not characterized by a humanist notion of the self or even necessarily of the human species. Although Pater implies a developmental trajectory from the primitive to the humanized, he also declares that what he calls the Greek spirit “belongs to all ages”; Apollonian religion may be “entirely humanised” but living beings are not necessarily entirely Apollonian (*D* 17). [...] Pater describes Dionysus “becoming, in his chase, almost akin to the wild beasts—to the wolf” (*D* 47). Pagan human sacrifice is, in this context, a symbolic performance of the sacrifice of liberal humanism itself, “the beautiful soft creature become [sic] an enemy of human kind” like the “werewolf.”³⁹

Denisoff calls attention to the importance of Pater's claim that this animalistic, Dionysian spirit “belonged to all ages,” existing alongside and in dynamic tension with the Apollonian, humanist notion of self throughout its historical development. Yet Pater's essay is unique for the emphasis he places on the moment of recognition, when one realizes the continuous yet hidden presence of the Dionysus Zagreus throughout the Greek concept of humanism. Pater declares that the image of the Dionysus Zagreus “has left, indeed, but little effect in Greek art and poetry, which criticism has to put patiently together, out of late, scattered hints in various writers” (*D* 43). Much like the body of Dionysus Zagreus himself, the myth is torn apart and “scattered” throughout various works of classical antiquity that the mythographer-critic reconstructs into a whole. Yet once this reconstructed whole is recognized “as a tradition really primitive, and

harmonious with the original motive of the idea of Dionysus,” the coherent story of Greek humanism, in a moment, is destroyed: “You have no sooner caught a glimpse of this image, than a certain perceptible shadow comes creeping over the whole story; for, in effect, we have seen glimpses of the sorrowing Dionysus, all along” (*D* 43-44). The momentary “glimpse” of the Dionysus Zagreus fundamentally changes the nature of the story: instead of a triumphalist narrative of the progressive development of Apollonian rationality, the reconstructed image of this figure undermines the story from the inside the myth itself, as “a phase,” of Dionysus’ “own personality, in the true intention of the myth.” Pater’s essay demonstrates that the anthropological study of myth complicates the developmental trajectory of *Bildung* epitomized by Winckelmannian Hellenism.

Yet in addition to revising received notions of Hellenism, Pater’s attempt to integrate the anthropological and materialist concept of survival with the philosophical and idealist concept of *Bildung* raises the intellectual stakes of Paterian aestheticism by addressing one of the major problems of the Western philosophical project in the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault, in his famous analysis of the connection between post-Kantian philosophy and anthropology in the nineteenth century, argues that anthropology is the necessary counterpart to the post-Kantian conception of the subject, insofar as the modern configuration of knowledge (what Foucault calls “the modern *episteme*”) comes into being in the late eighteenth century, at the very moment when “man” is conceived of as both the subject and object of human thought. Inspired by Kant’s composition of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) after the publication of the three *Critiques*, Foucault concludes that the modern configuration of knowledge is determined by the emergence of the figure of “man” in the late eighteenth century as an “empirico-transcendental doublet”:

It is probably impossible to give empirical contents transcendental value, or to displace them in the direction of a constituent subjectivity, without giving rise, at least silently, to an anthropology—that is, a mode of thought in which the rightful limitations of acquired knowledge (and consequently of all empirical knowledge) are at the same time the concrete forms of existence, precisely as they are given in that same empirical knowledge.⁴⁰

The problem modern thinkers must deal with, according to Foucault, is the fact that the modern empirical sciences describe man as limited by various historical contingencies. At the same time, however, as Gary Gutting states, “this finitude is a philosophical problem because this same historically limited empirical being must also somehow be the source of the representations whereby we know the empirical world, including ourselves as empirical beings.”⁴¹ Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy attempts to resolve this paradox by proposing that it is the very limitations of our knowledge that makes knowledge possible in the first place, and that those historical factors that make us finite also make us epistemologically knowable. How this can be possibly be the case is the question that philosophy and anthropology continually attempt to answer, because within the modern configuration of knowledge man is both irreducibly transcendental (the philosophical subject) and irreducibly empirical (the anthropological object) at the same time. According to Foucault, the genuine problem stems from the modern *episteme*'s placement of “man” himself at the center of all discourses as the origin and the *telos* of every act of representation. As a result, our self-conscious understanding of ourselves is fundamentally split: we can understand the figure of man as either subject *or* object, but never both at the same time. They are both necessary to each other and necessarily exclude each other, and hence can never be co-present within the concept of “man.”

In this context, one can understand Pater's emphasis on the moment of interpretive recognition of the persistent presence of the "melancholy" Dionysus within the myth: "You have no sooner caught a glimpse of this image [of Dionysus Zagreus], than a certain perceptible shadow comes creeping over the whole story; for, in effect, we have seen glimpses of the sorrowing Dionysus, all along." Pater's metaphors of vision ("glimpse," "perceptible shadow") express the paradox that lies at the heart of his representation of the Dionysus myth: once one "sees" the violent, destructive, anti-humanist aspect of myth, the fundamental "ethical" character of it changes radically. The Dionysus myth does not prepare the way for the inexorable triumph of an Apollonian human subjectivity that provides the foundation for Platonic rationality; rather, it is a story about the violence and destructiveness inherent in unbridled human sensuality. Or, more properly speaking, the story of Apollonian rationality and the story of Dionysian violence are *exactly the same story*: after making this statement, Pater takes two paragraphs to retell briefly the history of the myth itself, focusing on the increasingly "melancholy" nature of Dionysus as the myth develops over time. This story, of course, is simply a condensed version of the exact same story narrated over the previous forty-four pages of the essay.

What has changed is what one might call, using Pater's optical metaphor, our "perspective" on the story. Pater's uses visual figures to account for the fact that Dionysus Zagreus has been hidden in plain sight within the entire Dionysus myth in order to express the paradox inherent in the figure of "man" as construed by the modern *episteme*. We cannot simultaneously think of ourselves as both the rational Apollonian humanist subject that follows Pater's anthropological account of the Dionysus myth *and* the irrational Dionysian object that Pater's analysis has discovered to be inextricably intertwined with the Apollonian subject. Indeed, Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885)—the work many

reviewers and critics believed his major intellectual achievement—attempts to move beyond the dialectical opposition that defines the post-anthropological subject's relationship to the aesthetic object.

Turning Away in *Marius the Epicurean*

Pater's "Conclusion," which was excised from the second edition of *The Renaissance* in 1877, returned in the third edition of 1888 with a note declaring that he "had dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested" by that controversial polemic.⁴² Published in 1885, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* takes the form of a historical *Bildungsroman* narrating the life of an aesthetically inclined young man during the last days of the Roman Empire under the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE). Pater's representation of his protagonist offers him a concrete repertoire of figures to think through the implications entailed by the "survival" of primitive forms of erotic violence within "modern" forms of human subjectivity. In this novel, Pater attempts to rethink the relationship between subject and object in his aesthetics. Pater positions his novel as a critical exercise accomplished in a fictional form that has a particular task: to negate the opposition between two antithetical conceptions of subjectivity. Yet instead of focusing on the Dionysian and Apollonian forms of consciousness described in his mythological essays, *Marius* returns to Pater's own intellectual framework, examining the antithesis between "Cyrenaic" and "Diaphanous" forms of subjectivity.⁴³

Pater's attempt to overcome this dialectical opposition comes into focus when we consider the distinctive and unprecedented closeness of focalization between the narrator and the main character.⁴⁴ Besides the moments when the narrator breaks historical verisimilitude to refer to events occurring outside the purview of his fictional realm, the narrator's perspective and Marius's perspective are very frequently identical to one another. As Iser observes, the intensity

of the novel's focalization has two interrelated effects on the novel's form: first, the external world is present to the reader only through Marius's impressions; secondly, Marius is only knowable to the reader through his impressions of the external world. Marius has no inner life apart from the various objects and situations he encounters. In conceiving reality as a fundamentally "optical phenomenon," Marius is thus "pure receptivity": a living example of the aesthetic subject described in the "Conclusion."⁴⁵

Appearing to embody the aesthetic subject's lack of agency and non-interventionist stance towards the external world, Marius thus distinctly lacks the characteristic impulse towards self-realization typically associated with the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Marius's passively visual relationship to the world reaches a moment of crisis, however, in the chapter called "Manly Amusements." Occurring at the end of volume two, at the exact structural center of the book (chapter fourteen of twenty-eight), the events narrated here strike a discordant note compared to the rest of the narrative, while at the same time addressing the conjunctions among anthropology, violence, and sensuality Pater addressed in his previous essays. In the midst of Marius's explorations of the various intellectual systems available to him in late imperial Rome, all of which could be considered fairly undramatic regarding external events, he is confronted by the violent displays of ritualistic animal and human sacrifices presented in the Roman amphitheatre, which the narrator relates in grotesquely vivid detail, identifying the spectacle as a "survival" of ancient rituals associated with the worship of Artemis and Diana. Turning away in disgust, Marius trains his eye on the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who stares impassively at the spectacle. Marius then declares Aurelius to be his "inferior now and forever on the question of righteousness" because of his ability to view the spectacle with passive indifference (*MtE* 170). Marius gain a measure of self-knowledge apart from his passive visual receptivity towards the

world, but only as the result of two negative acts: turning away from the violence of the amphitheatre, and defining his morality solely in contrast to that of Marcus Aurelius.⁴⁶

Iser has called upon this moment in *Marius* as evidence of Pater's admission of the failure of the "aesthetic self" described in the "Conclusion." For Iser, Marius "only grasps his own singularity through his negative responses to events and ideas around him" because it is only in the welter of fleeting impressions that the aesthetic self hopes to find its ideal. In this view, faced with the "unmistakable moral alternatives" thrown up by the "real world" as presented in the amphitheatre, Marius becomes dissatisfied with the impassive philosophy embodied by Marcus Aurelius, but refuses to commit himself to any other philosophical system, because to do so would be to "sacrifice the potentially unlimited range of choices, for in the abundance of possibilities he hopes at last to find his ideal."⁴⁷ In Iser's account, Marius spends the rest of the novel unsettled and dissatisfied, unable to come to any satisfactory conclusion regarding his proper aesthetic or ethical relationship to the external world. Marius's turning away from the violence of the amphitheatre is a figure for the radically diminished range of ethical choices available to the aesthetic self when faced with the world's cruelty.

The negativity of this turning registers quite differently, however, when examined within the context of the chapter as a whole. Pater embeds the violence of the amphitheatre and Marius's turn in between two seemingly unrelated digressions: At the beginning of the chapter, Marius reflects on his relationship with Cornelius, a Roman soldier and a Christian whose personality offers the "cold, clear corrective, which the fever of his present life demanded," in contrast to Marius's "fevered attachment" to his recently deceased friend, the pagan Flavian (*MtE* 165). At the end of the chapter, the narrator abruptly breaks away from Marius's perspective to address the novel's readers directly, admonishing them to abandon their "self-

complacent” sense of moral superiority towards the barbaric practices of the past (*MtE* 170). Although Marius, in theory, is the living embodiment of the aesthetic subject described in the “Conclusion,” Pater’s novel actually presents a specifically anthropological understanding of Marius’s consciousness. As such, the “Manly Amusements” chapter shows how far Pater’s understanding of the aesthetic subject has shifted from since composing the “Conclusion.” Rather than burning with a hard gem-like flame, Marius must cool off and turn away from the disgusting objects the world presents to him.

It is only by understanding Pater’s representation of extreme violence as an integral aspect of the aesthetic unity of this chapter that one can comprehend the stakes of Marius’s “crisis.” Pater, in characterizing the cruelty of the amphitheatre as a primitive “survival” derived from the ancient worship of Artemis and Diana, continues his use of anthropology to comprehend the violence of sensuality. At the same time, however, in *Marius* Pater militates against the impulse to reduce the critical subject and the aesthetic object into the empirical objects of anthropological study: Pater’s Tylolean three-phase theory of myth, for example, renders the critic-mythographer merely the medium for the expression of a historical imperative inherent in the myth itself. Anthropology’s subordination of aesthetics to the empirical study of human cultural development eliminates the notion of aesthetic autonomy to which Pater remains obviously committed to throughout his writings (especially in his emphasis on the notion of aesthetic *Bildung*), and ultimately reproduces the same basic problem that led Pater to abandon idealist historicism for anthropological materialism in the first place. While the former cannot account for aesthetic objects, the latter cannot account for critical subjects: anthropological materialism is as prone as transcendental idealism to collapse non-identity into identity by either ignoring or destroying difference.

The “Manly Amusements” episode takes us to the very limits of the anthropological model of subjectivity. Pater navigates between the mutually exclusive oppositions inherent in the “empirico-transcendental doublet” of modern subjectivity by representing the dialectically antithetical relationship between “primitive” sensual violence and “modern” aesthetic contemplation. This antithesis is negated and preserved within Marius’s true *aesthetic* consciousness, which only comes into being the very moment he turns away from the scene in the amphitheatre. Pater reproduces this process within the narrative form itself, when the narrator turns away from the narrative to address the reader’s own moral sensibilities directly. Furthermore, Pater states that Marius had been prepared for this turn by his disavowal of Flavian in favor of Cornelius, suggesting that the dynamic negativity of erotic desire provides a model for sustaining non-identity within the modern subject. Pater thus stakes a claim to recuperate aesthetic and subjective autonomy through the negativity elicited by eroticized aesthetic experience.

The chapter begins with a brief description of the wedding of Lucius Verus (Marcus Aurelius’s co-emperor) and Lucilla (his oldest daughter). During the ceremony, Marius encounters Cornelius who has, the narrator informs us, become Marius’s intimate, “peculiar” friend (*MtE* 165). This encounter prompts Marius to reflect upon Cornelius’s character and the nature of their friendship. Marius’s reflections, as focalized through the narrator, craft a dense web of interconnected figures in the act of positing an antithetical relationship between two different intellectual systems, both of which are figured as two different forms of homoerotic desire: one associated with his physical desire for Flavian, Marius’s recently deceased schoolmate, and the other associated with his more disinterested “aesthetic” appreciation of the beauty of Cornelius.

Marius' shifting of his affections from Flavian to Cornelius is, most obviously, a symbolic representation of the historical shift from pagan to Christian belief systems in late antiquity. Yet Marius also reflects that it was "[f]rom Flavian" that he "had caught [...], as in cipher or symbol, or low whispers more effective than any definite language, his own Cyrenaic philosophy, presented thus, for the first time, in an image or person, with much attractiveness [...]." What Marius derives from Flavian is "the powerful impression of the 'perpetual flux'" (*MtE* 166). This metaphor is central to Epicureanism's conception of reality, and Pater explicit references it in the "Conclusion" in his description of the aesthetic understanding of the world external to the self. In a notable revision of his famous injunction in the same essay to "burn always with this hard, gem-like flame," Marius's relationship with his deceased friend is figured as the form of heat associated with illness: Marius conceives of his desire for Flavian as a "feverish attachment, which had made [Marius] at times like an uneasy slave." In between *The Renaissance* and *Marius* (or, as it is expressed in the novel, in between Flavian and Cornelius), the figure of the perpetually fluctuating gem-like flame has transformed into a fever: rather than a figure for the liberation of the subject through the embrace of the world's sensuous materiality, Flavian's heat was a literal "dis-ease," rendering Marius an "uneasy slave"—a being whose rationality is subordinated (enslaved to) his lustful physical desires (*MtE* 166).

Marius metaphorically associates the feverishness of Flavian and his Epicureanism with the life he leads as part of the court of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, making references to his "fervid, corrupt life," and "the fever of his present life," both of which are concretely exemplified by the "the garish heat of the marriage scene" he observes (*MtE* 165). This metaphorical association indicates that Marius retrospectively understands his attraction to Flavian, as well as the Epicurean philosophy bolstered by that attraction, to be symptoms of a

fundamentally corrupt and diseased culture—what he refers to as the “world’s disillusion,” over which “people, at their best, seemed only to be brooding” (*MtE* 165). Marius reinforces this connection when he asserts that Flavian would have “eagerly” and “with [...] a light heart [...] taken his place in the amphitheatre” to observe the ritualized slaughter of animals (*MtE* 166). The Cyrenaic philosophy that Flavian espoused, which Pater explicitly associates with the aesthetic philosophy espoused in the “Conclusion,” cannot muster the critical distance necessary to evaluate the cultural objects that one encounters, but can only slavishly devote itself to whatever spectacle that presents itself to the subject.

By contrast, Marius is “wholly of the same mind” with Cornelius “when, alone of a whole company of brilliant youth, he had withdrawn from his appointed place in the amphitheatre” (*MtE* 165). Opposed to Flavian’s fevered passivity, Cornelius represents the “clear, cold corrective, which the fever of [Marius’s] present life demanded” (*MtE* 165). In marked contrast to Flavian’s Cyrenaic flamboyance, Cornelius embodies a noble Christian “reserve” that is to Marius “wholly unaccountable”: “Some inward standard Marius seemed to detect there (though wholly unable to estimate its nature) of distinction, selection, refusal, amid the various elements of the fervid and corrupt life across which they were moving together” (*MtE* 165). The words Marius uses to describe Cornelius’s character (“distinction,” “refusal”), in addition to his acknowledgement that he cannot account for Cornelius’s subjectivity according to any preexisting category (his “inability to estimate its nature”) explicitly recall the vocabulary Pater used to describe the diaphanous being’s lack of commerce with the world. Similarly, Marius believes Cornelius’s ethically motivated refusals of “indifferent pleasures” to be dictated by a “secret, constraining motive, ever alert at the eye and ear” (*MtE* 165). Much like the diaphanous being, Cornelius serves as the living embodiment of a form of epistemological

negativity that serves as a moral example *for* the world specifically because it is not *of* the world and cannot be comprehended by its categories: Just as the diaphanous being represented a “basement type” that could bring about “the regeneration of the world” because of its intractable difference from the world, so too does Marius’s inability to comprehend the ethical philosophy of Cornelius paradoxically enable Cornelius to serve as Marius’s moral ideal.

Also like the diaphanous being, Cornelius appears to embody this ethically-charged form of difference in the very materiality of his body, serving as “a kind of outwardly embodied conscience” for Marius (*MtE* 165). Cornelius, like Flavian, seems in his very physical form the symbol a particular intellectual vision of the world. Yet unlike Flavian, the supposedly Christian philosophy that Cornelius embodies is yet without any positive discursive content, his physical body seeming only to refer back to its own beauty:

But of what possible intellectual formula could this mystic Cornelius be the sensible exponent; seeming, as he did, to live ever in close relationship with, and recognition of, a mental view, a source of discernment, a light upon his way, which had certainly not yet sprung up for Marius? Meantime, the discretion of Cornelius, his energetic pureness and purity, were a charm, rather physical than moral; the regular beauty of his exquisite correctness of spirit, at all events, accorded so perfectly with the regular beauty of his person, as to seem to depend upon it. (*MtE* 166)

“Mystic,” “pure,” disciplined, and inaccessible, Cornelius’s “mental view” is known only to himself. At this moment in the novel, Cornelius’s Christian moral qualities seem articulated within his very physical form, Marius ascribes no positive propositional content, no “intellectual formula,” to Cornelius’s philosophy. Cornelius’s ethical knowledge appears purely self-referential and beyond representation, the very embodiment of the diaphanous being’s negativity,

which manifests itself in the physical body even as it gestures beyond the body towards a truth that cannot be represented within language. Marius must resort to rather vague descriptive terms (“a mental view,” “a light upon the way”) because he feels that Cornelius has reached a higher level of understanding than he has, a “mystic” vision of the world that diaphanously resists positive expression within language. At the same time, however, Marius acknowledges that the “charm” that attracts him to Cornelius is “rather physical than moral,” more erotic than ethical. Marius is motivated to follow Cornelius’s example not by virtue of his superior moral philosophy, but because he desires his body. Indeed, to Marius, Cornelius’s morality appears to be merely aesthetic, “the regular beauty of [Cornelius’s] exquisite correctness of spirit” dependent upon “the regular beauty of his person,” rather than his physical beauty reflecting or symbolizing his moral beauty.

Marius’s use of the phrase “seem to depend” indicates his belief that this interpretation of Cornelius’s character is a misapprehension caused by his own inability to understand the “intellectual formula” underlying Cornelius’s morality. It is the case, however, that Marius’s initial assessment is absolutely correct. In order to realize this quality, Marius must undergo an “encounter with the negative” that will motivate a radical reinterpretation of what he already knows—that physical beauty is dependent upon ethical beauty, and that it is only by undergoing the aesthetic encounter with the negative that the aesthetic can indeed be rendered ethical through its very antithetical relationship to amoral Epicurean eroticism. This encounter with the negative will manifest itself in the form of the violence of the amphitheatre, for which Marius is prepared through the aesthetic education or *Bildung* of his visual faculty: The narrator informs us that “it was still to the eye, through visible movement and aspect, that the character, or genius of Cornelius made itself felt by Marius.” Moreover, the narrator asserts that Marius’s

relationship with Cornelius represented “a reconciliation to the world of sense, the visible world,” and that “from the hopefulness of this gracious presence [of Cornelius’s beauty], all visible things around him, even the commonest objects of everyday life [...] took for him a new poetry, a delicate fresh bloom, and interest. It was as if his bodily eyes had been indeed mystically washed, renewed, strengthened” (*MtE* 166). The narrator specifically refers to this encounter with Cornelius’s beauty as the “education” that motivates Marius to turn away from the spectacle in the amphitheatre.

Through his aesthetically educated, “mystically washed” eyes, Marius gazes upon what he now understands to be a self-consciously archaic “entertainment” having “an element of old Greek revival in it, welcome to the taste of a learned and Hellenising society” (*MtE* 169). Indeed, Marius’s newly revived perspective is highly attuned to the anthropological resonances of the spectacle. He comprehends the cruelty of the amphitheatre through its connection to ancient myths and practices of worship, noticing that the event begins with “an advancing chorus [...] chanting the words of a sacred song, or hymn to Diana; for the spectacle of the amphitheatre was, after all, a religious occasion. To its grim acts of blood-shedding a kind of sacrificial character still belonged in the view of certain religious casuists [...]” (*MtE* 169). Although he is careful to emphasize that no one in the contemporary Roman world other than “certain religious casuists” actually associates the amphitheatre with explicit religious import, Marius remains keenly aware of the ceremony’s origin in ancient rituals of “sacrificial character” that continue to resonate within the modern spectacle.

The narrator intervenes at this moment to provide the necessary historical background to Marius’s insight, drawing upon an explicitly anthropological vocabulary to explain the original

significance of the ritualized violence against animals and its subsequent perversion by modern Roman culture. “Artemis or Diana,” the narrator states,

as she may be understood in the actual development of her worship, was, indeed, the symbolical expression of two allied yet contrasted elements of human temper and experience—man’s amity, and also his enmity, towards the wild creatures, when they were still, in a certain sense, his brothers. She is the complete, and therefore highly complex, representative of a state, in which man was still much occupied with animals, not as his flock, or as his servants after the pastoral relationship of our later, orderly world, but rather as his equals, on friendly terms or the reverse, —a state full of primeval sympathies and antipathies, of rivalries and common wants—while he watched, and could enter into the humours of those ‘younger brothers,’ with an intimacy, the ‘survivals’ of which in a later age seem often to have had a kind of madness about them. (*MtE* 167-68)

Although the narrator is ostensibly presenting the history of the religious practices surrounding the ancient cult of Artemis/Diana, goddess of the hunt, his anthropological analysis explicitly recalls Pater’s discussion of Dionysus Zagreus. Both Artemis/Diana and Dionysus Zagreus represent the “symbolical expression” of a period in time before the development of a specifically human subjectivity, when animals and humans cohabitated as “brothers” and “equals.”

Both of these ancient cults hearken back to a time before the very notions of subject and object become solidified, when truly intersubjective relationships between humans and animals existed. Yet in distinction to the Dionysian madness of the maenads, which elicited non-redemptive acts of violence and destruction, the ancient, pre-subjective natural sympathy

between humankind and animals provided a moral justification for acts of violence against them. Accordingly, the cult of Artemis/Diana symbolized “man’s amity, and also his enmity, towards the wild creatures” as it existed before the development of relations of domination and subjection entailed by the rationalization of human consciousness, an outgrowth of Classical civilization’s emphasis of humankind’s rational capacities within the “pastoral relationship of our later, ordered world.”

The narrator emphasizes that in the Roman amphitheatre of late antiquity, this impulse towards the creation of an “ordered world” where animals are rendered the “servants” of humankind has transformed into a brutal celebration of mankind’s own powers of domination: “the humanities” of the ancient relationship between man and animal, the narrator asserts “were all forgotten to-day in the excitement of a show, in which mere cruelty to animals, their useless suffering and death, formed the main point of interest” (*MtE* 168). Significantly, the narrator represents this celebration of “useless suffering and death” made possible by man’s absolute dominion over the animal kingdom in aesthetic terms, as the relationship between a human subject and an aesthetic object. “People watched [the animals] destruction,” the narrator asserts, “batch after batch, in a not particularly inventive fashion; though it was expected that the animals themselves, as living creatures are apt to do when hard put to it, would become inventive, and make up, by the fantastic accidents of their agony, for the deficiencies of an age fallen behind in this matter of manly amusement” (*MtE* 168). Entering, for a moment, the minds of the spectators, the narrator informs us that the suffering of these creatures is a source of aesthetic novelty for a creatively exhausted age. For the individuals watching the show, the animals are nothing more than objects of disinterested contemplation, their “useless suffering and death” disturbingly close to the “purposiveness without purpose” of the Kantian aesthetic object.

Yet more than simply serving as a barbaric form of mass entertainment, however, the narrator informs us that the spectacle fulfills the Classical dictum that art must both delight and instruct. The narrator calls the spectacle of the amphitheatre “a practical epigram”: “For the long shows of the amphitheatre were, so to speak, the novel-reading of that age—a current help provided for sluggish imaginations, in regard, for instance, to grisly accidents, such as might happen to one’s self; but with every facility for comfortable inspection” (*MtE* 168). At this moment, the narrator explicitly associates the spectator’s relationship towards the violence it witnesses to the relationship between the modern reader and the novel he or she reads. Although there may be a moment of “identification” between subject and object, the relationship is ultimately self-reflexive in nature. The aesthetic object is never acknowledged to be anything other than an instrument for the use of the subject, “a current help for sluggish imaginations [...] with every facility for comfortable inspections. This comparison has two implications: first, the narrator’s characterization of the amphitheatre show as an aestheticized, self-reflexive spectacle indicates the depths to which a “fervid, corrupt” Rome has sunk in its inability to empathize with the sufferings of other living creatures. Secondly, however, the narrator also suggests that the modern practice of novel reading is not as distant from the cruelty of the amphitheatre as one might imagine. As we will see, the narrator will go on to suggest that the very process by which something is rendered into an aesthetic object is just as cruel as the events of the amphitheatre, and exhort us to abandon any sense of moral superiority we might feel towards the cruelty of the past by virtue of the modern world’s supposedly “advanced” historical vantage point.

The narrator makes the case for the cruelty of aestheticization by discussing the amphitheatre shows that “centered in a similar practical joking upon the human being” (*MtE* 168). These performances, which featured slaves and criminals reenacting stories from ancient

history and myth, originally entailed the actual torture and execution of the individuals involved. “By making his suffering ridiculous” the narrator asserts, “you enlist against the sufferer, some real, and all would-be manliness, and do much to stifle any false sense of compassion” (*MtE* 169). Under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, however, the shows have become mere theatrical performances—ones that nevertheless carry a similar emotional charge for the audience:

The philosophical emperor, having no great taste for sport, and asserting here a personal scruple, had greatly changed all that; had provided that nets should be spread under the dancers on the tight-rope, and buttons for the swords of the gladiators. But the gladiators were still there. Their bloody contests had, under the form of a popular amusement, the efficacy of a human sacrifice; as, indeed, the whole system of public shows was understood to possess a religious import. (*MtE* 169)

Even though the tightrope walkers and the gladiators no longer risk death in the amphitheatre, they are “still there.” The public has not lost interest in these shows because, even “under the form of a popular amusement” they have “the efficacy of a human sacrifice.” In other words, even though the spectacle has been completely aestheticized, transformed into sheer theatricality, it still retains a vital connection to the primitive “religious import” that it carried when actual human sacrifices were performed. The narrator suggests that the process of aestheticization represented by the Aurelian “system of public shows” does not represent a distinct alternative to primitive spectacles of ritualized violence, but rather maintains the same essential qualities of those ancient religious spectacles in a different form.

This relationship between aestheticization and cruelty, and their shared origin in myth and primitive religious practices, would come under examination again in the work of Theodor Adorno, another aesthetic critic writing in the dialectical materialist tradition. Specifically,

Adorno's theory of the ugly provides a useful theoretical vocabulary to describe what Pater attempts to accomplish within the literary form of his novel. Much like Pater, Adorno employs the dialectical method articulated within the post-Kantian philosophical tradition to address "fundamental and far-reaching questions" regarding "the origins of art, its relations to myth and religion, and its changing function in human history," especially its "link to the primitive and archaic."⁴⁸ For Adorno, the key to understanding these relationships lies in the concept of "the ugly," which, when translated into aesthetic form, becomes "the cruel."⁴⁹ Adorno's theory associates ugliness and cruelty with the primitive religious practices associated with myth (i.e. the hideous masks used to ward off evil spirits, the cruel morality tales reenacted in the Roman amphitheatre).

