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Evolutionary Aestheticism:

Scientific Optimism and Cultural Progress, 1850-1913

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

by

Lindsay Puawehiwa Wilhelm

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Evolutionary Aestheticism:
Scientific Optimism and Cultural Progress, 1850-1913

by

Lindsay Puawehiwa Wilhelm

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Joseph E. Bristow, Chair

While evolutionary science may appear to have little in common with the Aesthetic Movement—the “art for art’s sake” philosophy of culture that arose in Britain in the late 1860s—this dissertation contends that these schools of thought formed interdependently, through a sustained dialogic exchange between writers whose interests spanned both art and science. Prominent Victorian figures such as the polymath Herbert Spencer, the aesthete Oscar Wilde, and the critic Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) not only accepted the truth of Charles Darwin’s insights, but also converged in their conception of what I term “evolutionary aestheticism”: a rational and yet remarkably optimistic philosophy that looked to the enjoyment of beauty and the cultivation of taste, rather than violent Darwinian competition, for modes of peaceable evolutionary progress.

Each chapter explores the development of evolutionary aestheticism, from the decade leading up to Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) to the publication of Lee's aesthetic primer *The Beautiful* (1913). The first chapter traces the tradition to Darwin's and Spencer's mid-century evolutionary theories, which exempted aesthetic experience from brutal natural laws of scarcity and struggle. Next, the dissertation considers how the cultural critic Walter Pater and the mathematician W. K. Clifford shaped aestheticism in the 1870s—the movement's formative years—by postulating a scientifically inflected ideal of the aesthetic temperament. The third chapter juxtaposes Wilde's criticism with Grant Allen's popular science writing: in the 1890s, these two writers articulated a radically hedonic aesthetics that equated individual happiness with social progress. The fourth chapter analyzes the "life-enhancing" aesthetics of Lee and the connoisseur Bernard Berenson, both of whom discerned the true value of beauty in its capacity to revitalize the entire species as well as the individual.

A short coda evaluates the legacy of evolutionary aestheticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the scientific claims of evolutionary aestheticism have all but disappeared from modern-day discourse, its central aim of reconciling aesthetic pleasure with social good has reemerged, this study concludes, in recent debates within literary and cultural criticism.

The dissertation of Lindsay Puawehiwa Wilhelm is approved.

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2017

To JFS—an unexpected optimist, a man of science, and a true artist.

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Chapter 3 is a version of “Sex in Utopia: The Evolutionary Hedonism of Grant Allen and Oscar Wilde,” in preparation for publication in *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

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Introduction

Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change.

—Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” (1890, revised 1891)

This dissertation investigates the cultural, ideological, and political linkages between literary aestheticism and the evolutionary sciences in Britain, from the decade leading up to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) to the publication of Vernon Lee’s aesthetic précis *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913). In the British context, the Aesthetic Movement emerged in the late 1860s with the publication of Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Walter Pater’s collection of critical essays *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).¹ Despite their many philosophical and artistic differences, the adherents of aestheticism generally rallied behind the creed of “art for art’s sake”: a phrase that Swinburne and Pater adapted from the early nineteenth-century criticism of French poet and dramatist Théophile Gautier. Drawing on the work of Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, and other French writers, British aesthetes such as Pater, Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde asserted that the primary purpose of art was to convey beauty, not to communicate ideas or impart moral lessons. From its inception until its decline in the early years of the twentieth century, aestheticism was thus a lightning rod for controversy, both for its celebration of sensual pleasure and for its concomitant rejection of moralistic standards of artistic value. Around the same time that Swinburne and Pater were publicizing their contentious views on aesthetics,

¹ Dennis Denisoff points out that the first use of the term “aestheticism” appeared in George Brimley’s 1856 review of Alfred Tennyson’s poem “The Lotos-Eaters.” While Denisoff observes that Brimley’s review anticipates many of the “characteristics and concerns soon to be associated with aestheticism” (especially a fascination with bodily sensation), Denisoff adds that Brimley had a minimal impact on the subsequent development of the movement. Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

another highly public debate—this one surrounding Darwin’s theories about the evolution of species—was also raging in magazines and lecture halls. To many Victorian readers, Darwin and his scientific heirs had radically overturned traditional doctrines about the purpose of the universe and humankind’s place in the cosmos. For this reason, in the decades after Darwin published *Origin*, supporters and detractors from a variety of disciplines heatedly argued not only about the validity of Darwin’s hypotheses, but also about the wider impact of evolutionary theory on the realms of art and culture.

While the concurrence of these two controversies in the late nineteenth century might appear coincidental at first glance, Wilde’s striking analogy between aesthetics and Darwinian sexual selection—which appeared in his dialogic essay “The Critic as Artist”—shows us that Victorian critics recognized points of real congruence between evolutionary science and aestheticism.² For Wilde, aesthetics and sexual selection were parallel processes of organic growth: unlike ethics and natural selection, which Wilde contends merely “make existence possible,” both aesthetics and sexual selection encourage positive “progress” by beautifying the world and thus improving our quality of life.³ The present study, in light of Wilde’s quip, considers how and why late nineteenth-century aestheticism and evolutionism converged in such remarkably hopeful conceptions of beauty. More precisely, I offer a fuller account of both schools of thought in this period by tracing their development within an interdisciplinary tradition of evolutionary aestheticism—a genealogy of naturalists, journalists, and critics that included Darwin, Pater, Wilde, and Lee as well the polymath Herbert Spencer, the mathematician and philosopher W. K. Clifford, the popular science writer Grant Allen, and the

² Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 204-205.

³ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 204.

connoisseur and critic Bernard Berenson. Beyond their respective investments in scientific rationalism and materialist theories of beauty, these writers shared a broader commitment to the optimistic notion, implicit in Wilde's comment, that aesthetic pleasure opened up alternative processes for cultural evolution. These processes, they believed, would operate not through unchecked Darwinian competition—the confluence of natural selective pressures that Darwin famously termed the “struggle for existence”—but through the concerted, widespread cultivation of aesthetic sensibility.⁴ By calling our attention to this intellectual alliance, “Evolutionary Aestheticism” intervenes in several rich strands of modern-day scholarship concerning literary aestheticism, the history of Victorian science, and, finally, the intersection of the two. This introduction provides a brief synopsis of the relevant criticism in these fields before elaborating on my specific contribution to this body of work and outlining the structure of the four chapters that follow.

Aestheticism in Britain sprang from a constellation of earlier artistic