In Adorno's theory, the beautiful represents the antithetical negation of ugliness, which is historically prior to the beautiful and only becomes "ugly" after the fact: "If one originated in the other, it is beauty that originated in the ugly, and not the reverse."⁵⁰ Thus does Adorno elaborate upon the insight made by Pater in *Marius the Epicurean*: one can only grasp the true meaning of the beautiful by understanding it as the historical antithesis of a cruelty that has its origin in myth and primitive religious practices. In this reversal, Peter Uwe Hohendahl suggests, "the beautiful takes on a new meaning. It becomes part of a historical process of a problematic human history: 'In this principle [of order] the antithesis to the archaic is implicit as the play of forces of the beautiful single whole; the qualitative leap of art is a smallest transition. By virtue of this dialectic the image of the beautiful is metamorphosed into the movement of enlightenment as a whole.'"⁵¹ Even though the transition from the primitive to the beautiful indicates the beginning of a new cultural stage marked by a stronger articulation of the aesthetic, the aesthetic can never entirely escape its bond with the archaic: "The affinity of all beauty with death has its nexus in

the idea of pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished in art.”⁵² As Hohendahl puts it, “[w]here art succeeds to bring about aesthetic reconciliation, it does so at a high price, namely the death of the non-aesthetic material.”⁵³

Even as beauty strives towards formal unity through its antithetical negation of the cruel/primitive, it reproduces the very cruelty of the mythic structures it attempt to transcend by excluding the reality of a human suffering that resists the impulse to formal reconciliation, thereby killing off in the aesthetic object all that which is not aesthetic. Adorno’s observations help one grasp the narrator’s assertion in *Marius* regarding the profound cruelty of the amphitheatre: “By making his suffering ridiculous, you enlist against the sufferer, some real, and all would-be manliness, and do much to stifle any false sense of compassion,” whether you present it in the “long shows of the amphitheatre,” or in a novel that represent “grisly accidents, such as might happen to one’s self” in a self-reflexive literary form that enables “every facility for comfortable inspection.” As Adorno states, “art despairs over the claim to power it fulfills in being reconciled”: in its desire to transcend fully the cruelty of mythic structures, art reproduces that very same cruelty in its form.⁵⁴ The representation of cruelty *as* cruelty negates the formal unity of the aesthetic object, but through that negation saves the aesthetic object from becoming *merely* aesthetic (which is to say, truly primitive), and thus sustaining a (qualified) version of aesthetic autonomy.

In the closing paragraphs of the “Manly Amusements” chapter, Pater represents this fracturing of the aesthetic object twice. Initially, he presents this fracture diagetically, in Marius’s turn away from the events of the amphitheatre towards Marcus Aurelius. Subsequently, he represents this fracture formally, in the narrator’s turn away from Marius towards the reader. The negativity of these turnings, rather than signifying the limited ethical

agency of the Paterian aesthetic consciousness, instead marks the birth of a new form of aesthetic consciousness. Yet while the aesthetic education which has trained Marius to reject cruelty in favor of an ethically imbued form of beauty grounds itself upon homoerotic desire, the narrator's attempts to reproduce this aesthetic education in his readers is founded upon the manipulation of narrative form.

The narrator, after describing the violent acts of the amphitheatre in lurid detail, informs us that a "weary and indignant" Marius "could not but observe that [...] Aurelius had sat impassibly through all the hours Marius himself had remained there" (*MtE* 169). By gazing upon Marcus Aurelius, Marius realizes that Aurelius's "indifferent attitude and expression" will serve as

a permanent point of difference between the emperor and himself [...] There was something in a tolerance such as this, in the bare fact that he could sit patiently through a scene like this, which seemed to Marius to mark Aurelius as his inferior now and for ever on the question of righteousness; to set them apart on opposite sides, in some great conflict, of which that difference was but a single presentment. (*MtE* 169-170)

As Iser has noted, Marius's action and his realization are both negative: he turns away from the spectacle so that he may define his ethics against those of Marcus Aurelius.⁵⁵ Yet rather than indicating Marius's moral passivity, these negative actions register the ethical force that can inhere in the aesthetic representation of cruelty.

Through his erotic desire for Cornelius, an attraction that rendered his "bodily eyes [...] mystically washed, renewed, strengthened," Marius has already come to understand that there was a connection between physical and moral beauty, yet in that earlier episode, he is unable to discern the "intellectual formula" justifying that connection. Yet after he has observed the events

of the amphitheatre, Marius can assert that “[h]is chosen philosophy had said, —Trust the eye: Strive to be right always in regard to the concrete experience: Beware of falsifying your impressions. And its sanction had at least been effective here, in protesting—‘This, and this, is what you may not look upon!’” (*MtE* 170). The narrator, once again focalizing itself through Marius’s morally indignant conscience, articulates Marius’s realization that one need not have an ethical philosophy that can be articulated discursively. Instead, he realizes that a morality can be founded upon the immediacy of one’s aesthetic impressions. Those beautiful impressions, however, are only rendered ethical through their antithetical relationship with the cruel. Marius’s desire for the beautiful Cornelius, the foundation of the “philosophy of the eye,” becomes ethical when it announces to Marius “what he may not look upon.” Cruelty, therefore, stands as the encounter with the negative necessary to imbue the subject’s recognition of aesthetic beauty with the force of ethical judgment.

This process is repeated again when the narrator fractures the form of the narrative by turning to address the reader. In an attempt to avoid becoming the sort of novel that merely provides help for “sluggish imaginations” by representing “grisly accidents, such as might happen to one’s self; but with every facility for comfortable contemplation” the narrator forces the reader to become self-aware of the position from which he or she casts ethical judgment upon the narrative. After presenting the awakening of Marius’s conscience while looking at Marcus Aurelius, the narrator asserts:

That long chapter of the cruelty of the Roman public shows may, perhaps, leave with the children of the modern world a feeling of self-complacency. Yet it might seem well to ask ourselves—it is always well to do so, when we read of the slave-trade, for instance, or of great religious persecutions on the side of this or that, or of anything else which

raises in us the question, ‘Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?’—not merely, what germs of feeling we may entertain which, under fitting circumstances, would induce us to the like; but, even more practically, what thoughts, what sort of considerations, may be actually present to our minds such as might have furnished us, living in another age, and in the midst of those legal crimes, with plausible excuses for them: each age in turn, perhaps, having its own peculiar point of blindness, with its consequent peculiar sin—the touch-stone of an unfailing conscience in the select few. (*MtE* 170)

This paragraph, the penultimate one in the chapter, has a clear purpose: namely, to prevent the reader from falling into “self-complacency” by identifying uncomplicatedly with Marius’s ethical awakening. The narrator realizes that readers, by sharing Marius’s disgust at the useless slaughter of animals for the purposes of entertainment, may very well be tempted to gloss over the difficulty entailed by Marius’s realization. The narrator suggests that this too-easy identification with Marius leaves the reader in an attitude of Aurelian indifference towards the profound struggle that defines Marius’s encounter with the negative. In order to lift the reader out of this complacency, the narrator emphatically fractures the narrative’s illusion of verisimilitude. He does so not merely to introduce incongruous historical detail into the narrative, as he does at other points in the novel, but to call readers to self-awareness by “turning around” to address them directly.

The purpose of this turn to the reader is to make readers cognizant of the extent to which their affective responses to cruelty, such as “the slave-trade” and “religious persecution,” are conditioned by their placement within a particular historical moment in their culture, rather than their own refined moral sensibility. The narrator suggests that understanding the supposed moral failings of the past does not require an imaginative act of historical sympathy, described as a

consideration of the “germs of feeling we may entertain which, under fitting circumstances, would induce us to the like.” Rather, it necessitates an intense self-examination that makes one aware of the extent to which personal “morality” is dependent upon historically contingent social norms. This act of self-reflection will lead us to realize, the narrator states, that thoughts and conditions “actually present to our minds [...] might have furnished us, living in another age, and in the midst of those legal crimes, with plausible excuses for them.” In other words, our consciousness as it exists *right now* would gladly participate in the cruelty we abjure if it were transferred to a different time and place, “each age in turn, perhaps, having its own peculiar point of blindness, with its consequent peculiar sin.” One can only become aware of this ethical blind spot and begin to construct a subjective moral philosophy, the narrator implies, through the aesthetic education of the bodily eye—the same dialectical process Marius has undergone within the chapter, and which the narrator subsequently attempts to inaugurate in the reader through this very break in the narrative’s form.

This second turning, however, in its intrusiveness and pedagogical tone, effectually undermines the logic that underlies the first turning. In the first instance, Marius’s turn away from the amphitheatre serves as justification of Pater’s aesthetic impressionism, motivated by Marius’s aesthetic education in the appreciation of homoerotic beauty that, through antithesis, results in the spontaneous creation of an ethical consciousness. The second turning reveals Pater’s uneasiness regarding his conception of erotic negativity by insistently mediating the reader’s aesthetic impressions of the novel through narratorial intrusion. This anxiety results from Pater’s attempt in *Marius* to articulate a dialectical process that, in its deployment of a negativity embedded in nonlinear temporal relations, resists the developmental arc inherent to the *Bildungsroman* as a genre. Consequently, rather than trust that the *Bildungsroman* will

accomplish its goal of transmitting a concept of mature selfhood to its reader by virtue of its structure, Pater's narrator breaks the structure in order to directly demand that the reader become self-conscious—an injunction that, as we have seen in the "Dionysus" essay, is effectually impossible within the modern *episteme's* conception of subjectivity.⁵⁶ This intellectual *impasse* comes to dominate the second half of *Marius the Epicurean*, which narrates Marius's perpetual dissatisfaction with all intellectual systems until he is killed and mistakenly canonized as a Christian martyr.⁵⁷ Yet Pater is finally able to negotiate the limitations of this Kantian form of humanist reason in his study *Plato and Platonism* (1893). By using Tylor's anthropology to examine the origins of Platonic thought, Pater can articulate a specifically aestheticist conception of human subjectivity founded upon erotic negativity—a subjectivity that expresses his radical reinterpretation of Kantian rationality.

The Truth in Eros: Aestheticizing Rationality in *Plato and Platonism*

Plato and Platonism, the last volume Pater published during his lifetime, came out one year before his death by rheumatic fever at the age of fifty-five. Although it was originally composed as a series of lectures "written for delivery to some young students of philosophy" and presented at Oxford in 1891-92, Pater's study is, oddly, less forcefully pedagogical in tone than *Marius the Epicurean*.⁵⁸ Although Pater's fellow classical scholars greeted *Plato and Platonism* respectfully at the time, subsequent commentators have come to the conclusion that the value of Pater's study lies more in its literary rather than its scholarly qualities. Williams suggests that in this work "Pater casts himself as a modern Ficino, 'translating' Plato to his own later age, re-creating a Plato who would be recognized by his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century and who is recognizable now as a particularly late-nineteenth-century Plato. The Paterian Plato is a figure 'fitted' to its intellectual environment."⁵⁹ Williams interprets this work as Pater's

“summary statement [...] of his own most habitual argumentative strategies” and the most explicit articulation of the influence of the Hegelian dialectic on his “historical method.”⁶⁰ Pater states as much in the first essay of the volume, where he asserts:

Dogmatic and eclectic criticism alike have in our own century, under the influence of Hegel and his predominant theory of the ever-changing ‘Time-spirit’ or *Zeitgeist*, given way to a third method of criticism, the historic method. [...] To put Plato into his natural place, as a result from antecedent and contemporary movements of Greek speculations, and Greek life generally: such is the proper aim of the historic, that is to say, of the really critical study of him. (*PP* 9)

My analysis of *Plato and Platonism* follows upon the premise that Pater’s study summarizes and reflects upon the methods of his historicism, and articulates a vision of Plato inflected by distinctly nineteenth-century intellectual concerns. I would add, however, that a reading that focuses on Pater’s introduction of Tyloorean anthropology to “put Plato into his natural place” reveals the definitive role of erotic negativity in Pater’s historicism for enabling a productive engagement with Kantian humanist rationality that, in one form or another, continually haunted Pater’s previous writings. Instead of abandoning rationality altogether, Pater crafts an anthropological interpretation of Platonic idealism in order to re-imagine the philosophical pursuit of truth as a desire that is both aesthetic and erotic in nature. Accordingly, he articulates a vision of rationality that is multiple and non-universal, one that is grounded in autonomous subjectivity yet remains intersubjectively communicable.

Pater begins his discussion of Plato’s famous “theory of ideas” by focusing on Platonic idealism’s displacement of the human subject from the center of its account of rationality. Pater asserts that “[o]ur common ideas, without which, in fact, we none of us could think at all, are not

the consequence, not the products, but the cause of our reason in us: we did not make them; but they make us what we are, as reasonable beings” (*PP* 150). This account of Platonic reason mounts an implicit historicist challenge to nineteenth-century humanist ideology. By turning to the historical figure that represents the birth of Western philosophy as a discourse founded upon the exercise of rationality, and by positing the figure of man as “the consequence” rather than “the product” of that discourse, Pater accomplishes two things: first, he undermines the figure of subjectivity as the self-sufficient creator of itself articulated by the ideology of *Bildung*; secondly, he renders the Platonic theory of ideas available to reinterpretation through anthropological analysis.

Pater, making an assertion similar to his discussion of the aesthetics of cruelty in *Marius the Epicurean*, insists that the supposed advance in human consciousness entailed by the advent of Platonic rationalism originated from and maintains a vital connection to mythology and primitive religious practices. Consequently, it can be fruitfully analyzed using the methods of Tylolean anthropology. He asserts that Plato’s idealism was “like a recrudescence of polytheism in that abstract world; a return of the many gods of Homer, veiled now as abstract notions, Love, Fear, Confidence, and the like; and as such, the modern anthropologist, our student of the natural history of man, would rank the Platonic theory as but a form of what he calls ‘animism’” (*PP* 151). By virtue of defining animism as “that tendency to locate the movements of a soul like our own in every object, almost in every circumstance, which impresses one with a sense of power,” Pater asserts that this animistic belief structures transformed into “rationality” when Plato directed that animistic belief-structure back onto himself: “Such ‘animistic’ instinct was, certainly, a natural element in Plato’s mental constitution,—the instinctive effort to find *anima*, the conditions of personality, in whatever preoccupied his mind” (*PP* 151). At first glance,

Pater's deployment of the theory of animism to account for Platonic idealism seems logical, given his desire to figure the individual as the product, rather than producer, of rational thought: animism names the inherently non-rational, "instinctive" psychological process by which the mind comes to apprehend the world external to it. Yet even as Pater subverts the philosophical understanding of "man" as an inherently rational being, his appeal to animism relies upon the existence of a self-conscious human subject. For Plato to be able to "find *anima*, the conditions of personality, in whatever preoccupied his mind," Plato must first have the ability to present his ideas to himself as objects of contemplation, "Love, Fear, Confidence, and the like."

In opposition to the total lack of self-consciousness found in Dionysian animalism, Pater retains the Hegelian belief that philosophical discourse can only come into existence after the development of self-consciousness, yet he asserts that this self-consciousness is not in and of itself rational. Instead, Pater argues that Plato's theory reveals the existence of an eroticized form of self-consciousness that is brought about through the logic of animistic thought, one that exists prior to and provides the foundation for human rationality. According to Pater, Plato's ability "[t]o speak, to think, to feel about abstract ideas as if they were living persons" is what enabled his philosophy to ascend from the material world to the world of ideas, and it is only by acknowledging his specifically *erotic* relationship to those ideas that we can understand the fundamentally aesthetic quality of Plato's philosophy:

With the lover, who had graduated, was become a master, in the school of love, but had turned now to the love of intellectual and strictly invisible things, it was as if the faculty of physical vision, of the bodily eye, were still at work at the very centre of intellectual abstraction. Abstract ideas themselves became animated, living persons, almost corporeal, as if with hands and eyes. And it is, as a consequence [...] of this mental

condition, that the idea of Beauty becomes for Plato the central idea; the permanently typical instance of what an idea means; of its relation to particular things, and to the action of our thoughts upon them. (*PP* 152)

Pater uses the theory of animism to effect an ingenious dialectical reversal in Plato's aesthetics. In works such as the *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, Plato distinguishes between the love of physical beauty and the love of ideal beauty (i.e. the love of truth itself): while physical love partakes of and is inspired by the ideal of the beautiful, it is but a poor substitute for the love of ideal beauty/truth. This ideal beauty, for Plato, is the highest form of reality, "Truth" itself, the original of which everything in the material world is but an inevitably degraded copy.

According to Pater, however, Plato's philosophical idealism is an animistic inversion of reality: Plato, having become a "master" in the "school of love" and thereby exhausting the possibilities of physical erotic desire, turns to his own animistically vivified consciousness and renders it the object of his (displaced) desires. In transforming the desire for physical beauty into desire for the ideal of beauty, Plato creates the perfect, inexhaustible object of erotic desire: it both promises the end of erotic longing (by superceding and supplanting physical beauty) while maintaining its existence in perpetuity (erotic desire is the motive that provokes one to seek after ideal beauty, but anything that actually partakes of the erotic is then, by definition, *not* ideal beauty). In this formulation, Platonic Beauty is thus the ultimate formulation of erotic negativity, perpetually producing desire through the inherent self-destructiveness of its own concept. For Pater, this pervasive erotic negativity explains the covert aestheticism of Plato's theory of ideas: while Platonism is usually understood to advocate the rejection of physical beauty in favor of disembodied, idealized truth, Plato's theory keeps "the faculty of physical vision, of the bodily eye, [...] at work at the very centre of intellectual abstraction" and renders

“the idea of Beauty [...] the central idea; the permanently typical instance of what an idea means.” Rather than abjuring the aesthetic, Platonic idealism actually motivates the never-ending, never-fulfilled quest for an impossible beauty that, paradoxically, will simultaneously satisfy and negate erotic desire.

It is not Pater’s intention, however, to resolve the paradox of Plato’s eroticized aestheticism. He does not attempt to undo Platonism’s intertwining of eroticism, aesthetics, and truth in the search for an uncontaminated “origin” to serve as a corrective to post-Enlightenment philosophy’s figuration of the self-creating rational subject. Instead, Pater’s writing manifests an interest in exploring how a dialectical engagement with the aestheticized erotic negativity of Platonic philosophy can provide a revised account of rationality that productively engages with, rather than rejects, the developments of the Western philosophical tradition. The implications of Pater’s radical reinterpretation of Platonism can be clarified by turning to Walter Benjamin’s strikingly similar discussion of Platonic *Eros* in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Written thirty-five years after the publication of Pater’s volume, Benjamin’s account of the aesthetic object evokes Hegelian negativity in support of a radically object-centered form of aesthetic interpretation. Much like Pater, Benjamin rejects of the universalizing tendencies of post-Kantian humanist rationality in favor of a negativity that articulates a qualified version of truth by associating it with aesthetic form, thereby allowing for the multiplicity of rationalities that nevertheless remain grounded in autonomous subjectivity.

Benjamin asserts that Platonism “presents truth—the realm of ideas—as the essential content of beauty. It declares truth to be beautiful.”⁶¹ As a result, Benjamin asserts that “the representational impulse in truth is the refuge of beauty as such [...]”—in other words, the primary importance of aesthetic beauty within an idealist theory of truth is revealed by the fact

that a concept of truth can only be thought of as manifesting itself within a particular material form.⁶² As a result, in philosophical discourse “Eros follows [beauty] in its flight, but as its lover, not as its pursuer; so that for the sake of outward appearance beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect, in fear before the lover. And only the latter can bear witness to the fact that truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it.”⁶³ Benjamin calls attention to what I would describe as the negative eroticism through which philosophy engages with the irreducibly aesthetic aspect of truth. The traditional view of truth as “a process of exposure which destroys the secret” relies on an understanding of truth as something that exists prior to the act of its revelation and is only a “secret” by virtue of the fact that it is, for the moment, hidden. The moment the secret is “exposed” by the philosopher or critic, it ceases to be a secret and takes the form of the thing-in-itself: i.e. the universal, singular, Kantian notion of truth.

Yet Benjamin reminds us that, through this process of exposure, the fundamental formal quality of the object, its status as a “secret,” is destroyed. The rationalist’s pursuit of truth inevitably misrepresents the object it is supposedly concerned with discovering by doing violence to its form. The philosopher destroys its supposed object of inquiry by disfiguring it beyond all recognition, eliminating its formal complexity by forcing it to fit to the pre-existent form of universal “truth.” In opposition to this destruction of the secret, Benjamin finds in Plato’s theory of truth the process by which truth comes into existence through the eroticized engagement between a particular philosophical subject and the particular aesthetic object. This “revelation which does justice to the secret” entails the presence of an individual subject attuned to the particulars of the object that it contemplates, including the formal contours that constitute the object as “secret.” Rather than doing violence to the aesthetic form of the object of

contemplation in order to make it fit a universal standard of “truth,” the philosopher/critic will reveal the secret in such a way that the irreducibly particular form of the aesthetic object’s “secret” meaning will come into view. In this respect, Benjamin reveals a vision of truth that is individual rather than universal, represented by irreducibly particular engagements between the singular critical subject and the form of the aesthetic object as they play a seductive game of hide-and-seek, the “secret” revealing itself in the process of the dialectical back-and-forth that constitutes aesthetic interpretation.

It is Pater, however, more than Benjamin, who foregrounds the irreducibly sexual nature of Plato’s theory of truth. He suggests that an understanding of truth that is both rationalist *and* non-essentialist can only be sustained when one explicitly acknowledges the fundamentally erotic and aesthetic nature of the pursuit of philosophical truth. This insight comes to the foreground in Pater’s analysis of the connection between eroticism and idealism in Plato’s thought. When inquiring about “the nature and function” of the idea in Plato’s philosophy, Pater asserts that the concept “come[s] home most clearly” when the relationship between the subject and the object of philosophical truth is understood as that of “the lover dealing with physical beauty, a thing seen, yet unseen—seen by all, in some sense, and yet, truly, by one and not by another, as if through some capricious, personal self-discovery, by some law of affinity between the seer and what is seen, the knowing and the known” (*PP* 152). Pater uses Tylolean anthropology to account for the philosopher’s intense passion and ardent devotion to the pursuit of truth through reference to the displaced eroticism underlying Platonic thought, citing Plato’s assertion in the *Republic* that “Philosophers are *lovers* of the truth and that which *is*—impassioned lovers” (*PP* 153). More than this, however, Pater’s description also explains why individual subjects can have fundamentally different relationships towards the (supposedly) same

object of knowledge. While truth can be recognized as true by all people through the exercise of their rational capacities, just as physical beauty can be recognized by all those who possess an appreciation of the aesthetics of the human form, the relationship between the individual philosopher and the truth he discovers remains fundamentally different in kind. A “law of affinity” exists between philosophical subject and philosophical object, a displaced version of the relationship between the lover and the beloved object whose “true” beauty the lover alone recognizes.

Thus, by asserting that critical/philosophical thought is fundamentally and irreducibly erotic and aesthetic in nature, Pater’s account of truth justifies the existence of a rationality that is non-universal and highly individual, yet at the same time manages to avoid solipsism and radical relativity through its intractable orientation towards the object. Pater suggests that the articulation of a particular truth is unique to the specificities of an individual’s eroticized “encounter with the negative” of the object of knowledge, yet remains amenable to discussion, debate, critique, and revision by others. As Pater asserts, when Plato made the idea of Beauty “[t]he typical instance of an abstract idea, yet preoccupying the mind with all the colour and circumstance of the relationship of person to person,” he “conveyed into the entire theory of ideas, the associations which belong properly to such relationships only” (*PP* 153). Although Pater criticizes Platonic idealism for making the individual philosopher’s (displaced) desire for a particular erotic object into the foundation for an entire philosophical system, he does not suggest that Platonic idealism, in any meaningful sense, is false. Instead, the focus of his critique is Plato’s transformation of the individual’s desire for beauty into universal, “objective” Truth.

Pater suggests that non-dogmatic discussions of rational truth can only be conducted if one acknowledges the unique “law of affinity” that exists between the philosophical subject and

its object of knowledge. This is the reason why Pater does not acknowledge that the “lover” in Plato’s dialogues is always understood to be a beautiful boy. In contrast to the “Winckelmann” essay, where Pater defined Winckelmann’s “enthusiasm” as specifically and necessarily homoerotic in nature, the Pater of *Plato and Platonism* asserts that the Platonic philosopher’s “enthusiasm of knowledge is literally an *enthusiasm*: has about it that character of one *person* by another, by which the ‘animistic’ old Greeks explained natural madness” (*PP* 153-54) (emphasis added). I want to suggest that the absence of gendered language in the discussion of eros in *Plato and Platonism* does not indicate Pater’s reticence towards regarding homoerotic desire in his later writings, as many other critics suggest. Instead, *Plato and Platonism*’s studied inattention to the gender of the philosophical subject highlights Pater’s point regarding the irreducible specificity of philosophical desire, as well the integration of Winckelmannian “moral sexlessness” into the form, rather than merely the content, of his writing. Although the individual qualities of the object of desire (including its gender) are of utmost importance to the subject, the cause of the “enthusiasm” which, in a displaced form, motivates his philosophical pursuit of truth, that particularity must not be conveyed into an absolutist philosophical system. Instead, the particularity of philosopher/critic’s desire must be acknowledged as such in order to avoid the dangers of philosophical absolutism. Accordingly, although anyone familiar with the Platonic dialogues would have been aware of Pater’s implicit reference to the specifically homoerotic aspects of Platonic idealism, Pater avoids specifying the gender of the desired object in order to underline the extent to which multiple forms of erotic desire (homoerotic, heteroerotic, and otherwise) play an heretofore unacknowledged yet definitive role in the construction of rationality as non-totalizing and fundamentally aesthetic in nature.

Taken as a whole, Pater's body of work stands as the late nineteenth century's most elaborate analysis of the relationship between eroticism and aesthetics. In the second half of this dissertation, I will be discussing the works of two of Pater's closest and most creative readers: Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee. Specifically, I will examine how Wilde and Lee adapted erotic negativity to revise two key aspects of Pater's thought: namely, his reliance on a notion of subjective autonomy, and the association he makes between aesthetic form and masculine homoeroticism. It is to Wilde's radical version of Pater's aesthetic impressionism, and his turn to Hegel's theory of lyric negativity to articulate a vision of limited yet perdurable subjective autonomy, that the next chapter turns.

¹ [Emilia Pattison], Review of Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, *Westminster Review* 43 (1873): 639-40.

² Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 282-83.

³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 1-22.

⁴ Robert Crawford, "Pater's Renaissance, Andrew Lang, and Anthropological Romanticism," *ELH* 53:4 (1986): 870.

⁵ William F. Shuter, "History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel," *PMLA* 86:3 (1971).

⁶ Steven Connor, "Myth as Multiplicity in Pater's *Greek Studies* and 'Denys L' Auxerrois'," *Review of English Studies* 34:133 (1983): 32.

⁷ Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 50.

⁸ Pater refers here to French philosopher August Comte, was one of the founders of "positivism," a philosophy that believes authentic knowledge can only be derived from the empirical methods of science, and that such knowledge can only come from the positive affirmation of theories through strict adherence to the scientific method. For an overview of the influence of positivism in late nineteenth-century British thought, see Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Chesham, UK: Acumen, 2007).

⁹ See Billie Andrew Inman, "The Intellectual Context of Pater's 'Conclusion'" *Prose Studies* 4:1 (1981).

¹⁰ Walter Pater, "On Wordsworth," *Fortnightly Review* 15 (1874): 458; subsequent references will appear in parentheses after the abbreviation *WW*.

¹¹ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871).

¹² Although Crawford believes that Pater never read Tylor's work, instead borrowing the terms from the writings of Andrew Lang, Inman insists that internal evidence from Pater's writings indicates that he must have had first-hand knowledge of Tylor's theories. See Crawford, "Anthropological Romanticism," 873, and Billie Andrew Inman, *Walter Pater and His Reading 1874-1877* (New York: Garland, 1990), ix-x. Additional support for Inman's assertion can be found in William F. Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100.

¹³ Crawford gives the definition of the term "survival" from the OED, but maintains that the dictionary does not account for the specifically anthropological meaning of the term as it appeared in Tylor's writings ("Anthropological Romanticism," 878 n. 74).

¹⁴ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 22-23; quoted in George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 192-93

¹⁵ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 428-29; quoted in Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 192-93.

¹⁶ Edward B. Tylor, "The Religion of Savages," *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1866): 82-83. Pater, in contrast to many of his contemporaries (including Tylor himself), did not hesitate to apply the insights of anthropology to the classical origins of Western culture, studiously attempting to avoid the racialist implications of "primitivism." In reference to "animism," Pater asserts "the condition 'survives' [...] in the negro who thinks the discharging gun a living creature; as it survives also, more subtly, in the culture of Wordsworth and Shelley, [...] Goethe, [...] and in Schelling [...]." (Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Essays* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1893], 151.)

¹⁷ Pater adapts this quotation from Shelley's "Peter Bell the Third" (1819).

¹⁸ Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 38.

¹⁹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, 12 vols., trans. G. Henry Lodge, (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1873), 4.212-13.

²⁰ Walter Pater, "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," *Fortnightly Review* 25 (1876): 87.

²¹ Inman, *Pater's Reading 1878-1894*, 176. See also John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., (London: George Allen, 1903-12), 19. 295-350; Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

²² John Coates argues that Pater critiques the limitations of Tylolean anthropology in "Dionysus" essay, especially Tylor's characterizing of "primitive" people as childlike and his denigration of historically later versions of myths. See John Coates, "Pater and the Myth of Dionysus," *English* 56 (Autumn 2007): 265-82.

²³ Yopie Prins, "Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters," in Richard Dellamora, ed., *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 53. Prins cites Pater, *Greek Studies*, 38.

²⁴ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 238-46.

²⁵ Connor argues that Pater, inspired by the work of influential linguistic anthropologist Max Müller, was preoccupied with the "palimpsestic" quality of myths, where subsequent interpretations become integrated into the myth itself. In this way, according to Connor, Pater anticipates Derrida's poststructuralist critique of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's attempt to map the structures of bodies of myth. Yet while Connor criticizes the frivolity of Pater's writing in comparison to Müller and Derrida, calling attention to "a certain playfulness in [Pater's] writings about myth which can be irritating and belies the seriousness of the issues with which he is engaged," I argue in that Pater's literary form, rather than being "playful," is meant to embody the paradoxical nature of the figure of "man" as it is articulated within modern rationalist discourses. See Steven Connor, "Myth and Meta-Myth in Max Müller and Walter Pater," in J.B. Bullen, ed., *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature, and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 199-222.

²⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*. European Studies in English Literature. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 107.

²⁷ Van A. Harvey, "Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>>, accessed July 31 2007).

²⁸ Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Trübner and Company, 1854). For more on the *Essays and Reviews* controversy, see the extensive introductory essay to *Essays and Reviews: The 1860 Text and Its Reading*, eds. Victor Shea and William Whitla. Victorian Literature and Culture Series (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

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- ²⁹ Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *Das Wesen der Religion* (Leipzig: Alfred Kroner Verlag, 1908): 3; cited in Karl Barth, “Introductory Essay”, trans. James Luther Adams, in *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot [Marian Evans] (New York: Harper & Row, 1957): xi.
- ³⁰ Barth, “Introductory Essay,” xii.
- ³¹ Feuerbach, *Essence*, 33.
- ³² Walter Pater, “A Study of Dionysus: The Spiritual Form of Fire and Dew,” *Fortnightly Review* 25 (1876): 761; subsequent references to this essay will appear in parentheses after the abbreviation *D*.
- ³³ See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871).
- ³⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 187.
- ³⁵ David DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1969), 171-72. Also see Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 91. Alex Potts has criticized Pater for ignoring the violent undertones of Winckelmann’s Apollonian ideal. However, I believe that Pater corrects for this error by focusing on the implicit violence of the humanist ideal in the “Dionysus” essay and in *Marius the Epicurean*. See Alex Potts, *Flesh and Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 238.
- ³⁶ Pater, *Greek Studies*, 56-7
- ³⁷ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 91; Dellamora cites Wendell Johnson, *Living in Sin: The Victorian Sexual Revolution* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 167.
- ³⁸ Dellamora argues that Pater’s description of the Orphic Dionysus is a figure for the “melancholic,” self-destructive, self-hating modern homosexual man, citing Pater’s reference to Solomon as the major piece of evidence for this reading. Yet given the paucity of other references to male homoeroticism in this essay, especially compared to the relatively explicit homoeroticism of Pater’s earlier essays and *Marius the Epicurean*, I believe that Pater’s consideration of homoeroticism is merely one aspect of his broader consideration of the relationship between violence and eroticism more generally. See Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 176-80.
- ³⁹ Dennis Denisoff, “The Dissipating Nature of Decadent Paganism from Pater to Yeats,” *Modernism/Modernity* 15:3 (2008): 439.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970): 248.

⁴¹ Gary Gutting, "Michel Foucault," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>>, accessed September 17 2008).

⁴² Pater, *Renaissance*, 186.

⁴³ The Cyrenaics were a hedonistic school of philosophy founded in the 4th century BCE; they are generally considered a less sophisticated precursor to the Epicureans. See Voula Tsouna, *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ See Carolyn Williams, "Walter Pater and the Form of Historical Revival," in Suzy Anger, ed., *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 78.

⁴⁵ Iser, *Aesthetic Moment*, 130-31.

⁴⁶ Pater's ironic use of the words "manly" and "manliness" in reference to the senseless violence and death represented in this chapter of *Marius* represents a criticism of the idealization of masculinity within the Victorian discourse of "muscular Christianity." This mid-century movement, most famously associated with Charles Kingsley, made the sexually disciplined male body "the central locus of [moral] value" (James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995], 101). This criticism is most strongly articulated in the narrator's criticism of Marcus Aurelius, an icon of masculine ascetic virtue during the Victorian period (see Ian Small's introduction to the World's Classics edition of *Marius the Epicurean* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986]). Although Adams claims that Pater's writings are notable for their "canny" homoerotic appropriation of the figure of the morally and physically idealized male body of muscular Christianity, Pater's harsh criticisms of masculinity indicate that an attempt to craft a very different homoerotic ideal in *Marius* than in his earlier writings. See Adams, *Dandies*, 184-231.

⁴⁷ Iser, *Aesthetic Moment*, 143.

⁴⁸ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Aesthetic Violence: The Concept of the Ugly in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *Cultural Critique* 60 (2005): 171.

⁴⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 88 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 49.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 50.

⁵¹ Hohendahl, "Aesthetic Violence," 185. Hohendahl cites Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 52.

⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 52.

⁵³ Hohendahl, "Aesthetic Violence," 186.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 50.

⁵⁵ Iser, *Aesthetic Moment*, 142-43.

⁵⁶ Marc Redfield argues that the *Bildungsroman*, more than any other genre, transmits the humanist ideology of self-formation of the subject, the integration of the particular "I" into the general subjectivity of a community, and into the universal subjectivity of mankind (Marc Redfield: *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996]).

⁵⁷ Pater's struggle against the universalizing tendencies of the genre makes *Marius the Epicurean* a forerunner of what Gregory Castle calls the "modernist *Bildungsroman*." Castle uses Adorno's concept of "negative dialectics" to describe the work done by the modernist *Bildungsroman* as an immanent critique of the capitalist and colonial impulses that had become established in the nineteenth century *Bildungsroman*, thus signaling a "successful resistance to the institutionalization of self-cultivation" (Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* [Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2006], 258).

⁵⁸ Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, vi; subsequent references will be appear in parenthesis after the abbreviation *PP*.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 277.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 258, 260.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso Books, 2003), 30.

⁶² Benjamin, *Origin*, 31.

⁶³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 31.

CHAPTER THREE

Oscar Wilde and the Performance of Lyric Subjectivity

In July 1890, readers of the *Nineteenth Century* encountered an article by Oscar Wilde containing this provocative statement: “Don’t let us discuss anything solemnly. I am but too conscious of the fact that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood.”¹ The very title of Wilde’s article, “The True Function and Value of Criticism; with Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue,” is a mockery of the seriousness typically associated with the nineteenth-century critical essay. Wilde’s insistence that he “not be misunderstood” plays up to the public image he perpetuated of himself throughout the 1880s: the fashionable dandy and self-anointed “Professor of Aesthetics” whose outlandish persona constituted a concerted attack on moral seriousness.²

Yet an attentive reader would have known that Wilde’s seemingly outré titled derived from Matthew Arnold’s well-known 1864 essay, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” a treatise that, whatever its other virtues, is not particularly famous for its humor. While Wilde’s nod to Arnold might appear to be merely satirical, a casual glance at the annotations to the recent Oxford edition of Wilde’s *Intentions* (1891, where Wilde republished this article as “The Critic as Artist”) reveals an imposingly broad range of references and erudite allusions that belie the apparent insouciance of the title.³ Wilde’s essay not only engages deeply with the works of Matthew Arnold, but also displays a profound knowledge of Walter Pater’s aesthetics. I open this chapter by examining how, in “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde performs the labor of the negative upon Pater’s theorization of intentionality in aesthetic criticism, and in the process offers a succinct presentation of the manner in which his vision of erotic negativity derives from, but also crucially differs from, that of Pater. I contend that Wilde’s critical essays present an

anti-metaphysical aesthetic philosophy, one that has some affinities with the notion of performative subjectivity in poststructuralist queer theory. Yet even as Wilde's writings celebrate the creative potential of non-essentializing forms of identity, they also caution against what is lost when humanist notions of subjectivity are jettisoned entirely. Wilde dramatizes this loss in *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* (1889, revised edition published 1921). I argue that Wilde deploys Hegel's performative theory of lyric to advance a homoerotic reading of Shakespeare's sonnets. By embedding this interpretation within a complex frame narrative, Wilde expresses the insight he gains from Hegel's theory: namely, that language's limited ability to capture the "truth" of erotic desire need not compromise the perdurability of the subject. In contrast to much recent work in queer theory, Wilde demonstrates how homoerotic desire can ground, rather than undermine, a notion of subjective autonomy.

Criticism of the Highest Kind: Pater, Wilde, and *Intentions*

"The Critic as Artist" stands alongside "The Decay of Lying" (1889) as one of Wilde's first major philosophical statements on aesthetics, a definitive turn away from the reviews and informal pieces that had made up the bulk of his early journalistic work. Curiously, however, the bold statements made in these articles that celebrate the "personality" of the aesthetic critic are not articulated through Wilde's first-person voice. Instead, they take the form of philosophical dialogues between two characters who, at times, mimic Wilde's own stylishly epigrammatic wit. In the case of "The Critic as Artist," Wilde's dialogue takes place between two young men, Gilbert and Ernest, who play two distinct roles within their exchange: Gilbert, the Paterian aesthete, articulates a series of fanciful, complex, and paradoxical ideas about art; Ernest, whose rather conventional opinions cause him to respond to Gilbert in shocked disbelief, skeptically questions many of Gilbert's more audacious claims. The dialogic form of Wilde's essay renders

the relationship between the text and the intentions of its author particularly ambiguous. As Ernest states in one of the dialogue's many moments of playful meta-commentary, it is by means of the dialogic form that an author "can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument."⁴ By combining the ambiguity inherent in dialogue with his own knowingly ironic stance towards that form, Wilde renders it impossible to determine if any of Gilbert's audacious claims can really be ascribed to himself, or even if such a question is relevant or meaningful. In other words, Wilde's own critical intentions in "The Critic as Artist" are entirely opaque because the statements made in this essay are merely the performed opinions of fictional characters.

As the title of the 1891 volume suggests, the essays included in *Intentions* playfully but insistently interrogate the concept of intentionality within aesthetic criticism, a question that arises most explicitly in relation to the writings of Pater. Wilde cites Pater's works so often in *Intentions* that many critics and reviewers accused Wilde of coming dangerously close to plagiarism. As Lawrence Danson has pointed out, even the title *Intentions* recalls Pater's own essay collection *Appreciations* (1889), which Wilde had reviewed positively in March 1890, calling it "an exquisite collection of exquisite essays, of delicately wrought works of art [...]" (*SMS* 25).⁵ On the whole, critics have understood Wilde to be Pater's critical disciple, a popularizer of Pater's abstruse aesthetic theories. More recently, however, critics such as Denis Donoghue and Julia Prewitt Brown have argued that there existed a certain amount of intellectual tension between Pater's and Wilde's respective aesthetic philosophies.⁶ Yet no matter how one chooses to interpret their relationship, it is certain that the personal and intellectual ties between Wilde and Pater have been obvious since the beginning of Wilde's literary career and are now a commonplace of Wilde criticism. Wilde had been an enthusiastic reader of *The Renaissance*

when he entered Oxford University in 1874, and he became an acquaintance of Pater's during his final year at the university. In subsequent years, the two men would review each other's work and maintained an amicable correspondence until Pater's death in 1894.⁷

Wilde was notably responsive to Pater's interest in the issue of critical intentionality. As I have discussed in chapter one, Pater himself discusses the question of critical intent most explicitly in his famous description of Leonardo Da Vinci's *La Gioconda*. By recognizing that Da Vinci's painting is embedded within a preexisting critical discourse that inevitably conditions its reception in the present, Pater comes to understand that the aesthetic object itself performs much the same critical work as the aesthetic critic himself, only in a different material form. This recognition calls into question the oddly mimetic relationship between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object within his theory of aesthetic criticism, which places him in a theoretical double-bind. Pater must confront the possibility that his engagement with the artwork either results in the projection of his own subjectivity upon the aesthetic object, or that his critical subjectivity has disappeared entirely within the object. In any case, the aesthetic critic is in danger of subsuming critical difference into a totalizing identity, thereby reproducing the transcendental and hierarchical aspects of the Kantian argumentative structure that the Paterian aesthetic critic expressly seeks to avoid. It is thus apparent in Pater's writings that, although he was interested in the relationship between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object, he did not believe that the intentions of the critical subject had the right to overwhelm or absorb the particularity of the aesthetic object.

The relationship between critical intentions and aesthetic objects is also one of the most vexed topics discussed in "The Critic As Artist," particularly when Gilbert cites Pater's discussion of *La Gioconda*. Gilbert presents a rather different interpretation of this passage by

foregrounding the issue of critical subjectivity that Pater tries to get away from in his writing. He interprets Pater's description as a celebration of the untrammelled personality of the critic *vis-à-vis* his engagement with the aesthetic object: "Who, again, cares whether Mr Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Lionardo never dreamed of?" Gilbert asks, before reciting the famous passage (*SMS* 238). He then asserts, "[T]he criticism I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it" (*SMS* 239). On the surface, it appears that Gilbert implicitly responds to those critics who have accused Pater of taking excessive liberties in his writings by ignoring the intentions of the artist in favor of articulating his own impressions, and in the process telling his readers more about himself than the aesthetic object he ostensibly discusses. Gilbert responds to this accusation by asserting that "criticism of the highest kind" is defined by its ability to open up the aesthetic object to a plurality of interpretations, rather than shutting down the interpretive process by limiting itself to divining the intentions of the artist and "accepting that as final." Because "the meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it," the aesthetic critic engages in a process of self-reflection and self-articulation in order to open up the aesthetic object for his readers. The goal, according to Gilbert's rendering of Pater, is to craft a description that is evocative rather than definitive, one that grants the reader/observer the interpretive latitude to gain knowledge of himself through his encounter with the aesthetic object. As Alison Pease asserts, what Wilde calls "Art is not so much the object as it is the process of aesthetic apprehension and, in turn, self-realization."⁸

Interpreted in this way, Gilbert's assertion simply represents an elaboration and expansion of Pater's famous transformation of Arnold's renowned assertion in "The Function of Criticism" that the aim of the critic was "[t]o see the object as in itself it really is" into the question asked in *The Renaissance*, "[w]hat is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?" Yet in the process of giving an ostensibly faithful rendition of Pater's interpretive methods, Gilbert undermines Pater's own intended meaning in his description of *La Gioconda*. Pater's discussion of Da Vinci's painting expresses acute awareness of and anxiety regarding the dangers of an impressionistic criticism unattached to any sure sense of the objectivity of the aesthetic object. Yet Gilbert interprets this passage as the "highest" expression of an interpretive method that places equal emphasis on the reactions of the observer and the intentions of the artist.

In contrast to Pater's apprehensiveness regarding the possibility of mimicking the critical object in one's own criticism, Gilbert asserts that "the critic reproduces the work that he criticizes in a mode that is never imitative, and part of whose charm may really consist in the rejection of resemblance, and shows us in this way not merely the meaning but also the mystery of Beauty, and, by transforming each art into literature, solves once and for all the problem of Art's unity" (*SMS* 243). Gilbert thus accomplishes an ingenious argumentative coup: by being faithful to the foundational premise of Paterian criticism (more faithful, indeed, than Pater himself), Gilbert fulfills the larger intentions of Pater's criticism by ignoring his intended meaning in one particular passage—in a sense, Gilbert "reproduces" Pater's work "in a mode that is never imitative." He opens up the meaning of the *La Gioconda* passage by applying Pater's critical methods to Pater's own writing. In this process of interpretation Gilbert (and, by implication, Wilde) gains mastery over the critical impressionist project. Gilbert's faithfulness to

Pater, his unreserved embrace of impressionistic criticism, paradoxically authorizes his unfaithfulness to Pater. In other words, it could be said that Wilde's dialogue performs the labor of the negative upon Paterian impressionism, cancelling and preserving the contradictions of Pater's thought within Wilde's own critical essay by committing itself to the critical subjectivism that Pater himself could never fully embrace.

While such a suggestion might seem far-fetched, given the generally flippant and insouciant tone of Wilde's essays, several critics have called attention to the importance of Hegel's aesthetics in the essays found in *Intentions*. This influence is especially apparent in final essay in this volume, "The Truth of Masks," which ends with this assertion:

Not that I agree with everything I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. And just as it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can apprehend the Platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism, and through it, that we can realize Hegel's system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks. (*SMS* 304)

This statement is not a mere idle gesture towards idealist thought. Rather, it draws attention to an important intellectual current running throughout *Intentions*. In his emphasis on "artistic standpoint" and "attitude," Wilde uses the dialectical method, "Hegel's system of contraries," fundamentally to undermine the notion that the aesthetic critic possesses a universally coherent, internally consistent subjectivity to which definite critical intentions can be ascribed.

Philosophically inclined critics have long recognized the signal importance of Hegel's thought within Wilde's aesthetics. Wilde, much like Pater, was greatly influenced during his

university years by Oxford Hegelians such as Benjamin Jowett, William Wallace, and F.H. Bradley. The idealist strain in Wilde's writing was recognized as early as 1892, when Max Nordau classed Wilde with Nietzsche as "egomaniacal individualists who had willfully distorted Hegel's idealism" in his infamous study *Degeneration*.⁹ Major literary critics of the early twentieth century, such as William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and René Wellek, also recognized Wilde's aesthetics to be part of the Hegelian idealist tradition, and Rodney Shewan's 1977 study, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egoism*, discussed the Hegelian elements within the notion of "soul" found in "The English Renaissance of Art" (lecture delivered 1882) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, rev. 1891).¹⁰

More recently, Phillip E. Smith and Michael Helfand's edition of Wilde's Oxford Commonplace Book has established once and for all his detailed knowledge of Hegel's works. Smith and Helfand argue that Wilde's aesthetic philosophy arose out of his unique synthesis of Hegelian idealism and the materialist theories of evolution articulated by Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Thomas H. Huxley, William K. Clifford, and John Tyndall.¹¹ Following in the steps of Smith and Helfand, Julia Prewitt Brown has argued that Wilde drew on German idealist thought in order to articulate an "ethical aestheticism" where "the experience of art is the only viable means in the contemporary world of countering the commercial spirit, or of arriving at that critical understanding of past and present that is essential for a safe future."¹² Brown, however, deemphasizes the Hegelian influence in favor of integrating Wilde into a Kantian/Arnoldian critical tradition, which causes her to minimize and oversimplify Pater's complex engagement with philosophical aesthetics, and to dismiss the manifest importance of dialectical argumentation in Wilde's writings.

Bruce Bashford, by contrast, has argued that Wilde was a rhetorical rather than metaphysical dialectician, and that Hegel's significance for Wilde was primarily stylistic rather than philosophical. Bashford contends that Wilde's investments in idealist thought are subsumed within his larger commitment to a sophisticated theory and rhetoric of modern humanism that "reconciles the traditional tenets of humanism with intellectual commitments not obviously compatible with those tenets."¹³ One of the crucial insights of Wilde's humanism, according to Bashford, is his realization that the humanist's call to aesthetic *Bildung* or self-culture will not necessarily lead to the discovery and development of a unified self. As Vivian states in the dialogue, "The Decay of Lying" (also found in *Intentions*), "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word 'Whim'" (*SMS* 164). By emphasizing theory over praxis, and reflection over the "bitter end of action," Wilde's aesthetics imagines art criticism to be a space where inconsistency is not only accepted but also encouraged to develop, where one realizes that "the self is plural and that it develops through being the many disparate selves it contains."¹⁴ As Gilbert asserts in "The Critic as Artist," art "springs from personality," a personality that, according to Pease, "is for Wilde never essential, but potential and multiple" (*SMS* 264).¹⁵ To recall again the title of this volume of criticism, the "intentions" found in Wilde's writings are always plural and always resist ascription to a single, consistent, and coherent subjectivity.

This understanding of the aesthetic subject is where Wilde's aesthetic philosophy differs most markedly from that of Pater. As we have seen in the "Winckelmann" essay, the Paterian aesthetic subject is created through the process of *Bildung*, or self-culture, in a more traditionally Hegelian paradigm. In this structure, the self-consciousness of the aesthetic critic comes into

being through the encounter with the negative, which occurs when the critic recognizes the existence of a desire that has been withheld from his consciousness, a recognition that occurs through the critic's engagement with the aesthetic representation of homoeroticism.

Consequently, this encounter with the negative elicits new insights into the nature of the aesthetic object. These insights come into existence when the critic articulates his own desires by means of an aesthetic criticism that includes both subject and object within its purview. This form of aesthetic criticism thus becomes a kind of self-interpretation routed through the objectivity of the aesthetic object. Winckelmann's encounter with homoerotic negativity renders his critical intentions present to and understandable by himself through a process of writing that makes his erotic desires recognizable to himself through aesthetic engagement with Greek sculpture. Winckelmann thus becomes, for Pater, the preeminent representative of the aesthetic critic whose can successfully answer the question "what is this [...] to me?" by correctly recognizing the erotic desire that motivates his own critical intentions.

Wilde, by contrast, is skeptical of the conclusions drawn from acts of self-interpretation. His dubiousness regarding the conclusions in "Winckelmann" about the nature of aesthetic reflection can be seen as early as an entry made in his Oxford commonplace book (c. 1874-79), where he quotes Pater's assertion that "[w]e must renounce metaphysics if we would mould our lives to artistic perfection" and use philosophy only to "detect the passion and strangeness and dramatic contrasts of Life." To this proposition, Wilde writes in response "Yet surely he who sees in colour no mere delightful quality of natural things but a spirit indwelling in things is in a way a metaphysician."¹⁶ Even at this early stage in his writing career, Wilde seems to have detected that, underneath Pater's seemingly radical statements on aesthetics in *The Renaissance*, he remained committed to a metaphysical notion of "deep" subjectivity.

Although Wilde, like Pater, focuses on the operations of aesthetic *Bildung* and the development of the aesthetic critic's "personality" within his writings, it is also apparent that, for Wilde, the cultivation of self-knowledge does not necessarily result in a vision of the self as singular, coherent, and consistent. Instead, self-knowledge results in the belief that the individual contains many selves that resist sedimentation into a univocal, self-consistent form of subjectivity. Consequently, self-knowledge remains necessarily incomplete, which is to say, the critical language used by the self to interpret itself is never capable of entirely capturing the dynamic plurality of subjectivity without falling into inconsistency and contradiction. In *Intentions*, Wilde often rejoices in this subjective incoherence by exploding stale truisms about the self, such as his celebration in "The Truth of Masks" of the unbridled subjectivity expressed by the aesthetic critic's "artist standpoint" and "attitude," which can intend two absolutely contradictory interpretations of the artwork. It is for this reason that Wilde's writings have proven so appealing to psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and queer critics, who see in Wilde's oeuvre an anticipation of their own non-essentialist, de-centered conception of human subjectivity that celebrates the self's contingency and multiplicity.

Given the dialectical nature of his thought, however, Wilde does not simply affirm all forms of plural subjectivity. When one moves from Wilde's essays to his fictions, something quite different can be seen, namely, pessimistic and disturbing portraits of individuals becoming aware of the radical incompleteness of their subjectivity through the experience of homoerotic desire. Similar to Pater's later writings, which I have discussed in chapter two, in his fictions Wilde embeds homoeroticism within cultural formations of violence and destruction. In a work such as *Marius the Epicurean*, however, Pater subjects the violent potential of homoerotic desire to the labor of the negative, and finds that an anthropological understanding of human

subjectivity can be cancelled and preserved by an aestheticized homoeroticism that, through the dialectical encounter with violence, leads Marius to a more advanced level of self-consciousness. In Pater's writings, the question "what is this [...] to me?" is always answerable: the subject is capable of continually undergoing destruction and creation under the imperatives of aesthetic *Bildung* because of his inexhaustible capacity for self-consciousness and self-interpretation.

In "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," however, Wilde's characters run up against the very limits of their capacity for self-understanding when they attempt to express their sexual desire within language. By doing so, they dramatize Hegel's insight into the radical negativity of lyric utterance, the moment when the individual realizes there is no longer any guarantee that the language of self-analysis meaningfully interprets the self from which that language originates and proceeds. This inability to express their homoerotic desires throws Wilde's characters violently back upon their own existence, creating a fatal misrecognition: they believe that the inability to articulate their erotic desires indicates an irremediable failure of the *self*, rather than a failure of language. Instead, I suggest that Wilde's unnamed narrator, who comes to realize that language can never capture the "truth" of the self, demonstrates how a specifically *aesthetic* attitude toward erotic desire's resistance to linguistic articulation can provide the ground for a limited yet perdurable form of autonomous subjectivity.

The Performance of Lyric Subjectivity: "The Portrait of Mr. W.H."

Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." presents a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets purporting to reveal the identity of Mr. W.H., the famous "onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets" mentioned in Shakespeare's dedication. Mr. W.H. is identified as a young actor named Willie Hughes, a member of Shakespeare's troupe who became the object of his erotic longing and the inspiration for his dramatic art. Rather than presenting this theory in the form of a

traditional literary-critical essay, however, Wilde embeds this interpretation within a narrative frame that recounts the origin and circulation of this theory of the sonnets among three men: the unnamed narrator of the story, his friend Erskine, and Erskine's deceased friend Cyril, the supposed originator of the "Willie Hughes theory" of the sonnets.

The controversial Willie Hughes theory, which these three men find so strangely compelling, did not originate with Wilde, but was first proposed in 1766 by the literary critic Thomas Tyrwhitt, and was subsequently endorsed by Edmund Malone in his influential 1790 edition of the sonnets. The Willie Hughes theory was accepted, but severely condemned, by the noted literary critic Henry Hallam in 1839, who regretted that the poems had ever been written and maintained that "[t]here is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection, which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiment that abound in this long series of sonnets."¹⁷ Yet by the time Wilde wrote "Mr. W.H." in the late nineteenth century, this theory had largely fallen out of fashion among Shakespeare scholars. As the narrator of "Mr. W.H." states before he is converted to the Willie Hughes theory, most Victorian Shakespeare scholars had decided that "[Lord] Pembroke, Shakespeare, and Mary Fitton are the three personages of the Sonnets; there is no doubt at all about it" (*SMS* 35). Yet Wilde's story revives "Willie Hughes" in order to place homoerotic desire in provocative relation to the problems of aesthetic interpretation.

Most critics have recognized that Wilde's fictional presentation of the Willie Hughes theory allows him to exemplify the methods of "art-criticism" celebrated in the *Intentions* essays. He composes a work of criticism that also functions as a piece of creative, imaginative literature in its own right. Wilde's story of aesthetic criticism thus not only presents an interpretation of Shakespeare's poetry, but also explores the various psychological motivations, relations, and

investments that motivate the act of literary interpretation. Furthermore, critics who have discussed the markedly homoerotic aspects of Wilde's tale within the context of art-criticism have relied upon poststructuralist theory to describe Wilde's meta-critical attempts to either create a vocabulary for male same-sex desire, or to analyze his suggestive deployment of the rhetoric of same-sex desire in order to enhance the provocative ambiguity that is, for them, the hallmark of language's specifically literary capacities.

Very little attention has been paid, however, to the experiences of radical self-estrangement portrayed in "Mr. W.H.," all of which are elicited by encounters with the homoeroticism expressed in the very act of articulating the Willie Hughes theory of the sonnets. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the various presentations of the Willie Hughes theory, much like the aesthetic theories presented in the *Intentions* dialogues, are performed by various literary characters both for the benefit of the reader and for the benefit of other literary characters. In this chapter, I argue that the concept of performance is a key category for analyzing the conjunction between homoerotic negativity and self-estrangement in Wilde's story. Throughout "Mr. W.H.," Wilde imbricates the interpretive performances of the Willie Hughes theory with other types of performative acts: both the theatrical performances of Willie Hughes, and the poetic "performance" expressed by Shakespeare's sonnets themselves.

Just as Wilde views art-criticism as the opportunity for the critic to exercise his own creative powers in service of the creation of his own "personality," Wilde's story presents literary interpretation as a type of performance that stands alongside these other forms of aesthetic performance in its vital, creative relationships to the subject. These performances of interpretation offer characters the opportunity to both express and create their subjectivity through the articulation of homoerotic desire. At the same time, however, these performances

demonstrate the process by which acts of self-interpretation break down when the individual is forced to confronts the representation of his own erotic desires.

For Wilde's characters, belief in Willie Hughes is literally a matter of life and death. The story begins when the unnamed narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." learns of the Willie Hughes theory from his friend Erskine, who, in turn, received the theory from his Oxford friend Cyril Graham, an "effeminate" acting enthusiast who supposedly discovered the existence of Willie Hughes "working by [the] purely internal evidence" provided by the poems themselves (*SMS* 37). Erskine tells of how Cyril presented him with a portrait of Willie Hughes in order to prove to Erskine the veracity of the interpretation. Erskine goes on to tell of his discovery that the painting was a forgery commissioned by Cyril himself, and of Cyril's subsequent suicide in the name of the Willie Hughes theory.

Although Erskine finds the Willie Hughes theory untenable, the narrator is convinced by Cyril's interpretation, and proceeds to narrate the process by which he goes through the sonnets in search of evidence in support of Cyril's theory. In the novella-length version of the story, published in 1921 but written sometime during the early 1890s, the narrator's reading of the sonnets offers digressions on the history of boy actors on the Renaissance stage, the Renaissance revival of Neoplatonic thought, and the significance of the "Dark Lady" mentioned in the later part of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence.¹⁸ After writing a letter to Erskine outlining the evidence in support of the Willie Hughes theory, however, the narrator discovers that he no longer believes the theory himself. Yet he soon learns that his letter has re-convinced Erskine of the theory, and inspired him to travel to the continent in order to find evidence that will convince the now unbelieving narrator of the existence of Willie Hughes. Two years later, the narrator receives a letter from Erskine declaring his intent to commit suicide in the name of the Willie

Hughes theory. The narrator travels to the continent in hopes of saving Erskine, but finds that he is already dead. He soon discovers, however, that Erskine died after a long struggle with tuberculosis, rather than by suicide. The story ends with the narrator ambiguously claiming that, whenever he looks at the forged painting of Mr. W.H. (his inheritance from Cyril by way of Erskine), he now believes that “there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (WH 101).

Although literary critics have paid considerably less attention to “Mr. W.H.” than to Wilde’s critical essays, plays, and novel, the consensus position on this novella is that it represents, in fictional form, the psychological and linguistic complexities inherent in the act of aesthetic criticism. Some scholars, such as Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand, Paul K. Saint-Amour, and David Wayne Thomas have bracketed off the homoerotic aspects of Wilde’s tale in their attempts to understand “Mr. W.H.” to articulate a coherent and positive paradigm for the project of “art-criticism” outlined in the critical dialogues.¹⁹ Other critics, however, have called upon the theoretical resources of poststructuralist linguistics and psychoanalysis in order to grapple with the story’s dramatization of the insoluble contradictions and inevitable failures of literary interpretation. Linda Dowling relies on Derridean deconstruction to argue that “Mr. W.H.” expresses the problems of interpretation introduced by the “new philology” of the late nineteenth century, and exemplified by the writings of decadent authors. The new philological concept of “autonomous language,” she argues, undermines the notion that moral and social order can base itself upon a divinely ordained linguistic order.²⁰ Similarly, Joel Fineman deploys deconstructive theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in his account of Wilde’s story as the *telos* of the quixotic literary project begun by Shakespeare’s sonnets themselves. Fineman defines this project as “the literary problematic that derives from the effort to imagine a visible language, a

language in which there would be no difference between the *imago* of presentation (the “Portrait”) and the *sign* of representation (“W.H.”),” written in service of the impossible ideal of a self that is simultaneously both represented within and created by language.²¹

These poststructuralist readings, which offer sophisticated accounts of the complexities and ambiguities found in “Mr. W.H.,” also dominate analyses that try to make sense of the novella’s explicit references to same-sex eroticism. Critics who have attempted to explicate this relation have used poststructuralist theory and psychoanalysis in service of two lines of argumentation: either the ambiguities of literary interpretation in “Mr. W.H.” represent Wilde’s struggle to articulate a language for desire between men that escapes the condemnatory and pathologizing discourse surrounding male homoeroticism in the late nineteenth-century, or the story’s foregrounding of the linguistic indeterminacy lying at the heart of literary interpretation is a reflection or repetition of a psychic incoherence lying at the heart of sexual desire.

Regarding this first line of argumentation, Regenia Gagnier argues that Wilde’s story attempts to articulate a subjective, literary standard of truth that stood apart from the scientific objectivity coming to dominate Victorian society, one that could accommodate the “truth” of the existence of desire between men.²² In the same vein, Kate Chedgzoy’s feminist-psychoanalytic analysis maintains that “[t]he myth of Willie Hughes facilitates the creation of a homosocial bond between Wilde and Shakespeare—a bond which is then used to valorise love between men. This is achieved in part by means of the appropriation of metaphors of female reproductive capacity in the service of a narcissistic reproductive of self.”²³ Similarly, Lawrence Danson argues that “Wilde tried to speak about sexual desire by withholding the language of his own speaking—always deferring the revelation the language promises, because that revelation, being *in* language, would necessarily falsify his truth.”²⁴ These studies share the presumption that

Wilde was forced to look to the discourse of aesthetics in order to find a language suitable for the representation of a culturally stigmatized homosexual desire that preexists the act of writing itself. By doing so, these studies oversimplify what Joseph Bristow has called, borrowing a phrase from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the “complex, multiform” quality of Wilde’s sexuality as it manifested itself both in his life and in his literary works. Bristow calls attention to the fact that, before the trials in 1895 that led to his imprisonment for acts of “gross indecency,” “there is little evidence to suggest that Wilde had much or any interest in the ways in which sexual behavior had become a focus of fascination for those thinkers [...] Wilde, until the time of his prison sentence, had no perception of himself as either a ‘homosexual’ or an ‘invert’, even though these almost interchangeable labels were gaining credibility within scientific circles in the mid-1890s.”²⁵

The fact that Wilde, at the time of writing “Mr. W.H.,” seems to have had no clear sense of himself as the possessor of a specifically stigmatized sexual identity militates against the assumption that he felt a particularly urgent need to find a vocabulary that would exonerate his homoerotic desire. Horst Schroeder’s study of the contemporary reception of “Mr. W.H.” appears to substantiate this claim, since contemporary critics had little or nothing to say about the homoerotic implications of Wilde’s narrative, focusing instead on the relative plausibility of the Willie Hughes theory as a legitimate intervention in Shakespearian criticism. “Mr. W.H.” did not become associated with homosexual implication until after it was introduced as evidence against Wilde at his trial.²⁶ While one could argue that these critics simply were simply inattentive to the homoerotic implications of Wilde’s story, I contend that the generally subdued contemporary critical reaction to “Mr. W.H.” indicates that Wilde’s story was neither intended nor understood to be a disclosure or defense of Wilde’s own same-sex desires *per se*, but was

(much like Pater's "Winckelmann") an investigation into the imbrication of homoeroticism and the practice of art-criticism.

Both William Cohen and Richard Halpern have analyzed the intersection between same-sex desire and aesthetic criticism by elaborating upon Fineman's insights in their interpretations of the indeterminacy shared by both linguistic signification and the psychology of sexual desire in Wilde's story. According to Cohen's deconstructive reading, the discovery of the name "Willie Hughes" encoded within the language of the sonnets is a figure for "the basic contradiction of language, the impossible striving after a univocal correspondence between signifier and signified. As the exemplary case of language's indexical capacity, the name can thus be understood as a false work that tells the truth about the falseness—that is, the arbitrary, unmotivated character—of language in general." Cohen reads the forged portrait of Mr. W.H. as "the 'perfect representation' not of some referential reality but of the name figured in the sonnet [...] [I]f the forgery represents the theory in visual form, it is only *as* a counterfeit—not as a representation of the real—that it induces belief."²⁷ Cohen not only suggests that Wilde's story functions as an allegory for the *différance* that inevitably compromises the finality of linguistic meaning, but also posits that Wilde connects this insight regarding linguistic instability to the fundamentally unstable nature of sexual secrets: "For in the process of staking out a terrain for literature that is codified and enigmatic, Wilde simultaneously proposes that certain sexual secrets provide a key to the interpretive puzzle just as plausibly as do the literary ones."²⁸ Cohen's reference to "sexual secrets" recalls Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, which defines the modern subject as a subject that possesses sexual secrets about him- or herself that must be kept hidden, therefore effecting the self-disciplining of the subject. Cohen thus concludes "Wilde's aversion to an unequivocal affirmation of homoeroticism," his refusal to name or define the

specific nature of the homoerotic bonds represented in the story, “has less to do with an intentional negativity about sex than with his positive program for literature.”²⁹ According to Cohen, Wilde drew upon the ambiguously “secret” status of homoerotic desire as a resource for exploring for the intractable ambiguity of literary language itself.

Richard Halpern elaborates on Cohen’s account of the move from image to text by mapping it onto the conjunction between the discourses of “sodomy” and “sublimity”. Halpern argues that the Willie Hughes theory “circulates in, and is structured by, the [psychoanalytic] field of the transference,” whereby “belief is always staged for, and in behalf of, a nonbelieving Other.” Halpern further claims that “[f]or Wilde, transference defines not only an intersubjective dynamic but an economy of exchange among separate aesthetic and erotic spheres.”³⁰ Wilde’s story deploys the move from image to linguistic sign “Mr. W.H.” in order to elucidate language’s capacity to “transubstantiate” beauty from one artistic medium to another. This movement, according to Halpern, is “precisely the mark” of the Hegelian sublime, insofar as “the medium of speech manifests an ungraspable or unspeakable aspect within beauty.” This transmission, however, is “supplemented by a second and even more important field of translation between the sexual and the aesthetic” accomplished by means of Freudian sublimation. This sublimation of the erotic into the aesthetic can only be accomplished “by separating out an impure portion, and this portion does not simply vanish.”³¹ This “impurity” manifests itself in Wilde’s story through the rhetoric of sodomy: a discourse that occupies, along with the sublime, a space that is beyond representation, but which can be gestured towards through the language of “unspeakability”. This sodomical rhetoric “works to heighten, rather than disperse, the sense of a dreadful secret” in Wilde’s story by vaguely intimating the “unnameable sin” rather than the explicit portraying

homosexual acts. Halpern thus concludes “Wilde does not render sodomy sublime so much as he creates a sublimity that sodomy cannot possibly answer to.”³²

Cohen’s and Halpern’s readings of “Mr. W.H.” productively complicate the relations among homoeroticism, identity, and language in Wilde’s novella. They both harness the explanatory power of Fineman’s reading to move beyond interpretations that understand “Mr. W.H.” simply to reveal or articulate Wilde’s homosexual desires. Their turn to the notion of *différance* to explain Wilde’s deployment of homoeroticism, however, relies on the unstated assumption that linguistic structures and psychic structures unproblematically map onto each other. This is due to their shared reliance on Lacan’s poststructuralist version of Freudian psychoanalysis, which famously claims that “the unconscious is structured like a language.”³³ Hence Cohen’s reading of “the name” and Halpern’s Lacanian interpretation of Hegel’s sublime both posit at the heart of “Mr. W.H.” a *mise-en-abyme* of linguistic representation, which expresses the unavoidable force of *différance* compromising identity.

A close examination of Wilde’s story, however, reveals that acts of literary interpretation continue unabated. The problem, it seems, does not lie in linguistic interpretation in and of itself. In Wilde’s story it is no longer evident that acts of interpretation have any necessary or significant relationship to the self from which they originate. I argue that, instead of representing a presciently Lacanian understanding of Hegel’s sublime, Wilde’s representation of the relationship between subjectivity, homoeroticism, and aesthetic criticism was influenced by a much more proximate and immediately germane source: Hegel’s discussion of the performativity of poetic language in his theory of the lyric.

Before discussing Wilde’s deployment of a Hegelian theory of lyric, however, it is necessary to discuss Wilde’s configuration of the relationship articulated among poetic forgery,

aesthetics, and performance in “Mr. W.H.” Wilde’s story begins with a discussion between Erskine and the narrator regarding famous literary forgeries. When the topic of Chatterton’s forgeries of medieval poems comes up, the narrator recounts that he “insisted that his so-called forgeries were merely the result of an artistic desire for perfect representation; that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work [...]” (*SMS* 33). The narrator exonerates Chatterton’s crime by suggesting that the word “forgery” cannot apply to an act committed solely in the name of aesthetic perfection. Chatterton’s presentation of the poems under Rowley’s name was not a deception committed either for its own sake or for financial gain, but for the achievement of “perfect representation,” because the deception was necessary to create the “conditions” in which the poems could achieve their intended aesthetic effect, which would include the audience’s belief in the historical authenticity of the poems.

Wilde had made a very similar claim in his 1886 essay on Chatterton, which he delivered at Birkbeck College in London. Although this lecture was never published, the manuscript of Wilde’s notes contains the assertion that “Chatterton may not have had the moral conscience which is truth to fact—but he had the artistic conscience which is truth to Beauty. He had an artist’s yearning to represent and if perfect representation seemed to him to demand forgery he must needs forge.” Positing the existence of an “aesthetic conscience” that is separate and independent from the “moral conscience,” Wilde goes on to explain that Chatterton’s intention was to evacuate all traces of his own subjectivity from his poetry: “[T]his forgery came from the desire of artistic self-effacement. He was the pure artist—that is to say his aim was not to reveal himself but to give pleasure—an artist of the type of Shakespeare or Homer—as opposed to Shelley or Petrarch or Wordsworth.”³⁴ Chatterton’s intention, according to Wilde, was for the

audience to undergo a *purely* aesthetic experience, divorced from the irrelevant accidentals and contingencies of the author's personality. Forgery, in Chatterton's case, was only intended to contribute to the poetry's overall aesthetic effect by creating the illusion that his poetry belonged to a historically distant and inaccessible past.

When the topic of Chatterton's forgery reappears in the opening paragraphs of "Mr. W.H.," however, the narrator's reasons for exonerating the forger are quite different from those presented in the earlier lecture. The narrator insists that Chatterton should be exonerated from his supposed crime, not because of his laudable motives *per se*, but due to the nature of artistic creation. The narration claims that because "Art" is "to a certain degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realize one's own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life, to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem" (*SMS* 33). Instead of suggesting that the artist possesses either of two types of conscience, moral or aesthetic, the narrator insists that there are two types of "problems," ethical and aesthetical, which the interpreter of the "so-called forgery" must not confuse. When the narrator of "Mr. W.H." claims that the issue of forgery is aesthetic, rather than ethical, he implies that "forgery" names the very boundary that separates aesthetics from ethics.

According to the narrator, works of art do not make substantive claims about reality that can be adjudicated either as true or false, right or wrong. Instead, an aesthetic creation should be considered "a mode of acting" in which the artist strives to actualize his "personality" as an ideal that transcends the "accidents and limitations of real life." In other words, the narrator suggests that the forged aesthetic object is *performative*: it enacts the artist's ideal "personality" for the benefit of an audience of interpreters. The artist, instead of erasing his personality in order to

create an autonomous aesthetic object, uses the forgery's illusion of historical verisimilitude as part of the performance his personality, purified from accident and limitation—including, in the case of Chatterton, the accident of having been born in the eighteenth century instead of the middle ages. In the narrator's view, works of art can only be evaluated according to their effectiveness in presenting an idealized version of the artist's subjectivity, even (or especially) when the artist presents the work as the product of someone else's subjectivity.

The narrator thus also implies that all art is a mode of "acting" in the theatrical sense. He suggests that the artist's expression of selfhood, which is accomplished through an act of aesthetic creativity, is the expression of a self that is produced by and through that creative act, not the representation of a self that exists prior to or outside of the aesthetic act. As Gilbert states in "The Critic as Artist," "When a great actor plays Shakespeare [...] [h]is own individuality becomes a vital part of the interpretation. [...] In point of fact, there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet. If Hamlet has something of the definiteness of a work of art, he has also all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholics" (*SMS* 246). Gilbert asserts that the role of Hamlet only comes to its full fruition through many individual interpretations by a multitude of actors, and that there is no textual original of Hamlet that exists outside or prior to the many performances of that role. By interpreting the narrator's assessment of Chatterton's forgery in light of Gilbert's assertion, one can see that Wilde's aesthetics collapses the two possible definitions of the term "acting."

The justification for Chatterton's forgery found in "Mr. W.H." not only contradicts the one offered by the 1886 lecture, but also marks a significant shift in Wilde's aesthetic philosophy and practice. Wilde's narrator implies that acts of forgery epitomize a more general truth about the nature of the artwork: namely, that works of art should be considered a form of *doing* on the

part of the artist that cannot (or should not) be evaluable as either true or false, let alone right or wrong. By referring to aesthetic creation as “a mode of acting,” Wilde’s narrator can be considered to anticipate the philosophical concept of the “performative utterance.”

Wilde’s narrator implies that works of art should be considered a form of *doing* on the part of the artist that cannot (or should not) be evaluable either as true or false, let alone right or wrong. In his reference to aesthetic creation as “a mode of acting,” some critics might understand Wilde’s narrator to be anticipating queer theory’s concept of “performativity.” This idea, which has its origins in the writings of philosopher J.L. Austin, and has subsequently been discussed in the writings of Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is a cornerstone of poststructuralist-influenced queer theory. These thinkers use performativity to formulate non-essentializing theories of identity, and to explore the role of language in the construction of subjectivity by making reference to various processes by which linguistic and bodily acts work to reiterate and/or subvert normative social and sexual practices.

Wilde, however, was too shrewd of a dialectician to celebrate performativity merely as an opportunity for the aesthetically self-created subject to subvert social norms. He suggests that there exists some aspect of subjectivity that must be located outside of the performative act. Although, as Gilbert says in “The Critic as Artist,” there is no ideal Hamlet that exists apart from individual performances of the role, the fact that there are “as many Hamlets as there are melancholics” suggests that the unique selfhood of each individual actor inflects his particular performance of the role. These actors certainly do not embody the bounded selfhood existing beyond language one typically associated with notions of subjective autonomy, insofar the uniqueness they lend to Hamlet is given its character within the dramatic performance itself. Yet

the irreducible individuality of each performance hints at the existence of some perdurable form of selfhood that performative acts can neither contain nor efface.

According to Hegel, poetry stands as the preeminent artistic form of the modern era in its combination of music's representation of spiritual interiority and the external, material, and phenomenal character of sculpture and painting. Moreover, he asserts that poetry is the medium through which "the mind expresses all of its fantasies and art to the mind."³⁵ As Hegel scholar Jan Mieszkowski explains, "[p]oetry's uniqueness stems from the fact that the subject and the object of poetry, the medium and the message, are one in the same. [...] [P]oetry can deal with any and every topic in any and every fashion because in the final analysis what poetry really expresses is the mind's apprehension of itself to itself in itself."³⁶ Hegel asserts that the human imagination, "that universal foundation of all the particular art-forms and the individual arts," is both the proper material *and* the proper medium of poetry.³⁷ Yet because poetry has no restrictions on either its form or its content, it "appear[s] as that particular art in which art itself begins [...] to dissolve [...]. [P]oetry destroys the fusion of spiritual inwardness with external existence to an extent that begins to be incompatible with the original conception of art, with the result that poetry runs the risk of losing itself in a transition from the region of sense to that of spirit."³⁸ Even as poetry represents the moment of ultimate conjunction between inward and outward, the purest expression of the subject's ability to interpret its expression of selfhood back to itself, its very "success leads it astray—in its autonomy, it threatens to abandon its mediating role and evacuate itself of any representational duties whatsoever."³⁹

Distinct from dramatic and epic poetry, lyric is most expressive of the self's ideas and inner feelings. Moreover, Hegel asserts that lyric utterances cannot "be so far continued as to display the subject's heart and passion in practical activity and action, i.e., in the subject's return

to himself in his actual deed.”⁴⁰ As Mieszkowski explains, “Hegel [...] insists that because lyric is the highpoint of artistic subjectivity, the expression of interiority as such, it must be grasped as an *act* of self in a way that epic and drama cannot be. The important thing to realize is that a lyric act of self [...] must remain stillborn.” The expression of self through lyric thus occurs in a language “that acts in such a way that the action can never be grasped as the coordination of a self and an act. [...] Lyric acts without becoming someone’s action.”⁴¹ The language of lyric poetry “does not present itself as a discourse that understands itself in and as its own acts of self understanding. This is a language that never offers a grammar or syntax that could serve as a model for relations between agents and their deeds or subjects and object.”

Instead, according to Hegel, lyric is the place where the imagination “is essentially distinguished from thinking by reason of the fact that [...] it allows particular ideas to subsist alongside one another without being related, whereas thinking demands and produces dependence of things on one another [...].”⁴² Lyric poetry thus represents the violent negation of both art and thinking: “Lyric [...] becomes the outpouring of a soul, fighting and struggling with itself, which in its ferment does violence to both art and thought because it oversteps one sphere without being, or being able to be, at home in the other.”⁴³ Mieszkowski concludes that, for Hegel,

lyric poetry cannot self-clarify or self-interpret in the course of articulating itself as the product of its own articulations. Where lyric subjectivity is concerned, the self’s expression of itself to itself is as destructive as it is creative. [...] Lyric fails to demonstrate that its own self-interpretation begins and ends with the acts by which it makes its own significance self-evidently meaningful to itself. On the most basic level,

this means that the self-interest of self—the notion of the self as even minimally self-related or self-concerned—has lost its inevitability.⁴⁴

Lyric poetry's expression of this loss of self-relatedness could thus be considered performative, but in a very different sense than the way the term is used in poststructuralist and queer theory. While critics such as Judith Butler have argued that non-essentialist, performative notions of selfhood enable the subversion of social norms and the radical rethinking of ethics through creative and/or destructive acts of citation and reiteration, Hegel suggests that lyric poetry reveals that linguistic self-expressions do not necessarily have any meaningful relationship to the self from which those expressions originate. Poetic language demonstrates that linguistic acts of self-interpretation need not lead to greater self-knowledge or self-consciousness. Lyric poetry thus epitomizes language's capacity to embody absolute negativity—a violent and destructive force that cannot be recuperated or redeemed by the dialectical process.

Hegel's theory of lyric poetry clarifies the change in Wilde's thinking regarding the relationship between aesthetic self-representation and forgery. His shift from the seemingly intuitive conclusion that Chatterton's forgery was an attempt at self-effacement, to the counterintuitive conclusion that the forgery was an attempt to "realize [his] own personality," is part of a dialectical "system of contraries," rather than a theoretical contradiction. Forgery is a thus a misnomer, a product of "confusion," when applied to works of art, insofar as "all art" is "a mode of acting." As Hegel demonstrates, in lyric poetry (and, by extension, in all works of art produced by the human imagination) self-expression and self-effacement ultimately coincide with each other, becoming one and the same at the very limit of the aesthetic representation of subjectivity—a limit referred to, in Chatterton's case, under the misleading name of "forgery."

For Wilde, then, Hegel's theory of lyric expresses not only the crisis of poetic interpretation, but also a crisis in the cultivation of critical subjectivity, and indeed, aesthetic creativity generally. As Gilbert states in "The Critic as Artist," echoing Hegel, "there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one" (*SMS* 228). "Mr. W.H." dedicates itself to exploring what happens to the critical subject when acts self-expression transform into acts of self-effacement, and the consequences of that transformation for the expression of erotic desire. In this way, "Mr. W.H." could be seen as a response to and revision of Pater's "Winckelmann" (an essay Wilde implicitly references in both versions of "Mr. W.H.") that exposes the self-cancelling relationship between of self-interpretation and self-consciousness.

Erskine indicates the disjunction between these two self-reflexive acts in his response to the narrator's defense of Chatterton: "'What would you say about a young man who had a strange theory about a certain work of art, believed in his theory, and committed a forgery in order to prove it?'" (*SMS* 33). Erskine's odd locution draws attention to the subtle distinction between having a theory about an artwork and believing in that theory.⁴⁵ Erskine's question interrogates not only the concept of sincere belief but also the relationship between belief and self-knowledge. When Erskine refers to the forgery that the young man committed "in order to prove it," the antecedent of the pronoun is not entirely clear. While "it" would seem to refer most obviously to the "theory," it is also possible that "it" refers to the entire preceding clause. In that case, the forgery would be committed not to prove the truth of the theory itself, but to prove that the young man believes in his belief in the theory: if believing a theory is distinct from having a theory, then it stands to reason that believing a theory can be distinct from *believing* in one's belief in a theory.

Erskine's question moves the discussion of forgery from the realm of aesthetics to the realm of aesthetic interpretations. Although the narrator responds to Erskine's by answering "Ah! that is quite a different matter," the relationship between poetic forgery committed for the sake of aesthetic experience and a forgery committed for the sake of an aesthetic theory remains an open question (*SMS* 31). Erskine responds to the narrator by telling the story of Cyril Graham's forgery, a narrative that calls into question whether an aesthetic theory can ever escape the "failure-through-success" characteristic of lyric poetry's representation of subjectivity. That is to say, the story of Cyril Graham is not only about a forgery committed in order to prove an aesthetic theory, but also about his attempts to attain self-knowledge, or to believe even in the *possibility* of attaining self-knowledge, through an aesthetic encounter with the homoeroticism found in Shakespeare's sonnets.

The portrait of Mr. W.H. itself stands as both the literal and metaphorical embodiment of Cyril's quixotic desire to attain erotic self-knowledge through an interpretation of Shakespeare's sonnets. When Erskine presents the painting as prelude to the story of Cyril Graham, the narrator sees

A full-length portrait of a young man in late sixteenth-century costume, standing by a table, with his right hand resting on an open book. He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy, wistful eyes and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. (*SMS* 34)

Mr. W.H. stands next to "the two masks of Comedy and Tragedy," which indicates his profession as an actor. Using a magnifying-glass to take a closer look at the book, the narrator

spells out the words “To The Onlie Begetter Of These Insuing Sonnets,” and realizes that the Mr. W.H. referred to in the title of the portrait is none other than Shakespeare’s Mr. W.H (*SMS* 35).

We soon learn, however, that the painting is a forgery commissioned by Cyril in order to prove the veracity of the Willie Hughes theory to Erskine. The thematically marked connection between poetry and acting accentuated in both the painting and in the Willie Hughes theory suggests the complex motivations underlying the commissioning of the forgery. Erskine relates that the Willie Hughes interpretation began one day when Cyril summoned him to his rooms in London. Cyril tells Erskine “he had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare’s sonnets; that all the scholars and critics entirely on the wrong track; and that he was the first who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr. W.H. really was” (*SMS* 37). Although Cyril’s use of “purely internal evidence” initially indicates that he is prepared to offer a traditionally “lyric” interpretation of Shakespeare’s sonnets as autotelic and hermetically self-sufficient, we soon learn that this internal evidence indicates “that the young man to whom Shakespeare addressed these strangely passionate poems must have been somebody who was a really vital factor in the development of his dramatic art [...]” (*SMS* 38). By suggesting that the young man addressed *in* the sonnets is not the primary inspiration *of* the sonnets themselves, but rather of Shakespeare’s plays, Cyril roundly rejects common late-Victorian interpretations of the sonnets as an entirely idealized and self-referential edifice, “merely a philosophical allegory, and that in them Shakespeare is addressing his Ideal Self, or Ideal Manhood, or the Spirit of Beauty, or the Reason, or the Divine Logos, or the Catholic Church” (*SMS* 40).

The philosophical-allegorical interpretations referenced by Cyril are, in fact, direct quotations from two major articles on Shakespeare’s sonnets: first, the novelist and critic John A. Heraud’s “A New View of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: An Inductive Critique,” published in

Temple Bar in 1862, and second, the anonymous “New Views of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: The ‘Other Poet’ Identified,” a two-part article published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1884 and 1885.⁴⁶ There is substantial evidence that Wilde was familiar with both of these articles. Cyril follows Heraud by mocking the “German commentator” who suggests “Mr. W.H.” stands for “Mr. William Himself,” and according to Wilde’s letter of inquiry to *Blackwood’s*, the two-part article of 1884-1885 provided the direct inspiration for the writing of “Mr. W.H.” (*SMS* 40).⁴⁷ Both Heraud’s essay and the *Blackwood’s* article concur that the sonnets represent the high point of Shakespeare’s artistic achievement as precursor to a certain version of the transcendental high-romantic lyric, and that the interpretive key to understanding the entire sonnet cycle is the infamous sonnet 20, “A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted.” Readers and critics have long recognized this sonnet to be Shakespeare’s most markedly homoerotic poem, making reference to young man as “the master mistress of my passion” whom “Nature, as wrought thee, fell a-doting/And by addition me of thee defeated/By adding one thing to my purpose nothing” (ln. 2, 10-12).

Heraud asserts that, in this sonnet, Shakespeare finally “passes out of the dramatist into the poet,” by apostrophizing his “*alter-ego*, in the ideal personality, in the universal humanity,” through the image of “masculine beauty”.⁴⁸ Heraud proceeds to offer this rhetorical question: “For does not the poet himself declare, that the Ideal Man, the Friend, who he has addressed, has all along been identified with himself—has simply been his Objective Self?”. He asserts that the theme of sonnets “is the love of the One for the Many; but the Many, how multitudinous soever, are yet properly but the reflex of the One, and the sum of both is the Universe. That Shakespeare saw this as clearly as any German sage of later times is to me manifest; but he had not theorized it [...].⁴⁹ In this idealist, Kantian-cum-Coleridgean interpretation, Heraud evacuates all

individual specificity and erotic physicality from the figure of the young man. Instead, he suggests that the movement of the sonnet cycle from praise of the object to the praise of the subject, and from praise of the subject to praise of the universal subject, recapitulates in its very form the operations of consciousness itself as it is conceptualized within philosophical idealism. Heraud thus understands the sonnets to be a completely self-referential and autotelic whole, the forerunner and epitome of lyric subjectivity in its high-romantic mode.

Similarly, the author of the *Blackwood's* articles maintains that the sonnets represent the culmination of Shakespeare's aesthetic achievement, insofar as they represent the utmost embodiment of his subjective communion with the divine logos: "He foretells, as with prophetic certainty, that his verse would be the permanent memorial of the life, name, and glory of the immortal beauty and love of which he sings."⁵⁰ By identifying the "other poet" referenced in the sonnets as none other than Dante Alighieri, the author suggests that, like Dante, Shakespeare's sonnets anticipate the Romantic sublime: "[T]hrough the thought, imagery, and style of both Dante and Shakespeare exhibit their great powers, [...] yet these two gifted and singularly able writers alike confess that the glory of their theme far exceeded the measure and the reach of their skill, even when taxed and stretched to the utmost possible extent."⁵¹ According to the author, Shakespeare attempted to gesture towards this unrepresentable "Divine Wisdom" by giving it a human form. Instead of making use of the ideal of feminine beauty, as Dante did with Beatrice, Shakespeare represents the divine in "the anonymous form of manly and youthful beauty."⁵² The conjunction between masculine beauty and divine logos is nowhere more apparent than in sonnet 20, where "[f]or the full expression of his poetical invention, idea, or device, it was necessary to add to this form of manly beauty the figure of the woman [...]." The author goes on to assert that "this complex figure, as pictured and described in the 20th sonnet, contains in it and

expresses the poetical invention, idea, or device, on which all the sonnets depend. It is ‘the master mistress’ of Shakespeare’s ‘passion.’ And the critic able to interpret and expound that 20th sonnet ought to be able to interpret every sentence, from first to last, in all the sonnets.’⁵³ Much like Heraud, the author literally renders the young man of the poems “anonymous” and allegorical in the very process of placing this homoerotic celebration of masculine beauty at the center of Shakespeare’s poetic vision.

These representative late-Victorian readings attempt to present Shakespeare’s sonnet cycle as his utmost poetic achievement, just the sort of self-referential, self-interpretive lyric whole theorized by Hegel in the *Ästhetik*. They do so by placing the figure of the beautiful young man at the center of the sonnets, yet evacuating him of any material, physical, or erotic specificity. Cyril Graham’s championing of the Willie Hughes theory is a rebellion against these impulses, as he returns physical and erotic reality to the figure of the young man by trying to “de-lyricize” the sonnets. Erskine asserts that Cyril “felt, as indeed I think we all must feel, that the Sonnets are addressed to an individual—to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair” (*SMS* 40). Cyril’s focus on the “individual,” the “particular,” and “personality” is an attempt to ground the sonnets in the material physical and emotional reality.

As such, Cyril’s focus on Shakespeare’s “actual” emotional reality and the material reality of the young man is of a piece with Wilde’s own youthful ideas about poetry. In his *Oxford Commonplace Book*, Wilde states:

In proportion as poetry separates itself from human passions and feeling, so does it lose its own essence, and the quality of its power. Wordsworth’s sonnet on the advantage of Compulsory Education is as unfit a subject for poetic art as are those flights of

transcendent imagination to which Shelley sometimes soared. One flies too high: the other does not fly at all: So the pure intellect and the pure imagination are not themselves the right mainsprings of noble song which has it's [*sic*] natural roots in the passionate side of nature [...].⁵⁴

The young Wilde, like Cyril, believes that the “essence” of poetry can be found only in “human passions and feelings,” the subjective emotional responses to actual things, events, and people in the world. Both the youthful Wilde and Cyril specifically position themselves against a certain version of the high Romantic lyric that vaunts the expression of the “transcendent imagination” above the “passionate side of nature.” This lyricism was, for Wilde, embodied by Shelley’s poetry, and was, for Cyril, enshrined by those critics who try to understand Shakespeare’s sonnets as philosophical allegory written in praise of an abstract and imageless sublimity.

Cyril’s wish to return the sonnets to the passionate side of nature requires him, therefore, not only to insist on the material reality and erotic appeal of the young man, but also to remove the sonnets from the ethereal realm of the autotelic lyric utterance. “Who was he,” Cyril asks, whose physical beauty was such that it became the very cornerstone of Shakespeare’s art; the very source of Shakespeare’s inspiration; the very incarnation of Shakespeare’s dreams? To look at him as simply the object of certain love-poems was to miss the whole meaning of the poems: for the art of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is not the art of the Sonnets themselves, which indeed were to him but slight and secret things—it is the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding [...]. (*SMS* 40).

Cyril, by placing the young man as the “cornerstone,” “source,” and “incarnation” of Shakespeare’s creativity, simultaneously finds “a whole new meaning to the poems” hidden in the sonnets that, ironically, displaces their centrality in Shakespeare’s poetic oeuvre, where they

had been situated by the late-Victorian critical establishment. This emphasis on the embodied form of the young man renders the poems “slight and secret things” in comparison to “the art of the dramatist,” which uses the performing human body as its primary tool of expression.

By deemphasizing the aesthetic significance of Shakespeare’s lyric in favor of his drama, Cyril discovers that the young man of the sonnets emphatically is not an allegorical embodiment of the Objective Self or Divine Wisdom, but rather “none other than the boy-actor for whom he created Viola and Imogen, Juliet and Rosalind, Portia and Desdemona, and Cleopatra herself” (*SMS* 41). For Cyril, the sonnets do not add up to a self-referential lyric whole, but are instead a means of deciphering the relationship between the dramatic works and the individual who inspired them by eliciting Shakespeare’s erotic desires. The difference between Cyril’s approach to the Sonnets and that of other late-Victorian critics can be seen most clearly in his interpretation of Sonnet 20. Rather than presenting the poem as the figural “key” that will unlock the meaning of the entire sonnet cycle, Cyril finds the actual name of the boy-actor punningly encoded in the sonnet’s seventh line: “A man in hew, all *Hews* in his controwling.” Cyril thus asserts that the last name of the boy-actor must be “Hughes,” because “[i]n the original edition of the Sonnets, ‘*Hews*’ is printed with a capital letter and in italics, and in this, he claimed, showed clearly that a play on words was intended [...]” (*SMS* 42). Cyril’s emphasis on Shakespeare’s wordplay calls attention both the materiality of language and its ability to reference a material reality that occurs outside the operations of the poems themselves.

Although he claimed to have discovered the name “Willie Hughes” from the language of the poems, Cyril’s overall erotic and embodied reading of the Sonnets stands as an aesthetic interpretation that is simultaneously an act of self-interpretation in the Winckelmannian mode.

Erskine declares that “Cyril Graham’s theory evolved [...] purely from the Sonnets themselves.” Moreover, Cyril’s theory depended

for its acceptance not so much on demonstrable proof of formal evidence, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense, by which alone he claimed could the true meaning of the poems be discerned [...]. He went through all the Sonnets carefully, and showed, or fancied he showed, that, according to his new explanation of their meaning, things that had seemed obscure, or evil, or exaggerated, became clear and rational, of high artistic import [...]. (*SMS* 41-2)

Cyril insists that the “true meaning” hidden within the poems does not take the form of empirically verifiable “evidence” that can be objectively adjudicated as either true or false. Instead, it can be “discerned” only by those who, like Cyril, have developed a particular kind of attunement to the feelings expressed by the poems, “a kind of spiritual or artistic sense.” To someone who has cultivated their aesthetic discernment by engaging with the homoeroticism of the sonnets, what had seemed aesthetic imperfections coalesce into something “of high aesthetic import.” Moreover, Erskine’s use of loaded terms such as “obscure,” “evil,” and “exaggerated” implies that the elements transformed into something “clear and rational” by Cyril’s spiritual or artistic sense are precisely the homoerotic references that caused Hallam such regret.

Cyril’s subjective impression of meaning hidden within the poems, which transforms their discomfiting homoeroticism into an integral and coherent aesthetic project, strongly recalls Pater’s discussion of Winckelmann’s aesthetic criticism. Pater says of Winckelmann that the “world in which others had moved with so much embarrassment seems to call out in [him] new senses fitted to deal with it. [...] He seems to realize that fancy of the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself [...]”⁵⁵ Both Pater’s Winckelmann and

Cyril advocate a form of aesthetic criticism that brings hidden meanings to light through an encounter between the aesthetic object's expression of homoeroticism and the aesthetic critic's own homoerotic desires.

The connection between Cyril's articulation of the Willie Hughes theory and Winckelmann's aesthetic criticism becomes even more explicit in the narrator's elaboration of Cyril's theory. In an attempt to exonerate Shakespeare specifically from Hallam's claim that there was "something dangerous, something unlawful even" in sonnets, the narrator asserts that "Shakespeare had been stirred by a spirit that so stirred his age," that is, the spirit of erotically charged friendship between men. "It is no doubt true," says the narrator, "that to be filled with an absorbing passion is to surrender the security of one's [...] life, and yet in such a surrender there may be gain, certainly there was for Shakespeare" (*SMS* 68). The narrator makes reference to the relationship between Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino described in Pater's *Renaissance*, and observes that

A romantic friendship with a young Roman of his day initiated Winckelmann into the secret of Greek art, taught him the mystery of its beauty and the meaning of its form. In Willie Hughes, Shakespeare found not merely a most delicate instrument for the presentation of his art, but the visible incarnation of his idea of beauty, and it is not too much to say that to his young actor, whose very name the dull writers of the age forgot to chronicle, the Romantic Movement of English Literature is largely indebted. (*SMS* 69)

The author goes on to suggest that Willie Hughes might have been, quite literally, the progenitor of Romanticism. He speculates that, after Shakespeare's death, Willie Hughes traveled to Germany and brought with him "the seed of the new culture, and was in his way the precursor of

the *Aufklärung* or Illumination of the eighteenth century” that produced the writings of Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and by extension, Pater and Wilde himself (*SMS* 89).

We thus come to understand that the creative process articulated in the works of Shakespeare, Cyril, and the narrator all share in the logic of homoerotic aesthetic impressionism articulated in Pater’s “Winckelmann” essay. Cyril deploys this logic in defense of his “de-lyricizing” interpretation of the sonnets, which attempts to save Shakespeare’s poems from the bloodless hermeticism of late-Victorian critical consensus by returning them to the embodied reality of Shakespeare’s erotic desire for Willie Hughes. We soon learn, however, that Cyril’s homoerotic interpretation of the sonnets becomes untenable even to himself. Yet Cyril does not lose his faith because empirical evidence has failed to prove the historical existence of Willie Hughes (though, of course, it has), nor does he lose it because he ceases to believe in the theory *per se*. It would be more accurate to say, instead, that Cyril *ceases to believe in his belief* in the theory.⁵⁶ He realizes that his interpretation of the sonnets cannot escape the logic of the performative lyric utterance, which estranges the self from the self in and through the very act of articulating one’s completely subjective aesthetic impressions.

Erskine inadvertently forces this realization upon Cyril when he maintains: “before the theory could be placed before the whole world in a really perfected form, it was necessary to get some independent evidence about the existence of this young actor, Willie Hughes” (*SMS* 43). Cyril does not become upset because he is afraid that there will be no evidence supporting his interpretation. To the contrary, Cyril becomes agitated because Erskine refuses to mirror Cyril’s own unquestioning belief in the theory. According to Erskine, Cyril became inordinately disturbed by his suggestion that they search for empirical evidence in support of the historical existence of Willie Hughes. Cyril “became a good deal annoyed” by what he called Erskine’s

“philistine tone of mind, and indeed was rather bitter on the subject” (*SMS* 43). Cyril turns angry at the mere suggestion that Erskine needs external, empirical evidence in order to believe in his interpretation. According to Erskine, “we discovered nothing, of course,” in the way of historical evidence supporting the Willie Hughes theory, “and each day the existence of Willie Hughes seemed to me to become more problematical” (*SMS* 43). Erskine’s loss of faith put Cyril “in a dreadful state,” such that he “used to go over the whole question again and again, entreating me to believe [...]” (*SMS* 43-4). Cyril’s worry is not that the Willie Hughes theory is objectively true per se, but rather that Erskine *believe* in the Willie Hughes theory in the same way that Cyril himself believes in the theory: that is, as subjective aesthetic impression that takes the form of “a kind of spiritual or aesthetic sense” that induces belief.

Cyril’s disturbance stems from the fact that Erskine’s encounter with his impressionistic and homoerotic interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnets does not compel immediate assent. Erskine’s need for empirical proof to support Cyril’s aesthetic judgment runs counter to one of the fundamental postulates of idealist aesthetics. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant asserts that aesthetic judgments characteristically take the form of what he calls “subjective universals.” This apparently oxymoronic term means that one’s aesthetic impressions are, on the one hand, entirely subjective and incommunicable between subjects, i.e. the actual experience of an object’s beauty cannot be given to someone else in or through language. Yet because these aesthetic judgments are disinterested and do not depend on private conditions, one feels that this impression *ought* to be shared by others. This is why people articulate their aesthetic judgments as if they were inherent properties of the aesthetic object, or logical necessities: one says “this is beautiful,” rather than “I believe this to be beautiful.” Kant asserts that, because this subjective universal is not founded on an objective principle, it stems from “a subjective principle, which

determines only by feeling rather than concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked.”⁵⁷ Kant refers to this principle as the *sensus communis*.

Although Kant is careful to maintain that the *sensus communis* only entails the *expectation* that one’s aesthetic judgment should be shared by others, not that guarantee that it will be, Erskine’s disbelieving “philistine tone of mind” thus presents a profound challenge not only to the Willie Hughes theory, but also to the integrity of Cyril’s subjectivity itself. Rather than experiencing the sense of self-extension that is usually provided by the *sensus communis*, Cyril must contend with Erskine’s marked refusal to share the “spiritual or artistic sense” elicited by the sonnets. The fact that this aesthetic interpretation is tied to his erotic desires renders Erskine’s refusal even more detrimental to Cyril’s sense of self: homoerotic aesthetic criticism, instead creating the synchronic and diachronic bonds across time described by Pater in the “Winckelmann” essay, throws Cyril against the limits of his own existence, which forces him into the profoundly unsettling sense of isolation and incompleteness that compels him to beg for Erskine’s belief in the theory.

In a last-ditch effort to convince him of the theory’s truth, Cyril presents Erskine with the eponymous “Portrait of Mr. W.H.” as proof of the objective historical existence of Willie Hughes, and his significance for Shakespeare’s literary genius. As the reader already knows, however, the portrait is a forgery. Cyril’s attempt to return Shakespeare’s sonnets to the material reality of his erotic desire, and his attempt to prove the objective historical reality of that desire both founder upon the absolute limitations of the self. Similar to Chatterton’s forged poems, Cyril’s forged painting reveals the absolute limitations of the subject’s capacity either to express or efface the self through aesthetic interpretation, and the consequent impossibility of escaping the autotelic logic of the lyric utterance. The self-reflexive nature of this forgery is literally

figured on the canvas itself, when we realize that the portrait of Mr. W.H. is, in fact, a portrait of Mr. Cyril Graham. As Erskine describes him, Cyril Graham shares many physical qualities with the young man represented in the portrait. Cyril is “effeminate” and “somewhat languid in manner,” asserting that “he was the most splendid creature I ever saw, and nothing could exceed the grace of his movements, the charm of his manner” (*SMS* 36). He was “always cast for the girls’ parts,” in the student productions of Shakespeare mounted by Cambridge’s Amateur Dramatics Company, “and when *As You Like It* was produced he played Rosalind. You will laugh at me, but I assure you that Cyril Graham was the only perfect Rosalind I have ever seen” (*SMS* 37). Perhaps most tellingly, Erskine asserts, “the two things that really gave [Cyril] pleasure were poetry and acting” (*SMS* 36).

Also like Chatterton’s forgeries, Cyril’s forged painting catches him up in the performative logic of the lyric. In his attempt to prove the historical existence of Willie Hughes, and thus to remove all traces of his own subjective impressions of the Sonnets, Cyril has created nothing but a “realization of his own personality.” The portrait literalizes the fact that, in the search to find the real historical person that inspired Shakespeare’s poems, he has only found himself, dressed up as another.

Moreover, Erskine presciently suggests that the forgery was created, ultimately, for Cyril’s sake only. Cyril tells Erskine that he commissioned the painting “purely for your sake. You would not be convinced in any other way. It does not affect the truth of the theory,” Erskine replies, “The truth of the theory! [...] The less we talk about that the better. You never even believed in it yourself. If you had, you would not have committed a forgery to prove it” (*SMS* 46). Erskine is even more correct than he realizes: if Cyril had any doubts as to the truth of the Willie Hughes theory, then a forgery would do nothing to assuage those doubts. If the

painting convinced Erskine to believe in Willie Hughes, Cyril would always know that Erskine's belief was elicited under false pretenses. Rather, the only truth that could be confirmed by Erskine's belief would be that the Willie Hughes theory is an interpretation that can be believed by someone *other than Cyril himself*. Even if the historical existence of Willie Hughes could never be proven conclusively, Erskine's belief would at least confirm for Cyril that the theory is objectively meaningful—that it makes sense outside his own head.

While the inability to confirm the coherence of a literary interpretation hardly seems the stuff of compelling fiction, *Mr. W.H.* shows that this problem of inter-subjective confirmation is more than merely epistemological. Indeed, it becomes the driving force of the novella's drama. In response to Erskine's accusation, Cyril shoots himself with a revolver "in order to show me how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was" and "to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets" (SMS 46). Yet, as Erskine states with admirable clarity, "a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it" (SMS 47). Cyril's suicide is not a mere logical fallacy, but rather suggests that he found his continued existence unsupportable. The Willie Hughes theory has failed Cyril on three counts: not only has it resisted confirmation through recourse to empirical evidence, and failed to establish that his homoerotic desires could be shared by anyone else, but most devastatingly, it has undermined Cyril's faith that he can offer a coherent account of himself within language.

Thus, while the inability to confirm of a literary interpretation would hardly seem the stuff of compelling fiction, "Mr. W.H." shows that this problem of inter-subjective confirmation is more than merely epistemological. In response to Erskine's accusation, Cyril shoots himself with a revolver "in order to show me how firm and flawless his faith in the whole thing was" and "to offer his life as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets" (SMS 46). Yet, as Erskine states with

admirable clarity, “a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it” (SMS 47). Erskine implies that Cyril found it impossible to continue living in the face of the apparent failure of the Willie Hughes theory. Willie Hughes has betrayed him on three counts: not only has it resisted confirmation through recourse to empirical evidence, and failed to establish that his homoerotic desires could be shared by anyone else, but most devastatingly, it has entirely undermined Cyril’s faith that he could ever attain a coherent and meaningful sense of self.

As Wilde’s novella goes on to demonstrate, however, the profound sense of existential meaninglessness that drives Cyril to suicide is the result of a fundamental confusion regarding the relationship between language and self. Cyril interprets Erskine’s failure to reciprocate his belief in the Willie Hughes theory as evidence of his own damaged and inadequate subjectivity, one that has been perverted by homoerotic desire. This is because he believes that his failure to communicate his subjectivity in and through language reflects the inadequacy of his individual subjectivity, rather than being merely a property of language itself. Wilde’s narrator, on the other hand, comes to the opposite conclusion: he discovers that language’s inability to articulate his homoerotic desires proves that selfhood may persist beyond language’s ability to articulate it.

Much to Erskine’s surprise and dismay, the story of Cyril’s “sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets,” instantly convinces the narrator of the truth of the Willie Hughes theory. “It is the only perfect key to Shakespeare’s Sonnets that has ever been made,” the narrator asserts, “It is complete in every detail. I believe in Willie Hughes” (SMS 47). The narrator’s ecstatic embrace of the Willie Hughes theory is, however, followed by an account of his traumatic loss of faith, one that mirrors Cyril’s own tragic loss of faith. Yet, in contrast to Cyril, the narrator can survive this loss once he realizes that the language’s failure to capture the immutable “truth” of his erotic

subjectivity can be personally and intellectually enabling. The narrator realizes that he has the ability to craft a linguistic utterance that can gesture towards the presence of a subjectivity that exists beyond language's limitations.

In the narrator's initial enthusiasm for the Willie Hughes theory, it becomes clear that he believes the theory not only to be "the only perfect key" to Shakespeare's sonnets, but also to be the only perfect key to expose the truth of his sexual subjectivity to himself. "How curiously it had all been revealed to me!" the narrator exclaims, "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" (SMS 93). The narrator believes that the sonnet cycle expresses the absolute truth of his innermost self and his innermost desires, his "soul's romance," in its entirety. He explains that, in rereading the Sonnets from the vantage point of the Willie Hughes theory, "it seemed to me that I was deciphering the story of a life that had once been mine, unrolling the record of a romance that, without my knowing it, had coloured the very texture of my nature, had dyed it with strange and subtle dyes" (SMS 91). The narrator thus represents his acquisition of erotic self-knowledge as a strange sort of literary metempsychosis. In a nearly delusional act of identification, the narrator relates that his experience of reading the Sonnets is akin to remembering having actually experienced every detail of the love affair between Shakespeare and Willie Hughes: "Yes, I had lived it all," the narrator maintains, "I had stood in the round theatre with its open roof and fluttering. [...] I saw *As You Like It*, and *Cymbeline*, and *Twelfth Night*, and in each play there was some one whose life was bound up into mine, who realized for me every day, and gave shape to every fancy" (SMS 92). Through this dramatic over-identification with the content of the Sonnets, the narrator thus undergoes collapse between subject and object characteristic of Hegelian lyric performance.

Although the narrator believes himself to have gained perfect erotic self-knowledge through this collapse, it becomes apparent that he experiences near-complete *loss* of self through this act of literary interpretation. By imagining that he actually inhabited the mind, body, and soul of Shakespeare, the narrator allows the story of the Sonnets to stand in for “the whole story of [his] soul’s romance.”

Although he eventually realizes the vacuity of his identification with the Sonnets through his attempts to re-convince Erskine of the truth of the Willie Hughes theory, the narrator first writes a letter to Erskine that offers a “passionate reiteration of the arguments and proofs that my study had suggested to me.” After sending the letter, though, the narrator discovers that after putting “all [his] enthusiasm” and “all [his] faith” into convincing Erskine of the theory, he actually no longer finds it terribly convincing himself: “It seemed to me that I had given away my capacity for belief in the Willie Hughes theory of the Sonnets,” the narrator states, “that something had gone out of me, as it were, and that I was perfectly indifferent to the whole subject” (SMS 94). Feeling that he has been somehow emptied out of his capacity for belief by writing the letter to Erskine, the narrator eventually admits to himself

“I have been dreaming, and all my life for these two months have been unreal. There was no such person as Willie Hughes.” Something like a faint cry of pain came to my lips as I began to realize how I had deceived myself, and I buried my face in my hands, struck with a sorrow greater than any I had felt since boyhood. After a few moments I rose, and going into the library took up the Sonnets, and began to read them. But it was all to no avail. They gave me back nothing of the feeling that I had brought to them; they revealed to me nothing of what I had found hidden in their lines. (SMS 95)

In referring to his belief in Willie Hughes as a type of “dreaming,” the narrator recognizes that his experience of deep identification with the Sonnets was a merely a fantasy. He acknowledges that his belief that the Sonnets revealed to him, in objective form, the true “story of his soul’s romance” was merely elaborate self- deception. The mutually reciprocal relationship he believed existed between himself and the Sonnets now seems to be merely the projection of his own desires onto the poems: he “brought” feeling to the Sonnets, but in return they give him “back nothing.”

This realization presents a profound challenge to his sense of self, one that parallels the challenge to Cyril’s self that occurred when Erskine refused to mirror his unquestioning belief in the Willie Hughes theory. Instead of feeling the exhilarating sense of self-extension promised by the Kantian *sensus communis*, the narrator must confront the limits of his own subjectivity. The romance that seemed to “really” exist in the Sonnets was merely the projection of his own homoerotic desires that he mistook for objective reality. The narrator’s loss of belief in the theory is thus (like Cyril’s), completely devastating on a personal level. He admits that his current indifference towards the theory is “a bitter disappointment,” and that his self- deception strikes him “with a sorrow greater than any I had felt since boyhood” (SMS 94, 5). He tells Erskine, ““I wish I could believe the Willie Hughes theory,’ [...] I would give anything to be able to do so. But I can’t. It is a sort of moonbeam theory, very lovely, very fascinating, but intangible. When one thinks that one has got hold of it, it escapes one” (SMS 97-8). The narrator speaks openly of the anguish that Cyril’s suicide only implied. His loss of belief in the “moonbeam” Willie Hughes theory, and the self-interrogation that follows hard upon it, fills him with deep “sorrow.” This sorrow is the result of his loss of a sense of connection and

identification with the Sonnets' homoeroticism. Once the capacity for belief "escapes one," one is left gazing dejectedly into the shallowness of one's own reflection.

Unlike Cyril, however, the narrator survives this loss of faith by realizing the true nature of this despair. The narrator expresses this hard won wisdom in his surprisingly empathetic reaction to Erskine's fake suicide. Although Erskine insists in a letter to the narrator that he will kill himself "for Willie Hughes' sake, and for the sake of Cyril Graham, whom I drove to death by shallow scepticism and ignorant lack of faith," the narrator soon learns that, although Erskine is dead, he did not actually commit suicide (SMS 98). Instead, he wrote the note aware of his imminent demise from tuberculosis. Erskine's attempt to convince the narrator by presenting his death as a suicide is, in a sense, a type of "forgery" that parallels the forged painting Cyril used to convince Erskine of the Willie Hughes theory. Although the narrator is initially confused by Erskine's motives for lying about his death, he eventually concludes that:

He was simply actuated by a desire to reconvert me to Cyril Graham's theory, and he thought that if I could be made to believe that he too had given his life for it, I would be deceived by the pathetic fallacy of martyrdom. Poor Erskine! I had grown wiser since I had seen him. Martyrdom was to me merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realize by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true. (SMS 100)

Just as Cyril's decision to commission a forged painting suggested that he was afraid of not actually believing in the Willie Hughes theory, so too does Erskine's forged suicide indicate his own "terror" of doubting his faith in the Willie Hughes theory. Moreover, the narrator realizes

that Erskine believed, just as Cyril did, that “reconverting” someone to the theory was the only way of assuaging that doubt.

The narrator, however, instead of exhibiting the sense of betrayal Erskine felt towards Cyril, feels nothing but pity for Erskine. In contrast to the “shallow scepticism” Erskine says he directed toward Cyril, the narrator believes that Erskine’s fake martyrdom is the result of a “tragic scepticism.” This skepticism is tragic rather than shallow, the narrator suggests, because it arises from a form of self-doubt that is entirely unnecessary and misguided. It is an attempt to bridge the wholly imaginary gap between what men “want to be true” and “what some terror in their heart tells them is not true.” In other words, I am suggesting that the “tragic scepticism” the narrator identifies in Erskine describes the anguish one feels when forced to confront the apparently insurmountable gulf between the subjective experience of what one wants to believe (in this case, his belief in and identification with Willie Hughes) and one’s ability to confirm that belief through a self-originating act, such as the act of linguistic self-interpretation *via* literary criticism. The “terror” that Cyril and Erskine feel as a result of this skepticism is thus rooted in a tragic misunderstanding: they destroy themselves (or, in what ultimately amounts to the same thing, claim to have destroyed themselves) because they believe that language is unable to articulate their faith in Willie Hughes because their subjectivities are irrevocably damaged and rendered inadequate by their perverse homoerotic desires.

Yet the narrator’s ability to recognize this skepticism as tragic, and the pity he feels towards “the pathetic fallacy” of Erskine’s false martyrdom, suggests that he has “grown wiser” through his encounter with the Willie Hughes theory.⁵⁸ Yet the narrator chooses to convey the implications of this wisdom not through the actual content of his utterances, but through the specifically *aesthetic* qualities of his unique narrative voice. It is within the register of the

aesthetic that Wilde locates the perdurable aspect of the subject that language can neither contain nor efface, the selfhood that Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” suggests must exist outside of the performative act. The specifically aesthetic quality of subjectivity becomes most apparent in the last line of the novella, when the narrator admits to the reader, “I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (SMS 101). This statement expresses, in highly condensed form, the narrator’s realization that a form of perdurable subjectivity subject transcends language’s ability to express it. The line seems, at first glance, to be a rather puckish refusal of closure: the narrator wants to neither confirm nor deny the viability of the Willie Hughes theory. More significantly, though, the phrasing of the statement carefully sidesteps issues of both grammatical and personal agency. Although he initially prepares the reader for an unequivocal statement of his beliefs by beginning with the assertion “I think,” a clever deployment of the infinitive form allows him to float the abstract possibility of the theory’s truth without indicating anything about his personal commitment to the theory. Yet this evacuation of linguistic agency does not entail the complete erasure of the narrator’s subjectivity. On the contrary, the wry detachment conveyed by the narrator’s tone and style, its aesthetic qualities, certainly convey something of the his personality and outlook, even though we learn nothing explicit about the specific content of his beliefs. The narrator adroitly avoids the problem of the self- reflexivity by allowing literary voice to stand in for the explicit articulation of selfhood. This voice conveys the presence of the self without saying anything specific about it. In this way, the narrator uses the specifically aesthetic techniques of style and tone to gesture towards the presence of a subjectivity that is necessarily condemned to articulate itself within a fundamentally inadequate language, yet cannot be either created or destroyed by that language.

Wilde's deployment of Hegel's performative theory of lyric in his novella demonstrates the psychic dangers inherent in both the emotional over-investment in the literary object *and* the assumption that the subject's perdurability is merely an illusion constructed by language. One could ultimately assert that the studied seriousness that is characteristic of these two interpretive frameworks must inevitably fail to do justice to the studied frivolity characteristic of Wildean style. Yet in crafting a distinct literary voice that expresses the subject's boundaries while at the same time gesturing beyond them, Wilde shows us a form of homoerotic desire that creatively refuses its entrapment within the inevitable limitations of language. By doing so, Wilde suggests that aesthetic expressions of selfhood do not merely either subvert or uphold normative social categories, but may in fact create the very conditions that make social critique possible. Thus it is to Vernon Lee's exploration of the feminist implication of aesthetically grounded social critique, and its ability to invoke a non-teleological vision of historical experience, that the next chapter turns.

¹ Oscar Wilde, "The True Function and Value of Criticism; with Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue," *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 28 (1890), 130.

² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), xvi. It should be kept in mind that Ellmann's biography is not always entirely reliable on the exact details of Wilde's life. See Joseph Bristow, "Biographies" in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6-35.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, vol. 4: Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" in *The Soul of Man under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling (London: Penguin, 2001), 262; subsequent references to this edition will appear in parentheses after the abbreviation *SMS*.

⁵ Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13-4.

⁶ Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 65-97; Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

⁷ Ellmann, *Wilde*, 77-100.

⁸ Alison Pease, "Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory" in *Palgrave Advances*, 109.

⁹ Philip Smith, "Philosophical Approaches" in *Palgrave Advances*, 146; Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 443-44.

¹⁰ See Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of a Mind in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53; Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977).

¹¹ Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 17-34.

¹² Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, 51.

¹³ Bruce Bashford, *Oscar Wilde: The Critic as Humanist* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999), 11.

¹⁴ Bashford, *Critic as Humanist*, 14.

¹⁵ Pease, "Aestheticism," 108.

¹⁶ Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 141.

¹⁷ See Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1999), 89-112. For a provocative alternate account of the homoerotic reception of the sonnets, see Robert Matz, "The Scandals of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *ELH* 77.2 (Summer 2010), 477-508.

¹⁸ "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." was originally published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in July 1889.

According to Horst Schroeder, Wilde expanded the story throughout the early 1890s, working on it at the same time he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the society comedies. Wilde did not revise much of what he had already written, but rather added to the frame narrative sections on Neoplatonism, the Dark Lady, and Elizabethan boy actors. Wilde had originally intended "Mr. W.H." to be included in the volume that would become *Intentions*, but eventually decided that separate publication would be best. He proposed this volume to his publishers Elkin Mathews and John Lane, who eventually decided against publishing it. Although the manuscript was thought to be lost after Wilde's arrest and subsequent bankruptcy, it resurfaced in 1920, and was published in a limited edition by Mitchell Kennerley in 1921. I use Dowling's edition of "Mr. W.H.," which is based on the Kennerley edition,

because it shows the refinement of Wilde's aesthetic ideas as he was entering the major phase of his literary career.

See Horst Schroeder, *"The Portrait of Mr. W.H.": Its Composition, Publication, and Reception* (Braunschweig: Technische Universität Carolo-Wilhelmina zu Braunschweig, 1984).

¹⁹ Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebook*, 87-95; Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 106-11; David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 160-65.

²⁰ Linda Dowling, "Imposture and Absence in Oscar Wilde's 'Portrait of Mr. W.H.,'" *Victorian Newsletter* 58 (1980), 26-29.

²¹ Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 28.

²² Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 17-48.

²³ Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 142.

²⁴ Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, 106.

²⁵ Joseph Bristow, "'A Complex, Multiform Creature—Wilde's Sexual Identities'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 198-99.

²⁶ 14. The claim that the story caused a scandal upon its 1889 publication was asserted, without any evidence, by Frank Harris in his biography of Wilde: "It set everyone talking and arguing. [...] The portrait of Mr. W.H." did Oscar incalculable injury. It gave his enemies for the first time the very weapon they wanted, and they used it unscrupulously and untiringly with the fierce delight of hatred." See Schroeder, *Composition, Publication, Reception*, 115-7.

²⁷ William Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 198.

²⁸ Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, 205.

²⁹ Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, 212-13.

³⁰ Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 46, 42.

³¹ Halpern, *Perfume*, 47-49

³² Halpern, *Perfume*, 51.

³³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (New York: Norton, 1998), 48.

³⁴ Oscar Wilde, [*Essay on Chatterton*], unpublished manuscript at William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, Wilde W6721M3.E78 [1886?], 149-51.

³⁵ “[D]en Geist mit mallen seinen Konzeptionen der Phantasie und Kunst [...] für den Geist ausspricht.” Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik. Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 225. Quoted in Jan Mieszkowski, “Derrida, Hegel, and the Language of Finitude,” *Postmodern Culture* 15.3 (2005), 27.

³⁶ Mieszkowski, “Finitude,” 9.

³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Vol. 2. Trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Clarendon, 1998), 967.

³⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 968.

³⁹ Mieszkowski, “Finitude,” 10.

⁴⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1112.

⁴¹ Mieszkowski, “Finitude,” 10.

⁴² Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1035.

⁴³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1128.

⁴⁴ Mieszkowski, “Finitude,” 11.

⁴⁵ As Rachel Ablow has pointed out, “Mr. W.H.” explores fiction’s role in allowing individuals to explore what it would be like to hold a particular belief, without actually having to commit to that belief. See “Oscar Wilde’s Fictions of Belief,” *Novel* 42.2 (2009), 175-82.

⁴⁶ John A. Heraud, “A New View of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: An Inductive Critique,” *Temple Bar* 5 (July 1862), 53-66; [Anonymous], “New Views of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: The ‘Other Poet’ Identified,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 135: 824 (June 1884), 727-61; [Anonymous], “New Views of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: The ‘Other Poet’ Identified. II.-Resemblances,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 137: 836 (June 1885), 774-800.

⁴⁷ Heraud, “Inductive,” 53; cite Schroeder.

⁴⁸ Heraud, “Inductive,” 57.

⁴⁹ Heraud, “Inductive,” 60.

⁵⁰ “Other Poet,” 751

⁵¹ “Other Poet,” 749

⁵² “Other Poet,” 753

⁵³ “Other Poet,” 754

⁵⁴ Smith and Helfand, *Oxford Notebooks*, 119. Wilde’s reference is to Percy Shelley’s “To a Skylark.”

⁵⁵ Walter Pater, “Winckelmann,” *Westminster Review* n.s. XXXI (January, 1867), 88-89

⁵⁶ Rachel Ablow argues that Wilde’s portrayal of ambiguous belief in “Mr. W.H.” indicates his engagement with the writings of Cardinal Newman, especially his *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). Ablow maintains that Wilde’s story “suggests that the beliefs we adopt in reading fiction represent only an extreme version of the beliefs we ordinarily regard as our own,” and that the value of fiction thus in its ability to allow us “to imagine who we are not.” In making her case, however, Ablow brackets off the issue of homoerotic desire, which seems to me to be the central issue at stake in Cyril’s crisis of belief. See “Reading and Re-reading: Wilde, Newman, and the Fiction of Belief” in *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. Rachel Ablow (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 157-78.

⁵⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 87.

⁵⁸ This term is, of course, borrowed from John Ruskin, whose writings were deeply influential for most mid- and late- Victorian art critics, including Wilde. See “Of Pathetic Fallacy” in *The Works of John Ruskin* (Library Edition), ed. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, vol. 3 (London: George Allen, 1903-12).

CHAPTER FOUR

Vernon Lee's Supernatural Eroticism

When Vernon Lee's (Violet Paget's) second book, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, was published in 1881, the twenty-five year old author was already a prominent and respected member of late-Victorian London's artistic and literary circles. Although she lacked the academic credentials of her university-trained male peers, her early education on the continent, combined with the detailed research and striking literary style found in her first volume, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), established her as one of the most innovative and insightful cultural historians of the period.¹ By the time she began *Belcaro*, then, Lee felt ready to address the considerably more technically complex realm of contemporary philosophical aesthetics. Yet in the introduction to this volume Lee claims that, after educating herself in the tradition of aesthetic thought, including "great many books about all the arts [...] from Plato to Lessing, from Reynolds to Taine, from Hegel to Ruskin," she decided to turn her attention to her own personal responses to "art itself, to statues and music and pictures and poetry, to [her] own thoughts and feelings."²

There is no evidence to suggest that Lee had read Walter Pater's writings prior to embarking on the *Belcaro* volume. However, her critical injunction to move away from philosophical abstraction and toward one's own impressions of the aesthetic object is similar to the question Pater asks himself in *The Renaissance*: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?"³ This like-mindedness regarding aesthetics was, perhaps, one of the reasons why Lee and Pater became fast friends upon meeting in Oxford in 1881. Lee's second volume on cultural history, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and*

Mediaeval in the Renaissance (1884), was not only dedicated to Pater, but it was also the first work of art criticism written in English to make full use of his insights from *The Renaissance*.⁴

While the writings of Pater associate erotic negativity with male homoeroticism, in this chapter I argue that Lee's fictions refuse the masculinist homoerotic logic of his aesthetic thinking by not merely countering with a gendered sexual reversal—lesbianism—but by evoking a much wider and intentionally amorphous erotics as a basis for cultural critique. Lee does so by using erotic negativity to invoke a reconfigured notion of “history,” one that collapses the relationship between sexuality and sequentiality she saw as characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. These supernatural fictions thus celebrate a pre-modern aesthetics of feminine erotic formlessness, one that Lee associates with the supernatural's ability to conceive of non-teleological forms of historical experience.⁵

The relationship between the aesthetic and the supernatural, and their connection to historical experience, is the topic of Lee's early essay, “Faustus and Helena” (1880).⁶ I argue that this piece differs markedly from Lee's other critical writings on aesthetics in its interrogation of the artistic value of “formlessness.” In this essay, Lee places the aesthetic in opposition to the supernatural, insofar as art restricts impressions and sensations to the limits of form, while the supernatural indulges one's desire to introduce elements of subjective fantasy to the world, a form of “ghostliness” that allows modern individual's access to pre-modern forms of experience. After her encounter with the aesthetic formalism of Pater's criticism, however, Lee's investigation of the relations among eroticism, history, and form occur mostly in her supernatural fictions rather than her critical writings. I argue that, in her fantastic tales, Lee represents “ghostliness” as a specifically feminine version of negative eroticism that resists the strictures of aesthetic form. The femininity of Lee's negative eroticism becomes explicit in her short story

collection *Hauntings*, particularly in the tale “Oke of Okehurst” (1886/90).⁷ This story adapts Pater’s theory of erotic negativity to express a new form of feminine eroticism that is threatening both to notions of historical teleology and to the formalizing impulse of masculine artistry. Yet despite her embrace of negative eroticism, Lee eventually came to believe that she would have to reject Paterian aestheticism if she to discuss directly the social ramifications of art. She expresses this ambivalent rejection of aestheticism in the later fantastic tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” which appeared in the *Yellow Book* (1896), by performing the labor of the negative on Pater’s notion of the aesthetic *Bildung* by indicating that the supernatural formlessness of the “feminine” aesthetic object, and not just the hard formalism of “masculine beauty,” has the capacity to elicit the male subject’s psychological and erotic development.⁸

Lee’s Supernatural Modernity

Walter Pater and Vernon Lee would remain in close social and intellectual contact for the rest of Pater’s life. During this time, Lee produced numerous essays and dialogues on aesthetic and ethical thought, written from a distinctly Paterian point of view.⁹ In addition, however, Lee also wrote the scandalous novel *Miss Brown* (1884), a vicious (and not very timely) satire of the Aesthetic Movement that made reference to many members of her own London social circle.¹⁰ This contradiction between Lee’s theoretical devotion to Pater’s aestheticism, on the one hand, and her disapproval of how those theories were actually put into practice, on the other, presage her eventual abandonment of aesthetic impressionism after Pater’s death in 1894.

Although Lee’s condemnation of the excesses of the Aesthetic Movement comes across most clearly in *Miss Brown*, I contend that Lee’s most ambivalent and complex negotiations with Pater’s aestheticism, and his theory of erotic negativity, can be found in her supernatural fictions. Beginning in 1886, Lee turned to supernatural narratives in order to investigate the social

implications of aesthetic formalism she ostensibly espoused in her critical writings. These “fantastic tales” express the tension created by her inability to reconcile the demands of formalist aesthetics with her concern with art’s social ramifications, especially as those concerns relate to the expression of feminine sexuality.

The most important lesson Lee learned from Pater was, in fact, the deep interrelation between aesthetic reflection and erotic desire. In her essay on “Mediaeval Love,” for example, Lee asserts that “there is, in all our perceptions and desire of physical and moral beauty, an element of passion which is akin to love; and there is, in all love that is not mere lust, a perception of, a craving for, beauty, real or imaginary, which is identical with our merely aesthetic perceptions and cravings [...]”¹¹ This characterization of aesthetic experience is comparable to Pater’s description of Winckelmann’s combination of philosophical and erotic temperaments. Much like Pater, Lee’s emphasis in *Belcaro* on the relationship between one’s idiosyncratic erotic impulses and one’s aesthetic judgments provided her a means of conceiving, as she put it, “an art-philosophy entirely unabstract, unsystematic, essentially personal, because evolved unconsciously, under the pressure of personal circumstances, and to serve the requirements of personal tendencies.”¹²

Furthermore, both Pater’s aestheticism and Lee’s non-dogmatic “art-philosophy” were at least partly conceived in reaction to the strong moralizing tendency of John Ruskin’s writings on art. In her essay on “Ruskinism,” Lee maintains that Ruskin’s understanding of beauty as “a direct result, an infallible concomitant of moral excellence” in which “the physical the mere reflexion of the moral” is not only “a very beautiful and noble idea” but also “a false idea.”¹³ Yet as Vineta Colby has pointed out, this condemnation of Ruskin did not mean that she entirely shared Pater’s belief that aesthetic judgment could be kept completely separate from moral

judgment. In an act of what Colby calls “verbal sleight of hand,” Lee asserts in “Ruskinism” that “[i]n every artist there is a man, and the moral perfection of the man is more important than the artistic perfection of the artist; but in as far as the artist is an artist, he must be satisfied to do well in his art. For, although art has no moral meaning, it has moral value; art is happiness, and to bestow happiness is to create good.”¹⁴

This somewhat muddled justification points to an intellectual contradiction in Lee’s early writings: even as she maintains an abstract, philosophical commitment in the absolute autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, in practice she never shies away from considering art in its historical context in order to make moral and social judgments. The deep ambivalence towards aestheticism found in Lee’s writings during the 1880s and 1890s stems from a basic intellectual contradiction: while her work on aesthetic theory remained devoted to the strict formalism of Paterian aestheticism, her cultural histories and supernatural tales reveal a deep and abiding interest in art’s historical context. Lee’s commitment to the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere seems most important in an 1880 essay on “Comparative Aesthetics” in the *Contemporary Review*. Here, Lee criticizes writers who discuss aesthetic objects in their social and historical contexts, advocating instead for an “absolute aesthetics” focused exclusively on the formal qualities of the object, one that examines “the relations between the work of art and the mind which perceives it.”¹⁵ Lee makes a similar statement in the introduction to *Belcaro*, where she asserts that “the work of art exists in the lines, tints, and shades of the picture or statue, in the modulations and harmonies of a composition, and [...] all the rest is gratuitously added by ourselves.”¹⁶

Yet, as Colby points out, for a true understanding of how Lee’s aesthetic criticism proceeds it is instructive to compare Pater’s discussion of the medieval story of “Aucassin and

Nicolette” in *The Renaissance* to Lee’s account of the same story, for it is here that Lee exhibits her historicist ambivalence towards Pater’s formalist aesthetics. While Pater calls attention to how the story’s beauty and strangeness anticipate the cultural and aesthetic values of the Renaissance, Lee points out that Pater’s discussion omits an episode that describes a violent encounter between Aucassin and a peasant. This episode is “the one occasion upon which that delicate and fantastic mediaeval love poetry [...] is confronted with the sordid reality, the tragic impersonation of all the dumb miseries, the lives, and loves, crushed and defiled and unnoticed, of the peasantry of those days.”¹⁷ Colby points out that this shift of focus “from the aesthetic—the beauty of the poem—to a value judgment on the social iniquities of feudalism” is characteristic of Lee’s early critical writings.¹⁸ This contradiction between aesthetic formalism and historicism led directly to Lee’s abandonment of Paterian aestheticism in 1894.¹⁹ One year after Pater’s death, in her “Valedictory” essay in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), Lee praises Pater’s eventual transformation “from an aesthete to a moralist,” and admits that she no longer believes in art criticism’s superior importance over moral and social issues. Indeed, as Stefano Evangelista notes, after publishing this volume Lee would mostly focus on the writing of fiction, essays on social and political issues, and physiological studies of aesthetic experience.²⁰

In this chapter, however, I focus on Lee’s attempts in her supernatural writings to reconcile the aesthetic formalism of her theoretical writings with her deeply felt awareness of the social realities that condition aesthetic representations of women’s sexuality. Given what we know about her life, Lee’s interest in the relationship between art and feminine sexuality might seem only natural. In addition to her public life as an art critic, most of what we know about Lee’s personal life suggests that her erotic energies were primarily directed toward women. Although Lee lived during a time when the sexological category of “female invert” was only just

beginning to gain cultural currency, many critics and biographers have characterized Lee as a modern proto-lesbian *avant la lettre*. Her adoption of an androgynous appearance and her erotically charged relationships with Annie Meyer, A. Mary F. Robinson and Clementina “Kit” Anstruther-Thomson suggest that Lee was as close to being a modern lesbian as any late nineteenth-century woman could be.²¹ Lee’s sexuality was, in fact, a heated topic of discussion even during her own lifetime. As Patricia Pulham notes, John Addington Symonds “in consultation with his friend, sexologist Havelock Ellis [...] considered that she and Mary Robinson ‘might serve as a possible case-history for the section on Lesbianism’ in *Sexual Inversion* (1896),” the first English medical textbook on homosexuality.²²

Yet there has also been substantial debate among critics regarding whether or not the term “lesbian” is entirely appropriate to describe Lee’s erotic relations with other women, which may or may not have found physical expression through sexual acts.²³ Consequently, discussion about Lee’s sexuality inevitably intersects with broader debates regarding how literary historians should engage with pre-twentieth century manifestations of same-sex desire between women. In order to negotiate these complications, Christa Zorn makes use of Terry Castle’s notion of “lesbian worldliness” to describe Lee’s refusal to let her homoerotic desires displace her from the center of “the very fabric of cultural life,” and her embrace of an “expansive, out-ward looking, and multifaceted humanity” which arose as a function of her erotic difference.²⁴ Zorn argues that lesbian worldliness allows us to see that “the homoerotic configurations in Lee’s texts are large metaphorical spaces from which she addresses mainstream audiences while also inscribing a minority discourse that becomes a controlling center as soon as it is recognized.”²⁵

One quickly realizes that, in Lee’s fictions, these “large metaphorical spaces” are often haunted, and her “homoerotic configurations” often take ghostly forms. If one follows Castle’s

line of argument, it would be Lee's "lesbian worldliness" that leads her to use the supernatural to express the homoerotic tension of her stories. According to Castle, Western culture has historically rendered representations of lesbian desire apparitional: the "literary history of lesbianism," she says, "is first of all a history of derealization."²⁶ Castle's "apparitional lesbian" is nearly invisible yet intensely threatening, because her existence represents a challenge to the foundational assumptions of a homophobic and patriarchal Western culture, including the association between vision and knowledge characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. "The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost effect' in [...] modern life," Castle asserts, "elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot—even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen."²⁷ For Castle, visibility is the central issue at stake in discussions of lesbian representation. She argues that the apparitional lesbian's pernicious invisibility can be recuperated through a project devoted to bringing her "back into focus," by directing critical attention to those texts that contain barely-visible traces of female same-sex desire.

As Annamarie Jagose has argued, however, the problem of visibility is merely an epiphenomenon of the real problem at the heart of modern lesbian representation: sequentiality. Jagose attempts to change the terms of the debate regarding representations of lesbian sexuality by shifting critical attention to issues of temporality rather than visibility. According to Jagose, modern culture has grafted the discourse of sequence onto discourse of temporality and sexuality in order to naturalize an erotic hierarchy: just as two "naturally" comes before one, and one moment comes "naturally" after the previous moment which is forever in the past, so too does heterosexuality "naturally" precede homosexuality both in order and in precedence. It is this "self-licensing logic of sequence" inherent in modern discourse around sexuality, self-licensing because it seems as incontrovertibly true as numerical order, that ensures lesbianism is

represented as secondary and derivative, literally “inconsequential” in comparison to the originality and primacy granted to male heterosexuality.²⁸ Jagose thus argues that “invoking the historical archive as a solution to the contemporary problem of lesbian visibility,” as Castle does, is ultimately counterproductive. This is because the “figure of ‘history’” is itself problematic: it energizes “the very tropes of before and after that, differently worked, enable the production of lesbianism as derivative.”²⁹

As I have stated, it is precisely history’s status as “figure” that is the primary concern of Lee’s supernatural fictions. Zorn argues that “Lee’s supernatural, which stages our intuitive and subjective connections to the past, thus can be seen as a metaphor for an unrealized historical method,” one in which art can “create a more immediate contact with the past than can historical scholarship.”³⁰ Lee draws on aesthetic resources of the supernatural, I argue, to articulate a concept of history that is no longer wedded to “tropes of before and after.” Lee’s tales thus attempt to revise an Enlightenment understanding of historical progress as moving irreversibly and inevitably toward the liberation of humanity. By performing the labor of the negative upon this arch-rationalist understanding of historical teleology, the supernatural thus enables the development of women’s sexual autonomy, one that reconfigure historical experience in order to elicit diffuse and motile forms feminine sexual subjectivity.³¹

As Lee states in the preface to *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (1890), her first collection of supernatural fiction, “ghosts” appear in the mind of the modern individual when she is forced to confront the radical alterity of the pre-modern past. Although Lee asserts that her stories contain no “genuine ghosts in the scientific sense,” they do contain “spurious ghosts” of whom she “can only confirm one thing: that they haunted certain brains.”³² These phantasms are psychological rather than metaphysical in origin: they are “things of the imagination, born there, bred there,

sprung from strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy [...].”

Yet Lee is careful to maintain that these “things of the imagination” do not simply arise spontaneously from the subconscious. Instead, ghosts function as a psychic intermediary between modernity and pre-modernity. Lee states that

the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past, in houses looking down on its troubadours’ orchards and Greek folks’ pillared courtyards; and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present. (39)

In this incredibly Paterian statement, Lee asserts that ghosts attempt to bridge the psychological gap between two radically incommensurate worldviews: that of “we educated folk of modern times” who live in a disenchanted, post-Enlightenment world, and that of a medieval and classical “Past” that believed unquestioningly in the metaphysical reality of supernatural experience. Ghostly experiences, in other words, allow us to *feel* what it might have been like to live in a pre-modern, non-rationalized world.

Lee’s concern with historical experience might seem at odds with the strict formalism of her aesthetic criticism. In addition to struggling with the apparent contradiction between Lee’s formalism and her evident concern with the morality of art, critics have long puzzled over the relationship between the emphatic anti-historicism of Lee’s art philosophy and the dramatic accounts of the historical experience offered in her cultural histories and her supernatural tales. Yet as Kristin Mahoney has argued,

in her works of supernatural fiction, Lee is highly preoccupied with the possibility that a particular method of perception may allow the past to manifest itself in the present. It is possible to resolve this seeming contradiction within Lee's approach to history through attention to her concern for objects in her supernatural fiction. Though, as Lee argues in *Euphorion*, it may be impossible to ever truly touch or know the past, the desire and the attempt to do so facilitates an interaction that is sensitive to the alterity of the object.³³

In Lee's supernatural fiction, the "desire" that Mahoney identifies as eliciting sensitivity to historical alterity primarily takes the form of *erotic* desire. Lee suggests that our attempts to know the past may be, in some ways, erotically motivated, and that our experiences of historical alterity may be endowed with a sexual charge. Moreover, by emphasizing women's ability to enter into eroticized encounters with the past, Lee undermines contemporary sexological accounts of lesbian desire that borrow their authority from what Jagose refers to as the self-licensing logic of sequence. Jagose argues that the writings of Havelock Ellis (who almost made Vernon Lee a case study in female inversion) and Sigmund Freud are underwritten by what she terms the "logic of sexual sequence," which guarantees the perversity and derivativeness of certain forms of sexuality by the fact that they come *after* (both historically and psychologically) male heterosexuality.³⁴ Yet Lee counters this heteroerotic teleology by deploying a negative eroticism that shows how the seemingly unbridgeable barrier between "the before and after" of history can be surmounted by a specifically feminine erotic sensitivity to alterity. By moving beyond this teleological vision of history, Lee renders historical experience available as a resource for creating forms of women's sexual subjectivity that harness the critical and affective force of a pre-modern aesthetics of formlessness.

Rationality, Ghostliness, and the Escape from Beauty: "Faustus and Helena"

Despite the title of Lee's early essay "Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art," the stakes of her discussion go far beyond the mere identification of a particular artistic effect. In this piece, Lee draws a sharp distinction between "art" and the "supernatural" in modern aesthetics, arguing that "the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct" (295). According to Lee, this opposition is a consequence of post-Enlightenment modernity's over-emphasis on rationality, a characteristic of modern intellectual and aesthetic practice that has transformed the very structure of human consciousness.

In this way, "Faustus and Helena" is a counterpart to Pater's "Winckelmann," insofar as both essays identify and describe a uniquely modern relationship between aesthetic experience and the individual subject. Many of the same literary and philosophical *dramatis personae* (such as Herder, Hegel, Goethe, Winckelmann, and Coleridge) appear in both essays. Yet while Pater's "Winckelmann" discusses how the experience of art from the past can bring a particularly modern worldview into being through an engagement with the aesthetic object's *form*, Lee's more historicist approach emphasizes the ways in which the advent of Enlightenment rationality alters the individual's experience of historical alterity. Lee describes how supernatural fictions, and *ghostly* fictions in particular, allow the individual to imagine his or her way out of a disenchanted modernity and into a historical past associated with primitive and childlike forms of consciousness.

Lee's description of the individual's desire to imagine herself in the past thus differs markedly from Pater's. While in "Winckelmann" Pater expresses his belief that historical knowledge inheres in the physical form of aesthetic objects from the past, Lee's characterization of supernatural ghostliness in this essay is thus ultimately dialectical: rather than representing a

reactionary and quixotic response to modernity, it is a dynamic and distinctively *modern* force for aesthetic creativity—one that she will, in her own supernatural fictions, associate with women’s sexuality.

Lee’s ambivalence regarding the aesthetics of the supernatural can be detected at the very beginning of her essay, in her first attempt to articulate the distinction between art and the supernatural. “Critical reason,” she asserts, “is a solvent, it reduces the phantoms of the imagination to its most prosaic elements; artistic power, on the other hand, moulds and solidifies them into distinct and palpable forms: the synthetical definiteness of art is as skeptical as the analytical definiteness of logic” (295). In Lee’s rendering, the forces of reason and artistry exist in a perfectly balanced dyad: while rationality undoes the creative work of the imagination by breaking it into individual “elements” through a destructive process of ratiocination, artistic practice makes up for this loss by giving those isolated elements material existence within plastic forms that exhibit their own unique particularity. The “synthetic definiteness” of art is thus the counterpart, embodiment, and fulfillment of the “analytical definiteness of logic”: aesthetic forms are logical forms made concrete. Together, art and logic, Lee implies, exist in a perfectly balanced and perpetually renewed dialectical process of loss and recompense, a new unity assembled from the shards of the “phantoms of the imagination.” Thus the supernatural, according to Lee, has no place in what can be properly designated as “art,” because it resists the necessarily formalizing processes of rational aesthetic production: “the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague,” argues Lee, “and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague, and it ceases to exist” (295).

Although the messy vagueness of the supernatural stands in sharp contrast to the neatness of the reason/art dialectic, Lee nevertheless emphasizes that the supernatural, as an aesthetic

phenomenon, can be isolated into a kind of conceptual purity that resists the “solvent” power of rationalized aesthetic production. Lee states that she will “consider only that supernatural which really deserves the name, which is beyond and outside the limits of the possible, the rational, the explicable—that supernatural which is due not to the logical faculties, arguing from wrong premises, but to the imagination wrought upon by certain kinds of physical surroundings” (296). For Lee, the “supernatural which really deserves the name” is, despite its fundamental vagueness, emphatically *not* in any way subordinate to rational thought. It is not a perversion or misapplication of the mind’s logical faculty. Instead, the supernatural has its own independent existence within the human mind: a product of the human “imagination” elicited by the mind’s encounter with the external, material world.

Lee does not only insist on the conceptual autonomy of the supernatural because it allows her to isolate it as an object of intellectual inquiry. She also implies that supernatural experience provides a compelling account of how the mind actually perceives reality, before those perceptions become subject to the disciplinary force of reason. Lee characterizes supernatural experience as

the effect on the imagination of certain external impressions, it is those impressions brought to a focus, personified, but personified vaguely, in a fluctuating ever-changing manner; the personification being continually altered, reinforced, blurred out, enlarged, restricted by new series of impressions from without, even as the shape which we puzzle out of congregated cloud-masses fluctuates with their every movement. (296)

The emphasis Lee places on the individual’s immediate impressions of the external world seems, if not directly inspired by, at the very least remarkably similar to the aesthetic impressionism described in Pater’s *Renaissance*. Also, like Pater, Lee relies on Edward Tylor’s theory of

animism to describe how we first make sense of the external world not through reason, but through primitive acts of personification that attempt to project human agency onto natural forces. These personifications, however, do not immediately solidify into myth, as Tylor and other nineteenth-century anthropologists suggested.³⁵ Instead, Lee emphasizes how important it is that these supernatural impressions retain their *vagueness*. A lack of definition allows these primitive personifications to change continually as the mind processes a constantly flowing welter of impressions received from the external world. These continuously morphing personifications, for Lee, are “the real supernatural, born of the imagination and its surroundings, the vital, the fluctuating, the potent [...]” (299). For Lee, the supernatural derives its liveliness and creative energy from the mind’s alert and attentive perceptual attunement to its environment.

Already, one can see in the emphasis Lee places on embodied perceptual experience the germs of her eventual turn to the empirical, physiological accounts of aesthetic experience she would explore with Kit Anstruther-Thomson at the beginning of the twentieth century. For the moment, however, it is important to note how Lee describes the artist’s transformation of the vital immediacy of the supernatural into the concrete forms of art. Lee asserts that

the vague, fluctuating impressions oscillating before the imagination like the colours of a dove’s wing, or the pattern of a shot silk, interwoven, unsteady, never completely united into one, never completely separated into several, were rudely seized, disentangled by art; part was taken, part thrown aside; what remained was homogenous, defiant, unchanging; it was what it was and could never be aught else. (304)

Art’s imperative to create forms that will give material reality to one’s impressions of the external world, Lee suggests, is akin to an act of violence. In order to give physical being to the

“vague, fluctuating impressions” of the mind, they must be “rudely seized,” torn apart, captured in a “homogenous, defiant, unchanging” form.

Moreover, though, those acts of violence produce the preconditions that are necessary for the creation of aesthetic beauty. Insofar as “art is the definer, the embodier, the analytic and synthetic force of form,” its embodiment of the “impressions and fancies” of the supernatural “implies isolation of those impressions or fancies, selection, combination and balancing of them; that is to say, diminution—nay, destruction of their inherent power” (304). Lee goes on to argue that this “destruction” is both metaphorically *and* literally enacted through the material processes that bring artistic productions into being:

As, in order to be moulded, the clay must be separated from the mound; as, in order to be carved, the wood must be cut off from the tree; as, in order to be re-shaped by art, the mass of atoms must be rudely severed; so also the mental elements of art, the mood, the fancy must be severed from the preceding and succeeding moods or fancies; artistic manipulation requires that its intellectual, like its tangible materials, cease to be vital, but the materials, mental or physical, are not only deprived of vitality and power of self-alteration; they are combined in given proportion, the action of the one on the other destroys in great part the special power of each; art is proportion, and proportion is restrictive. (304)

Art comes into being not, as one might suppose, through acts of creativity. It is, rather, a process of “diminution,” “severing,” deprivation, and restriction. The process by which art rationalizes the supernatural by giving it “proportion” also simultaneously “destroys” its vitality: art, in other words, murders to dissect the lived immediacy of the mind’s perception of the world. By giving

tangible form to the mind's perceptions, art kills off the dynamic elements of those perceptions that cannot fit within the limitations of aesthetic form.

Paradoxically, however, Lee asserts that the violence the artist inflicts upon the supernatural due to the limitations of his medium becomes recuperated by aesthetic form. Moreover, Lee suggests that this transmutation is of decisive historical significance: art becomes the supreme expression of human existence at the very moment it destroys the vitality of supernatural experience. "When art is mature," Lee argues,

the artist, conscious of his powers, instinctively recognising the futility of aiming at the embodiment of the supernatural, dragged by an irresistible longing to the display of his skill, to the imitation of the existing and to the creation of beauty, ceases to strain after the impossible and refuses to attempt anything beyond the possible. The art, which was before a mere insufficient means, is now an all-engrossing aim [...]. (305)

Lee's description of art's triumph over the supernatural reads, in many ways, as a textbook example of Hegel's account of the labor of the negative as a force for historical and aesthetic development. The artist, all too aware of the inadequacy of his materials, begins to focus obsessively on bridging the gulf between art and life through the exercise of his creative skills. At a certain point, the artist forgets his quixotic desire to represent lived experience in his attempt to display his artistic skills "for their own sake," and consequently, a completely aestheticized concept of beauty comes into being: the boundless energy of the supernatural is transformed into the carefully wrought perfection of aesthetic beauty. It is thus that a new and more perfect form of human expression is created out of the violence performed against, and ultimately the absolute destruction of, an older form of expression.

One of the definitive aspects of modernity, Lee implies, is the violent transformation of the volatile opposition between supernaturalism and art into the more stable dialectic between art and reason. Beauty, in other words, disenchant the world: for the modern artist “the gods, or the saints, which were cloudy and supernatural to the artist of immature art, are definite and artistic to the artist of mature art; he can think, imagine, feel only in a given manner; his religious conceptions have taken the shape of his artistic creations; art has destroyed the supernatural, and the artist has swallowed up the believer” (305). Despite the apparent triumph of rationalized aesthetics, however, Lee asserts that there remains in the modern world one “species of supernatural which still retains vitality”: namely, “ghosts” (309).

Lee is quick to point out that “[b]y *ghost*” she does “not mean the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in told or written tales; we mean the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies” (309-10). For Lee, ghosts are the “only modern equivalent” to “the gods of primitive religion”: the same process of personification that gave rise to primitive beliefs in the supernatural also elicits our modern experience of ghostliness. Ghosts are the product of the interaction between our minds and the external environment, “the damp, the darkness, the silence, the solitude,” and arise as “a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness, and which, confusedly embodied, we half dread to see behind us, we know not in what shape, if we look round” (310). Ghostliness is therefore the only experience available to modern individuals that captures the vagueness and thus the dynamic vitality that defines the true supernatural.

The survival of ghostliness as an aspect of human experience in the face of modernity’s rationalized aesthetics renders it, for Lee, not only a powerful agent for historical understanding,

but also a reminder of the irretrievable losses entailed by the advent of modern rationality. Lee states that, although

[w]e none of us believe in ghosts as logical possibilities, [...] we most of us conceive them as imaginative probabilities; we can still feel the ghostly, and thence it is that a ghost is the only thing which can in any respect replace for us the divinities of old, and enable us to understand, if only for a minute, the imaginative power which they possessed, and of which they were despoiled not only by logic, but by art. (309)

When we imagine ourselves to be in the presence of a ghost, we not only undergo the only “truly” supernatural experience that has been allowed to persist in modernity. Ghostliness also allows us, for a moment, to *inhabit* a pre-modern experience of reality, one that allows us to comprehend, on an almost bodily level, the felt reality of a pre-modern human existence. This glimpse into the past is necessarily tempered, however, by our modern inability to “believe in ghosts as a logical possibility.” The moment of historical sympathy enabled by ghostliness carries along with it a reminder of the pervasive force of Enlightenment rationality: to be in the presence of a ghost is, at the same time, to be reminded modern rationality’s destruction of genuine supernatural belief. Ghostly experience thus has the ability calls one’s attention to the inescapable disciplinary force of logic, a reminder of the vast realms of human experience that have been prohibited by the strictures of Enlightenment rationality. To be in the presence of a ghost is to be reminded that one cannot opt out of modernity.

Ghosts thus become a vehicle for two particular psychological impulses. Ghostly experiences encourage individuals to return to an enchanted and richly textured pre-modern world, yet at the same time, that desire for the past encourages dissatisfaction with the rationalization and mechanization of modern experience. Ghostliness therefore encourages in

modern individuals a distinctly modern form of aesthetic experience: nostalgia. Speaking of Goethe, one of the heroes of the Enlightenment, Lee states that he

felt the supernatural as we feel it, as it can be felt only in days of disbelief, when the more logical we become in our ideas, the more we view nature as a prosaic machine constructed by no one in particular, the more poignantly, on the other hand, do we feel the delight of the transient belief in the vague and the impossible; the greater the distinctness with which we see and understand all around us, the greater the longing for a momentary half-light in which forms may appear stranger, grander, vaguer than they are.
(312)

What is notable about Lee's description of the modern individual's longing for the supernatural is her emphasis on the fact that it is not merely a desire to escape the dullness of the modern life in favor of the grandness of an enchanted past. Instead, Lee is remarkable in her insight into the fact modern rationality carries with it, by necessity, the desire to escape from rationality: an intensely Hegelian proposition. In her elegantly balanced sentences, Lee describes how every modern impulse also carries its opposite: distinctness encourages the desire for vagueness, and the "prosaic machine" of modernity makes us long for the impossible.

Lee thus recognizes one of the essential truths of post-Enlightenment existence: that nothing is more modern than the desire to escape modernity. She identifies this impulse within many of the most iconic figures of the Enlightenment. "It was from this sickness of the prosaic," she writes,

this turning away from logical certainty, that the men of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of this century, the men who had finally destroyed belief in the religious supernatural, who were bringing light with new sciences of economy, philology, and

history—Schiller, Goethe, Herder, Coleridge—left the lecture-room and the laboratory, and set gravely to work on ghostly tales and ballads. (312-13).

The four figures Lee names in this passage are famous for their devotion to the Enlightenment notion of “Universal History,” an emphatically rationalist and teleological understandings of historical development.³⁶ In this passage, however, Lee’s emphasizes the violent force with which these heroes of the Enlightenment “destroyed” religious belief in order to draw an implicit parallel to her description of beauty’s violent destruction of the supernatural in art. Their turn to “ghostly tales and ballads,” then, should not be considered merely a reactionary and perhaps regretful rejection of their own intellectual modernity. Instead, Lee’s historical argument about the relationship between the supernatural and the aesthetic compels us to consider the relationship between Enlightenment and ghostliness within a similar dialectical framework. The fact that “logical certainty” necessarily carries with it the desire to write supernatural tales suggests that, far from representing the rejection of the modernity, the embrace of supernatural experience can actually further the process of modernization by negating the “sickness of the prosaic,” the seemingly inescapable disciplinary force of Enlightenment rationality.

For Lee, this tension between modern rationality and the supernatural finds its most exemplary expression in the representation of a historical feminine subject. The essay centers on one concrete example of the supernatural: Doctor Faustus’ raising of the ghost of Helen of Troy in the medieval Faust legend. Although this episode is but a “paltry and brand-new” addition to the tale, Lee suggests that its specifically supernatural qualities render it deeply affecting: “[i]t does not give the complete and limited satisfaction of a work of art,” yet it nevertheless “has the charm of the fantastic and fitful shapes formed by the flickering firelight or the wreathing mists [...]” (293, 294). For this reason, Lee asserts that all attempts to craft a specifically “artistic”

representation of the episode will inevitably come up short. She compares Marlowe's and Goethe's versions of the incident in order to show how both authors "failed" due to their inability to represent Helen's historically superannuated version of femininity (294). According to Lee, the historical Helen embodied the "antique woman" who "has a dignity due to her very inferiority and restrictedness of position; she has the simplicity, the completeness, the absence of anything suggestive of degradation, like that of some stately animal, pure in its animal nature" (317). Yet Marlowe, who lived on the cusp of pre-modernity and modernity, created an "essentially modern" Helen because "he had probably no inkling that an antique Helen as distinguished from a modern could exist. In the paramour of Faustus he saw merely the most beautiful woman [...]" (318). Alternatively, the thoroughly rationalized Goethe presents a scholarly and pedantic version of Helen, a "semi-vivified statue [...] with only the cold, bloodless, intellectual life which could be infused by enthusiastic students of ancient literature and art, gleaming bright like marble or a spectre" (316). The fact that Lee's exemplary instance of the supernatural is a feminine subject who resists the formalist and historicist impulses of Enlightenment rationality is not merely coincidental: this "stately animal" will, I argue, reappear in Lee's own supernatural fictions.

Lee ends "Faustus and Helena," however, by suggesting that supernatural experience must remain a wholly private phenomenon, if it is to escape being inevitably disciplined by aesthetic form. "To raise a real spectre of the antique is a craving of our own century," Lee asserts, "we have all of us the charm wherewith to evoke for ourselves a real Helena, on condition that [...] we seek not to show her to others, and remain satisfied if the weird and glorious figure haunt only our own imagination" (319). She seems not have followed her own advice, however: Lee wrote her first fantastic story six years later.

Supernatural Historicism and Erotic Subjectivity: “Oke of Okehurst”

In 1886, William Blackwood published Vernon Lee’s first supernatural tale, a novella titled *A Phantom Lover*. Lee republished the story four years later, in the *Hauntings* collection, under the title “Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover.” Much like the other stories in *Hauntings*, an artist narrates “Oke of Okehurst.” Lee’s artist-narrators are all “haunted” by historical *femme fatale* (or, in one case, *homme fatale*) figures: the ghost of the Renaissance noblewoman Medea da Carpi in “Amour Dure,” the human embodiment of the goddess Aphrodite in “Dionea,” and the memory of Zaffirino, the famous eighteenth-century singer, in “A Wicked Voice.”

I focus on “Oke of Okehurst” not only because it was the first supernatural tale Lee wrote, and thus established the themes that she would explore in the other *Hauntings* tales, but also because it is the only story in the collection that focuses specifically on a woman’s experience of the supernatural. Lee’s story begins with a dedication to her friend, the Russian poet Count Peter Bourtourline, which expresses misgivings about the supernatural tale similar to those expressed in “Faustus and Helena”: “To write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm;” she says facetiously, and “printer’s ink chases away the ghosts that may pleasantly haunt us, as efficaciously as gallons of holy water” (105). Lee’s story, however, is not really about ghosts *per se*: it is about what happens when someone has a supernatural experience but refuses to tell you about it. Moreover, by mapping her distinction between the aesthetic and the supernatural on to gender relations, Lee continues the investigation of femininity and historicism that began in the “Faustus and Helena” essay by demonstrating how post-Enlightenment rationality disciplines women’s sexuality.

Lee's tale is narrated by an unnamed artist, who has been commissioned to paint the portrait of an unremarkably country squire and his wife, William and Alice Oke. However, upon arriving at Okehurst, the Okes' Jacobean manner, the painter discovers that Alice is very different sort of woman than what he expected. She is "exquisite and strange,—an exotic creature" whose fascinates the narrator, even as he finds it impossible to capture her image on canvas (115). Eventually, in a fit of jealous rage against Lovelock, a ghost that he believes to be haunting Okehurst, William inadvertently kills Alice, and eventually kills himself.

For the narrator, the initial charm of Alice Oke comes from her obsession with her seventeenth-century ancestor, also named Alice Oke (the modern William and Alice being first cousins), whose portrait reveals her to be the modern Alice's exact double. The modern Alice is fascinated by the legend of the historical Alice, who conspired with her husband, Nicholas Oke, to kill her lover, a cavalier poet named Christopher Lovelock. Alice's obsession, which includes mimicking the appearance of the historical Alice, leads her to withdraw almost completely from the modern world. According to the narrator, she has "no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past" and is "utterly incapable of understanding or sympathizing with the feelings of others [having] entered completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman" (122, 131). Alice Oke's erotically charged, supernatural encounter with history—her "eccentric passion"—performs the labor of the negative upon a linear concept of history, and its collusion with men's attempts to discipline female sexuality. Lee thus suggests that the supernatural, by allowing women to engage in an eroticized relationship to the past, has the ability to create new forms of female sexual subjectivity.

Alice's consuming historical passion seems, in the first instance, a refuge from the interminable dullness of life with her dull, hopelessly modern husband. Despite his aristocratic

lineage, William Oke is the very personification of the modern “sickness of the prosaic.” According to the narrator, he is “absolutely like a hundred other young men you can see any day in the Park, and absolutely uninteresting from the crown of his head to the tip of his boot” (107). He betrays all of the romantic associations of his ancient name, which can be traced “back to Norman, almost to Saxon times,” through his devotion to the rationalized and bureaucratized administration of the modern state (120). “The condition of his tenants and his political party—he was a regular Kentish Tory—lay heavy on his mind,” states the narrator. “He spent hours in his study every day in his study, doing the work of a land agent and a political whip, reading piles of reports and newspapers and agricultural treatises” before “emerging from lunch with piles of letters in his hand [...]” (117). William Oke’s conservatism, far from the heroic Toryism of the cavalier poet, stems from his conformity to the modern norms of his social milieu and a pragmatic concern with the efficacious running of his estate, not a devotion to the grandeur of his family’s past. Alice’s turn to the past thus stems from, according to the narrator, “a perverse desire to surprise and shock [...] her husband, and thus be revenged from the intense boredom which his want of appreciation inflicted upon her” (116).

Alice’s obsession is more than mere escapism, however. By using her preoccupation with the past as an excuse not to have children after having a miscarriage, Alice uses her preoccupation with history as an excuse to take control of her sexuality and reject a specifically heterosexual vision of futurity (144). Although William Oke is uninterested in his family’s past, he is terribly concerned his family’s future. When the squire informs the narrator that he and Alice have no children, the painter recalls that he “noticed a vague complaint in his voice.” Yet when Oke attempts to hide this complaint by claiming, “I don’t care for children one jackstraw, you know, myself; can’t stand how anyone can, for my part,” the narrator tells us that “[i]f ever a

man when out of his way to tell a lie, I said to myself, Mr. Oke of Okehurst was doing so at the present moment” (112). Later in the story, the squire tells of the “prophecy” uttered in the seventeenth century by Nicholas Oke on his deathbed: “when the head of his house and master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke, descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end of the Okes of Okehurst.” He informs the narrator: “it seems to be coming true. We have no children, and I don’t suppose we shall ever have any. I, at least, have never wished for them” (134). Oke’s obvious preoccupation with his lack of children thus implies the real nature of Alice’s revenge: by making sure that Nicholas Oke’s prophecy comes true, Alice uses her obsession with the past as an excuse to disregard her husband’s sexual advances in the present, thus insuring there will be no future for the Oke family.

Alice’s apparent indifference towards motherhood marks her as “perverse” in more ways than one. By refusing to give birth to another generation of Oke’s, Alice appears to reject what Lee Edelman refers to as “reproductive futurity”: the heterosexist discourse which demands that one delay one’s pursuit of desire in the present for the sake of the future, which is embodied in the institution of reproduction and the figure of the Child.³⁷ The discourse of reproductive futurity is, of course, authorized by certain assumptions about temporality: normative heterosexuality becomes privileged because it is “in sync” with a linear and sequential narrative of temporality, which posits that the primary function of the present is to prepare for the future. Other manifestations of sexuality are thus portrayed as being temporally “aberrant.” As Edelman states, “[m]odern masculinist heterosexual culture conceptualizes lesbian and gay male sexuality in terms of a phallogentric positional logic, insistently (and dismissively) articulating lesbianism as a form of extended non-productive foreplay [...]. The scene of sodomy comes to figure, therefore, both a spatial and temporal disturbance in the logic essential to narrative

development.”³⁸ Similarly, Jagose argues that when “sequence underwrites those regulatory narratives that establish heterosexuality as the most developed form of sexual identification,” it creates a “charged context” where “sequence—what comes before and what comes after—often tips into precedence—what comes first and what comes second—as the logics of causality it allegedly secures mark themselves as already in the defensive service of heterosexuality.”³⁹

It is thus no coincidence that Alice’s rejection of heterosexual futurity comes through her affirmation of a non-teleological understanding of history. The “prophecy” that authorizes Alice’s refusal to have children relies on a historical temporality where the future can manifest itself in the present (the moment of prophecy’s utterance), and where the present is beholden to the demands of the past rather than the claims of the future. Alice’s obsession with history instead of maternity thus confounds William Oke’s preoccupation with the family lineage, and marks her as both sexually and temporally “perverse,” turned around the wrong way (away from her husband, away from the future): a word the narrator uses eight times to describe Alice.

By rejecting the teleological narrative of history that undergirds heterosexist reproductive futurism, Alice opens up a space to experiment with different forms of eroticism. She does so by drawing upon the supernatural’s ability to take the self away from rationalized modernity and into more sensually engaged, pre-modern forms of consciousness. Alice transforms her engagement with historical alterity into a resource for the exploration of alternate forms of sexual subjectivity, which she accomplishes through her eroticized relationship with historical objects. Thus, when the narrator casts doubt on the legend of Alice and Lovelock, she responds by taking the painter into the room and showing him “a large bundle of papers, some printed and some manuscript, but all of them brown with age, which she took out of an old Italian inlaid cabinet” (26). These are the poems of Christopher Lovelock, addressed to the historical Alice. The

modern Alice's interactions with these historical documents are strongly corporeal, insofar as they elicit highly erotic bodily responses. The narrator informs us that Alice touched "the yellow papers with delicate and reverent fingers" before commencing to read "some of them out loud in a slow, half-audible voice":

She held the papers in one hand, and leaned the other, as if for support, on the inlaid cabinet by her side. Her voice, which was delicate, shadowy, like her person, had a curious throbbing cadence, as if she were reading the words of a melody, and restraining herself with difficulty from singing it; and as she read, her long slender throat throbbed slightly, and a faint redness came into her thin face. She evidently knew the verses by heart, and her eyes were mostly fixed with that distant smile in them, with which harmonised a constant tremulous little smile in her lips. (126-7)

This "one hand" reading of Lovelock's poetry has fairly obvious masturbatory overtones: the "throbbing cadence" of her voice, which manifests itself in the throbbing of her throat, the tense interplay between disciplined self-restraint and eruption into song, the "faint redness" in her face and the "distant smile" in her eyes which culminates in a "tremulous little smile in her lips" all suggest, none too subtly, that the performance of these love poems brings Alice to orgasm. The object thus enables Alice to access what is perhaps the most basic form of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive sexual expression: autoeroticism.

Yet the stimulation Alice receives from the poems stems from more than just their amatory content: the main appeal of these letters lies in her hyper-sensual reaction to their very historicity itself. Alice believes that her erotic responsiveness to the poems proves the historical truth of the Lovelock legend. "Can you doubt of the reality of Christopher Lovelock now?" Alice asks after she recovers from her performance. The painter quite reasonably comments to

the reader that “[t]he question was an illogical one, for to doubt of the existence of Christopher Lovelock was one thing, and to doubt of the mode of his death was another; but somehow I did feel convinced” (127). The narrator is precisely right to say that Alice’s belief in the Lovelock legend is not based on logic or rational deliberation. Instead, Alice’s proof comes from her strictly non-rational, supernatural identification with the historical document: an identification that her body registers through erotic responsiveness. In this way, Alice Oke’s experience of the past bears a strong resemblance to what Elizabeth Freeman calls “erotohistoriography.” According to Freeman, erotohistoriography describes a corporeal engagement with the historical objects that does not respect the limitations of temporal linearity:

Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as a hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensation.⁴⁰

In response to Alice’s remarkable erotohistoriographic response to Lovelock’s poetry, the narrator makes a very specific and somewhat limited inference regarding her sexuality. To the narrator, Alice’s intensely sexual attunement to Lovelock’s poetry suggests that she was somehow supernaturally inhabited by the spirit of the historical Alice: “what struck me on thinking over the scene,” the painter comments, was “that this strange being read these verses as one might fancy a woman would read love-verses addressed to herself” (127). According to his

logic, Alice's intense response to the poems indicates that she must have inhabited the subject position of the person to whom the poems are addressed—the Alice Oke of 1626.

Other readers of "Oke of Okehurst," however, have disagreed with the painter. Denis Denisoff argues for a specifically lesbian reading of the story, in which the "the force of the same-sex bond" created by the modern Alice's apparent supernatural inhabitation "arises from the heroine's devotion to her namesake surpassing not only the portraitist's interest in the living Alice but also the dead Alice's dubious attachment to a lover who may have never existed and, if he did, whom she then helped murder."⁴¹ Denisoff correctly identifies the inadequacy of the painter's assessment of Alice as displaying an inherent bias towards masculine heterosexuality, in the assumption that only a man has the capability to arouse a woman sexually. Yet Denisoff's attempt to read Alice's desire as specifically lesbian in nature is, in its way, just as limiting as the narrator's heterosexist reading.

Alternatively, Patricia Pulham provides a Winnicottian psychoanalytic reading of the tale, which suggests that Alice's desire for the historical Alice is psychically over-determined: the Alice Oke of 1626 is "the phallic mother," "the apparitional lesbian," and "the beautiful boy" that has "a particular role to play in the expression on homosexuality," a figure she eventually projects onto Lovelock.⁴² Yet in the poetry reading scene, it is far from certain whether Alice either desires or desires to be the historical Alice. Indeed, the scene leaves it entirely unclear which individual is the primary cause of her sexual ecstasy. It is equally plausible (or implausible) to assume that Alice desire Lovelock, that she desires the historical Alice, that she identifies with the historical Alice as the object of Lovelock's desire, that she identifies with Lovelock as the object of Alice's desire, that she is aroused by her voyeuristic glimpse into the erotic dynamics of the Alice-Lovelock affair, et cetera. The only definite object of Alice's

desires in the poetry reading scene is the historical object itself—the “yellow papers” that she caresses “with delicate and reverent fingers.” Everything else, ultimately, is a mystery.

Alice gives neither the painter-narrator nor the reader any explicit account of her experiences while undergoing these supernatural, erotic encounters with history. I would argue that Alice keeps these experiences to herself for a very good reason. By refusing to state what, precisely, goes on in her head during these experiences, Alice has the ability to experiment with any number of different sexual subject positions in her erotohistoriographic imagination. The closest she ever comes to expressing something about her personal thoughts and beliefs is when the painter asks her for her thoughts on Dante’s description of enduring love in the “*Vita Nuova*.” She responds that she believes

Such love as that [...] is very rare, but it can exist. It becomes a person’s whole existence, his whole soul; and it can survive the death, not merely of the beloved, but of the lover. It is unextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meet a reincarnation of the beloved; and when this happens, it jets out and draws to it all that may remain of that lover’s soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved one once more. (150)

Alice’s speech would seem to indicate that she does, in fact, imagine herself to be the “reincarnation” of the historical Alice Oke, waiting to be surrounded by her “lover’s soul.” However, her distancing use of the third person makes it possible to read Alice’s speech as articulating the position of Lovelock. By focusing on the desires of “his whole soul,” rather than hers, and by waxing rhapsodically on the “unextinguishable” love that “the lover” possesses for “the beloved” even after her death, Alice displays profound sympathy for, if not identification with, Lovelock’s desire for the historical Alice.

The ambiguity and motility of Alice's desire is only compounded by the events leading up to her death at the hands of William Oke.⁴³ Throughout the final pages of the story, Alice seems to become the active agent of her own demise, suggesting to her increasingly delusional husband that she is being haunted by the ghost of the historical Alice's lover: "It was probably Lovelock," she says to William, when he thinks he sees a man looking through their window. After he starts becoming visibly distraught at the mere mention of "your eternal Lovelock," Alice continues to goad William by saying "If you saw any one with me, it must have been Lovelock, for there certainly was no one else" she tells her husband, when he reports seeing her walking with another man" (146, 7). Eventually, when William inadvertently kills Alice in an attempt to shoot "Lovelock," the painter offers us one last image of the mistress of Okehurst, finally satisfied in death: "Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly" (152).

Alice's eerie smile can be interpreted multiple ways. She could be happy to be reunited in death with Lovelock, whose actual ghost is the cause of Alice's death (unlikely, given Lee's opinion of "spurious ghosts"). Alternatively, she could be happy to have tricked her otherwise dull husband into killing her in a fit of delusional romantic passion, thereby both reuniting her with Lovelock and making him the unwitting agent of Nicholas Oke's prophecy. Or she could be happy because, by enabling the killing of Alice Oke, she has actualized the desires of Christopher Lovelock. In driving her husband to kill her by convincing him of the existence of Lovelock's ghost, Alice commits the act that, in a more traditional supernatural tale, would have actually been committed by Lovelock's ghost. Thus, when William kills Alice, thinking her to be Lovelock, he is essentially correct. Alice's erotohistoriographic encounters use historical experience to militate against men's attempts to "fix" her sexual subjectivity. This has made it

possible for her to identify with the sexual subjectivities of both the historical Alice *and* Lovelock. In death, she has become an essentially *transgendered* subject: she is “the lover” and “the beloved,” the subject and object of desire, the murderer and the murdered.

In this way, Alice perversely demonstrates the effectiveness of the advice Lee offers at the end of the “Faustus and Helena” essay, where she suggests that we “seek not to show” our supernatural fantasies “to others, and remain satisfied if the weird and glorious figure haunt only our own imagination.” For Catherine Maxwell, who also interprets “Oke of Okehurst” in light of the “Faustus and Helena” essay, Alice’s reticence is characteristic of the “enigmatic, elusive yet compelling women” found in the *Hauntings* collection “who defy being fixed and defined by those around them, even seeming to cross the boundaries of time and space.” For Maxwell, the stories in *Hauntings* “are structured around incompleteness” which serves as a “representational ruse [...] by which the supernatural can come into play” through avoidance of the “textual bodying-out” that “might in some way deprive [the stories] of their power.”⁴⁴ I would extend Maxwell’s argument by asserting that Lee presents Alice Oke’s elusiveness not only as a narrative ruse for the effective presentation of the supernatural, but also as a resource for women to explore psychically with different types of sexual subjectivity, without having to submit those fantasies to the confines of modern rationality.

The character in “Oke of Okehurst” that exhibits the strongest impulse to control Alice’s sexuality is not the milquetoast William Oke, whose will to reproductive futurity Alice seems to have conquered rather easily. Instead, the unnamed painter-narrator’s obsession with aesthetic form expresses his quixotic desire to control Alice’s eroticism. Specifically, the painter thinks he can discipline Alice Oke by “capturing” her image on canvas, using the limitations of aesthetic form to fix Alice’s eroticism in time. His ultimate failure to do so, however, reveals the *social* as

well as artistic implications of Lee's distinction between the aesthetic and the supernatural. Just as the "craving for the supernatural" expresses the modern individual's desire to escape from rationalized modernity into pre-modern forms of consciousness, so too can women's erotic embrace of the forces underlying supernatural experience (i.e. its rejection of a rationally based historical teleology and embrace of erotic motility) enable them to escape the confines masculine heterosexist control.

The narrator's will to masculine dominance appears most obviously in his assertions of intellectual predominance over the Okes of Okehurst. Although he expresses this superiority by ostentatiously displaying his knowledge of contemporary theories of scientific psychology, he also associates his skillfulness as a diagnostician with his skillfulness as a painter. He mentions how, although "it seemed so unfair that just [Oke] should be condemned to puzzle for ever over this enigma [of Alice's obsession], and wear out his soul trying to comprehend what now seemed so plain to me," he would nevertheless make "no attempt to explain psychological problems to him" due to Oke's "serious, conscientious, slow-brained [...] English simplicity" (140, 146). Later, when Oke begins seeing Lovelock's ghost, the painter "pour[s] out volumes of psychological explanation," but to no avail (149). Despite Oke's obtuseness, however, the narrator reveals to the reader his psychological explanation of Alice: "I am tempted to think," he says, "that the psychological peculiarity of that woman might be summed up in an exorbitant and absorbing interest in herself—a Narcissus attitude—curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, a sort of morbid day-dreaming, all turned inwards [...]" (116). Although the term "narcissism" would not appear in print until 1887, one year after the publication of Lee's story, the painter's use of the phrase "Narcissus attitude" to describe Alice's "morbid day-dreaming, all turned inward" is remarkably prescient of the term's use in psychological studies of

autoeroticism, and thereby indicating his familiarity with the cutting edge of research in scientific psychology.⁴⁵

The painter believes that his ability to diagnose Alice allows him to control her through psychological manipulation, thereby making it easier for him to capture the essence of her personality in his portrait. The narrator explains with almost sexual fervor that his scientific obsession with Alice's psychological condition is intimately tied up with his desire to represent the essence of her character visually. He states that he "pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation, with a kind of passion which filled my days, and prevented my ever feeling dull." Moreover, he is only able to endure the "monotonous life of solitude" at Okehurst because, as he states, he has "the interest of a strange psychological riddle to solve, and of a great portrait to paint" (116). The painter, in fact, actively encourages Alice's "very harmless psychological mania" for "the sake of the portrait [he] had undertaken" (122). Thus, immediately after Alice's orgasmic reading of Lovelock's poetry, the narrator exclaims to himself: "That is how I would wish to paint her!" (127). He asserts that he "derives a morbid and exquisite pleasure" in drawing her out about historical obsession because "[i]t completed her personality so perfectly, and made it so much easier to conceive a way of painting her" (128-9). Much like the heroes of the Enlightenment whom Lee describes in the "Faustus and Helena" essay, the painter's logical certainty in the explanatory power of science is the dialectical counterpart of his craving for supernatural experience. The painter believes that these two impulses will be reconciled in his painting: by encouraging her supernatural delusions, the painter makes her "Narcissus attitude" more visible on the surface of her body, which in turn makes her psychological condition more amenable to being contained by the aesthetic form of the portrait.

It is this desire to comprehend, represent, and thus discipline Alice's sexuality that serves as the painter's prime motivation. He states that he must paint Alice "in the yellow room" where she gives her orgasmic performance of Lovelock's poetry, and where the painting of the historical Alice is set: "Mr. Oke might resent it," he states, "Mrs. Oke even might resent it; they might refuse to take the picture, to pay for it, to allow me to exhibit; they might force me to run my umbrella through the picture. No matter. That picture should be painted, if merely for the sake of having painted it; for I felt it was the only thing I could do, and that it would be far away my best work" (129). Despite the fact that the painter originally took Oke's commission for purely financial reasons, in this passage it becomes clear that his obsession with Alice has made all material concerns completely beside the point. He does not even concern himself with the painting's existence beyond the moment of its completion. Instead, he wants to paint the portrait "merely for the sake of having painted it," as a demonstration and confirmation to himself of his own aesthetic virtuosity. Yet this display of artistic mastery depends on his mastery of Alice Oke: he manipulates Alice erotically and psychologically in order to get the painting he wants, and he will continue to do so despite anyone's objections, including her own.

Yet despite his protestations of intellectual superiority and aesthetic virtuosity, the painter finds it impossible to create an accurate representation of Alice Oke. This is because her refusal to obey the logic of linear temporality makes it impossible for her to be captured within the limits of aesthetic form. In the days before her murder, the narrator informs us that he has had Alice sit for one hundred and thirty preparatory sketches because he "somehow could never get beyond preparatory sketches with her," and of course, he never does (143). The narrator explains the hard won wisdom he gained through struggling and failing to paint Alice's portrait:

I don't believe, you know, that even the greatest painter can show what is the real beauty of a very beautiful woman in the ordinary sense [...]. Something—and that the very essence—always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time—a thing like music, a succession, a series—as in space. Mind you, I am speaking of a woman beautiful in the conventional sense. Imagine, then, how much more so in the case of a woman like Alice Oke [...]. (115)

The narrator's bizarre, tragic, and artistically futile encounter with Alice has taught him a truth about women more generally: namely, that the aesthetics of specifically feminine forms of "beauty," even of the "conventional" sort, obey a temporal logic that depends on sequence, and is not necessarily compatible with the static spatial logic of traditional portrait painting. The painter asserts that he has come to this realization because his encounter with Alice forced him to reckon with a woman whose distinctly unconventional beauty undermines conventional understandings of temporality.

Although we eventually learn that Alice's temporal disobedience stems from her rejection of historical linearity, the narrator seems to recognize her temporal insubordination on their very first meeting. In one of the rare moments when the narrator admits to his unreliability, he states that, although he cannot describe the "unusual" beauty of Alice Oke,

This much is certain, that I must have been immeasurably surprised at finding my hostess and future sitter so completely unlike everything I had anticipated. Or no—now I come to think of it, I scarcely felt surprised at all; of if I did, that shock of surprise could have lasted but an infinitesimal part of a minute. The fact is, that, having once seen Alice Oke in the reality, it was quite impossible to remember that one could have fancied her at all different: there was something so complete, so completely unlike every one else, in her

personality, that she seemed always to have been present in one's consciousness, although present, perhaps, as an enigma." (113)

Alice Oke's beauty is so overwhelming that even the memory of it causes the painter intense affective confusion: he cannot recall with any accuracy if he was "immeasurably surprised," or if he "scarcely felt surprised at all," or if he was surprised for only "an infinitesimal part of a minute." This confusion stems from the fact that Alice's beauty disrupts the relationship between painter's consciousness and linear temporality: it is so completely singular that it retroactively replaces the "conventional" image he had in his mind before meeting her.

Alice's beauty thus synthesizes the dialectical opposition between past and present. The painter asserts that Alice "was, beyond all comparison, the most graceful and exquisite woman I have ever seen, but with a grace and exquisiteness that had nothing to do with any preconceived notion or previous experience of what goes by perfect" (114). Yet by being so new, her presence reconfigures the very structure of memory itself, making her seem "always to have been present in one's consciousness, but as an enigma." The beauty of Alice Oke, by eliciting a shock of "surprise," retroactively reveals the presence of an aesthetic ideal hidden as a determinate absence in the painter's consciousness. Alice elicits the Hegelian encounter with the negative upon the painter by synthesizing the dialectic of past and present that inhered in his strictly formalist understanding of the representation of feminine beauty.

By using supernatural eroticism to performing the labor of the negative upon historical teleology, Alice thus comes to embody the force of negativity in her very being. This is what makes her sexuality both radically transformative yet completely admissible in her late-Victorian cultural context. Alice Oke is murdered because the men in her life are neither willing nor able to let their consciousness be transformed by her distinctly feminine negativity: William Oke is

driven mad by her sexual inaccessibility, and the painter falls into creative paralysis due to her unrepresentability. Yet although Lee's tale reveals the deeply dysfunctional gender dynamic that underlies her distinction between the aesthetic and the supernatural, she does not attempt to offer any political solution to the issue. Ultimately, "Oke of Okehurst" is a fantastic tale, not a social problem novel. Lee would eventually come to believe that she would have to abandon Pater's aestheticism altogether if she wanted to address the social ramifications of aesthetic experience. She addresses her ambivalent farewell to Paterian aestheticism in the story "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," which abandons all sense of historical context in order to reconfigure the notion of aesthetic *Bildung* that preoccupied Pater.

Gendering the Aesthetic *Bildung*: "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady"

Lee's fantastic tale, which (uncharacteristically for Lee) takes place in the ahistorical "nowhere" typically associated with legends and fairy-tales, narrates the development of Prince Alberic's relationship with the mythological "Snake Lady," a woman who appears to have physically materialized out of a tapestry, and whose transformation into a snake can only be reversed by a male lover's sexual chastity. I turn to this story because it is the first "fantastic tale" Lee wrote after explicitly and publicly abandoning Pater's writings, yet it continues to engage with Paterian aesthetic theories. It is, I suggest, her true final farewell to Pater and his particular version of aestheticism. Within this story, Lee offers a narrative of male psychological development that bears strong affinities to the concept of aesthetic *Bildung* articulated in the writings of Pater. Yet while Pater believed that ideal aesthetic critic attains greater self-knowledge by encountering aesthetic representations of male homoerotic desire, Lee's story places Prince Alberic's desire for the shape shifting "snake-lady" at the center of his developmental trajectory.

Lee's narrative emphasizes the gender difference of the aesthetic object, I argue, in order to critique implicitly the masculinist bias of Pater's theory of homoerotic negativity. While Pater proposed a seamless identification between the subject and the object of aesthetic contemplation, his theory relies on the conceptual equation of sameness with masculinity. In Lee's story, however, the snake lady's shape shifting embodies an erotic negativity that marks her active resistance to Prince Alberic's attempts to identify with her. Yet it is precisely her supernatural resistance to form that fuels Alberic's erotic desire and motivates his psychological development.

"Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" was first published in the *Yellow Book* in 1896. When the *Yellow Book* appeared in 1894, the year of Pater's death, it was something of a *succès de scandale*, vilified by mainstream critics yet selling a number of copies until Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895.⁴⁶ Although the story appeared in the most famous periodical associated with late-Victorian decadence, it has received much less critical attention than the stories found in the *Hauntings* collection. Peter G. Christenson focuses on the story's deep intertextual relations with other stories published in the *Yellow Book*.⁴⁷ I want to suggest, however, that the most significant contemporary influence on Lee's story was the concept of aesthetic *Bildung* articulated in Pater's critical writings, which is her object of her critique in this story.

Lee's close friendship and frequent correspondence with Pater continued until his death in 1894. One year later, however, in her "Valedictory" essay in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), Lee both paid tribute to Pater and expressed her ultimate disappointment with his version of aestheticism. Colby asserts that Lee's essay embeds two narratives of development in her eulogy for Pater: the first tells the story of Pater's spiritual maturation from aesthetic critic to spiritual counselor, the second expresses Lee's own farewell to her career as a cultural historian and aesthetic critic.⁴⁸ Lee asserts, approvingly, that Pater "began as an aesthete, and ended as a

moralist,” and uses the transformation recorded in works such as *Marius the Epicurean* to justify her newfound belief that “[a]rt is a much greater and more cosmic thing than the mere expression of man’s thought and opinions on any one subject.”⁴⁹ Lee thus presents two narratives of development that both culminate in the conclusion that aesthetic experience is ultimately ineffable, and that the writing of aesthetic criticism is merely a distraction from one’s direct experience of the work of art itself. “Prince Alberic,” which appeared one year after Lee’s “Valedictory” essay, presents yet another narrative of development. Despite her public disavowal of art criticism, I maintain that Lee’s story expresses her ongoing and ambivalent engagement with aestheticism’s theory of *Bildung*.

Lee’s story begins when Duke Balthasar of Luna, a narcissistic and tyrannical ruler, enters the rooms of his grandson, Prince Alberic, for the first time since his birth. Up to this point, Alberic has spent his entire life alone in his chambers and his garden, and has had almost no contact with the outside world. The narrator tells the story of Alberic’s psychological development through reference to his relationship to a tapestry hanging on his wall. In this narrative, Alberic reaches sexual maturity and self-awareness at the very moment he can discern the figures woven into the center of the tapestry. In early childhood, Alberic would spend his days gazing at the borders of the tapestry, “satisfied with seeing the plants and animals [...] and looking forward to seeing the real thing only when he should be grown up” (185). As he grows older, however, his attention gradually moves from the tapestry’s periphery to its center, as he spends his days puzzling out the intricate geography of the rustic scene represented there.

Eventually, in a passage that Maxwell identifies as a direct reference to Pater’s description of *The Last Supper* in his essay on “Leonardo da Vinci” in *Renaissance*, Alberic realizes that there are two faint figures in the scene.⁵⁰ These figures “seemed like ghosts,

sometimes emerging and then receding again into vagueness. Indeed, it was only as he grew bigger that Alberic began to see any figures at all; and then, for a long time he would lose sight of them. But little by little, when the light was strong, he could see them always [...]” (186). He recognizes that the two figures are a knight and a lady, and that, although the knight and his horse were beautiful, he “got to love the lady most,” even though the lower half of her body is covered by a crucifix set upon a chest of drawers, obscuring the skirt “he want[ed] so much to see” (187). One day, when Alberic’s nurse rearranges the furniture so that “the child should cease to sleep in her room,” it is revealed that the lady’s lower half “ended off in a big snake’s tail [...]” The narrator tells us that Alberic “loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her” (187-8).

Duke Balthasar’s eventual removal of the tapestry occasions Alberic’s first act of rebellion. He refuses food and begins to “pine away” because “the tapestry had been his whole world; and now it was gone he discovered he had no other” (188). The story of Alberic’s relationship to the tapestry maps his maturation from childish naiveté to sexual awakening onto his growing ability to discern the forms at the center of the tapestry. Once he is able to resolve the “ghostly figures” resolve into a definite form, that form becomes available as the object of his erotic desire, and provides the motivation for his first assertion of individuality in the form of adolescent rebellion. The narrative of Alberic’s psychosexual development is inseparable from his increasingly perceptive understanding of the aesthetic object.

Prince Alberic’s relationship to the tapestry bears many similarities to the narrative of aesthetic development offered in Pater’s “Winckelmann.” Pater asserts that Winckelmann’s critical insight into formal qualities of ancient Greek sculpture, much like Alberic’s ability to

recognize the forms represented in the tapestry, is associated with the entrance into erotic desire. In Winckelmann's case, however, it is crucial that the object of desire is a male body. The fact that both Winckelmann and the ancient Greek sculptures both *are* men and *desire* men creates a relationship of identification between the observer and the creator of the aesthetic object that spans across historical time: what Pater calls Winckelmann's "reconciliation with the spirit of Greek sculpture." Pater places particular emphasis on the specifically homoerotic "temperament" of his art-historical writings. He states that Winckelmann's "[a]ffinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual, that the subtler threads of temperament were inwoven in it, is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men."⁵¹ Pater quotes an impassioned letter sent from Winckelmann to a "young nobleman," about "the beauty of *man*":

As it is confessedly the beauty of *man* which is to be conceived under our general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inform instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female.⁵²

For Winckelmann (and, by extension, for Pater), the ideal aesthetic critic must be a man who desires men. This is because the critic's insight into the form of the aesthetic object, his intuition of "a whole sequence of laws" is actually a type of self-knowledge. Pater asserts that Winckelmann's understanding of ancient Greek sculpture represents uncovering of "forgotten" erotic knowledge "hidden" within his own consciousness:

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 is *en rapport* with it; it penetrates him, and becomes part of his temperament. He remodels his writings with constant

renewals of insight; he catches the thread of a whole sequence of laws in some hollowing of the hand, or dividing of the hair; he seems to realize that fancy of the reminiscence of a forgotten knowledge hidden for a time in the mind itself [...].⁵³

In this, perhaps strongest and most explicit description of the theory of erotic negativity in all of aestheticist writing, Pater focuses his attention squarely on the *effect* ancient artworks had upon Winckelmann's consciousness. The "constant renewals of insight" he gleans from sculptural details seem not to come from the sculpture, but rather from *inside* Winckelmann consciousness itself. As such, the true subject of Winckelmann's criticism is not actually Greek sculpture in and of itself, but rather its ability to uncover knowledge that is "forgotten" and "hidden" within Winckelmann's consciousness itself.

Pater's homoerotic aesthetic critic thus operates within a closed circuit of identifications, where the ability to discern the formal qualities of the aesthetic objects ultimately reflects back to the desires of the critical subject. It is only by becoming cognizant of his homoerotic desires, Pater suggests, that Winckelmann attained the insight necessary to write valuable aesthetic criticism. In Lee's story, however, Prince Alberic's full entrance into erotic desire does not occur in tandem with the proper recognition of aesthetic form *per se*, but when he realizes that the form of the desired object does not match his expectations. Alberic loves the lady "only the more" and comes to realize the nature of erotic desire by speculating that "the knight was so good to her" because she has the body of a snake.

I would emphasize, however, that I do not believe that Lee's story attempts to "correct" Pater's masculine homoeroticism by providing aesthetic criticism with a heterosexist theoretical foundation. Alberic's object of desire is, after all, not merely a lady, but a snake lady. Many readers of Lee's story have interpreted the prince's relationship with the Snake Lady to be a

coded expression of lesbian desire. Pulham, Kane, and Colby make much of the snake lady's place within a literary lineage of snake-women, such as Keats' Lamia and the psychoanalytic concept of the phallic woman, who have been traditionally associated with non-normative sexuality.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Martha Vicinus has linked Prince Alberic to the other "boyish" figures found in lesbian literature. For these writers, Vicinus argues, adolescent boys were "the defining, free agent" that allowed them to express their lesbian desires.⁵⁵ Alternatively, Zorn argues Prince Alberic and the Snake-Lady share a "feminine bond" that undermines the very concept of a gender binary and "negat[e] the absolutist patriarchal rule" of Duke Balthasar.⁵⁶ "The relationship between the Snake Lady and the Prince does not produce a new dualism," Zorn argues, "[w]ithout the boundaries of gender, norms like heterosexuality are undercut and direct us to other possible relationships."⁵⁷ This new, distinctly feminine vision of eroticism is therefore open to, but not defined by, the possibility of same-sex desire between women.

Lee thus uses the supernatural Snake Lady not to obviate Pater's homoerotic aestheticism, but to articulate a form of aesthetic subjectivity that can accommodate multiple forms of erotic difference. Alberic does not desire the snake lady simply because she takes on a serpentine form, but because she refuses to settle into any definite form, and thus resists becoming a knowable or comprehensible object. Throughout the story, the snake lady appears in various guises: as a snake, as Alberic's godmother, who provides maternal protection and companionship, as well the necessary materials for his education as a gentleman (a horse, a sword, and a library) when Duke Balthasar banishes him from the Red Palace, and as Lady Oriana, the beautiful woman who, according to family legend, fell in love with the prince's ancestor, also named Alberic, and who can only be released from the curse of being a serpent through the prince's chastity and sexual fidelity.

Throughout these shape-shiftings, Alberic's desire is sustained by his frustrated attempts to know more about the snake lady: "Children sometimes conceive an inexplicable shyness, almost a dread," the narrator states, "of knowing more on some subject which is uppermost in their thoughts; and such had been the case of Duke Balthasar Maria's grandson" (201). Later, the narrator informs us that, as Prince Alberic turns "into a full-grown and gallant-looking youth," he becomes increasingly obsessed by the story of the Lady Oriana:

He thought of it more than ever, and it began to haunt his dreams; only it was now a vaguely painful thought; and, while dreading still to know more, he began to experience a restless, miserable craving to know all. His curiosity was like a thorn in his flesh, working its way in and in; and it seemed something almost more than curiosity. And yet, he was still shy and frightened of the subject; nay, the greater his craving to know, the greater grew a strange certainty that the knowing would be accomplished by evil. (204)

The narrator's strongly erotic language in this passage, the "restless miserable craving," the "thorn" that slowly penetrates his "flesh," his ever-increasingly "craving," suggests that this "full-grown and gallant looking youth" cannot separate his erotic and his epistemological desires. Alberic's growth into psychological and sexual maturity can only be accomplished through an encounter with unresolved ambiguity—an ambiguity that manifests itself as the snake lady's resistance to taking a definite form.

The snake lady's shape-shifting only stops when she is killed by Duke Balthasar's men while in the form of a snake, and finally transforms into Lady Oriana for eternity. Much like Alice Oke, the Snake Lady also embodies in her very being the negative force of supernatural experience. In her perpetually fluctuating vagueness, she opposes the "necessarily essentially distinct" form of what can be properly designated "the aesthetic." By giving up Paterian

aesthetic criticism, Lee could begin to think of the supernatural as a way of resisting the hermetic homoeroticism of male aestheticism. In “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” then, Lee offers a vision of supernatural resistance to form that elicits psychological and erotic development by embracing the unknowable, and without relying on an exclusionary, gendered assumption of sameness. Significantly, however, Lee mounts her critique of aestheticism by using the aesthetes’ own theory of erotic negativity. By using this theory to mount what is essentially a lesbian-feminist critique of aesthetic form, Lee thus gives some indication of the theory’s potential as a viable method of criticism: one that has the ability to move beyond the divide between humanist and anti-humanist accounts of homoerotic subjectivity.

¹ Stefano Evangelista, “Vernon Lee in the Vatican: The Uneasy Alliance of Aestheticism and Archaeology,” *Victorian Studies* 51: 1 (2009): 31-41.

² Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), 5.

³ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 3.

⁴ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 67.

⁵ Although Christa Zorn also notes that Lee’s fantastic tales “search for alternative forms of female subjectivity,” she claims that these forms are “embedded in the uncanny dimensions of these stories which recreate the contemporary social psychological climates in which ‘otherness’ is invoked in images of strange beauty” (Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003], xxx-xxx). I, on the other hand, claim that the supernatural elements of these stories deploy historical consciousness to create these new forms of subjectivity, not contemporary social psychology.

⁶ “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art,” *Cornhill Magazine* 42 (1880); reprinted in *Belcaro*, 70-105.

⁷ Originally published as *A Phantom Lover: A Fantastic Story* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1886), later collected in *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London: W. Heinemann, 1890).

⁸ Vernon Lee, "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady," *Yellow Book* 10 (1896): 289-344; republished in *Pope Jacynth and Other Fantastic Tales* (London: Grant Richards, 1904).

⁹ See, for example, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886); *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887); and *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1894).

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1884). Lee also once tried her hand at realist fiction during this period, in *Vanitas: Polite Stories* (London: W. Heinemann, 1892).

¹¹ Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* vol. 2 (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884): 183-4.

¹² Lee, *Belcaro*, 10, 9.

¹³ Lee, *Belcaro*, 205-6.

¹⁴ Colby, *Literary Biography*, 57; Lee, *Belcaro*, 229.

¹⁵ Vernon Lee, "Comparative Aesthetics," *Contemporary Review* 38 (1880): 302.

¹⁶ Lee, *Belcaro*, 66.

¹⁷ Lee, *Euphorion*, 1, 137.

¹⁸ Colby, *Literary Biography*, 68.

¹⁹ The definitive account of the productive tension between formalism and historicism in Pater's writings is Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁰ See Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 68-75. For a detailed discussion of Lee's late writings on aesthetic experience, see Joseph Bristow, "Vernon Lee's Art of Feeling," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 25: 1 (2006), 1-23.

²¹ Ana Parejo Vadillo suggests that Mary Robinson's parents were upset by her relationship with Lee because there was a sexual component to their friendship. See Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Immaterial Poetics: A. Mary F. Robinson and the Fin-de-Siecle Poem," in Joseph Bristow (ed.), *The Fin-de-Siecle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 231-60.

²² Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Hampshire, UK: Aldershot, 2008): xiii.

²³ Notable critical discussions of Lee's sexuality include Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of 'Vernon Lee'* (New York: Garland, 1987); Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 21-41; Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Sally Newman, "The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14: 1/2 (2005): 51-75. Colby insists that Lee's relationship with Mary Robinson was an essentially chaste "Boston Marriage" (*Literary Biography*, 58).

²⁴ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 16-17.

²⁵ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 99.

²⁶ Castle, *Apparitional*, 34.

²⁷ Castle, *Apparitional*, 2.

²⁸ Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), ix.

²⁹ Jagose, *Inconsequence*, xi.

³⁰ Zorn, *Female Intellectual*, 147.

³¹ Although Zorn notes that Lee's fantastic tales "search for alternative forms of female subjectivity," she claims that these forms are "embedded in the uncanny dimensions of these stories which recreate the contemporary social psychological climates in which 'otherness' is invoked in images of strange beauty" (*Female Intellectual*, xxx-xxxii). I, on the other hand, claim that the supernatural elements of these stories use of historical consciousness to create these new forms of subjectivity, not contemporary social psychology.

³² Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 40. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³³ Kristin Mahoney, "Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption," *Criticism* 48.1 (2007): 61.

³⁴ Jagose, *Inconsequence*, 24-36.

³⁵ See my discussion of Tylor's anthropology in chapter two.

³⁶ See Christopher Parker, *The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1-33.

Although Edelman's use of Lacanian psychoanalysis to identify queerness with the death drive and the absolute rejection of politics has been extensively critiqued, "reproductive futurity" remains a useful concept to describe one of the many cultural discourses that work to justify homo- and queer-phobia.

³⁸ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 183.

³⁹ Jagose, *Inconsequence*, 101.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 95-6.

⁴¹ Denis Denisoff, *Sexual Visuality from Literature to Film, 1850-1950* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 104-5.

⁴² Pulham, *Transitional Object*, 130-1

⁴³ Denisoff argues that Alice is killed because her same-sex desires pose a threat to the late-Victorian patriarchal society, a truth that the narrator obfuscates by portraying her as an active conspirer in her own murder. Yet Alice's own dialogue clearly implies some sort of death wish. See Denisoff, *Sexual Visuality*, 104-6.

⁴⁴ Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late-Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 142-3.

⁴⁵ The word "narcissism" in the psychological sense first appeared in an 1887 article by Alfred Binet in the *Revue philosophique*, to describe a case of fetishism where a man was only sexually attracted to a material object, to the total exclusion of women. Binet claimed that such extreme fetishism expressed a form of autoeroticism. See Edward Shorter, *A Historical Dictionary of Psychiatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 184. Later, in an 1898 article on autoeroticism in the *Alienist and Neurologist*, Havelock Ellis made reference to the concept of narcissism for the first time in English, to describe "the Narcissus-like tendency sometimes found, more especially perhaps in women, for the sexual emotions to be absorbed, and often entirely lost, in self-admiration." (Havelock Ellis, "Autoeroticism: A Psychological Study," *The Alienist and Neurologist: A Quarterly Journal of Scientific, Clinical, and Forensic Psychiatry and Neurology* vol. XIX [1898]: 280). Given Lee's personal familiarity with the intellectual elite in Britain and on the continent, it is quite possible that Lee encountered this psychological theory before the term found its way into print.

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- ⁴⁶ See Linda K. Hughes, "Women Poets and Contested Spaces in *The Yellow Book*," *SEL: Studies in English Literature* 44.4 (2004), 849-72.
- ⁴⁷ Peter G. Christensen, "Cultural Decline and Alienation in Vernon Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. Paula Fox (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2006), 63-89.
- ⁴⁸ Colby, *Literary Biography*, 76.
- ⁴⁹ Vernon Lee, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1895), 255, 253.
- ⁵⁰ Maxwell, *Second Sight*, 146. The passage comes from Pater, *Renaissance*, 95.
- ⁵¹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 87.
- ⁵² Pater, *Renaissance*, 87-8.
- ⁵³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 88-9.
- ⁵⁴ See Jane Hotchkiss, "(P)revising Freud: Vernon Lee's Castration Phantasy," in *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*, ed. Corola M. Kaplan and Anne B. Simpson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 21-38; Mary Patricia Kane, "The Uncanny Mother in Vernon Lee's 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,'" *Victorian Review* 31.1 (2006), 41-62; Colby, *Literary Biography*, 230.
- ⁵⁵ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.
- ⁵⁶ Zorn, *Female Intellectual*, 153.
- ⁵⁷ Zorn, *Female Intellectual*, 156.

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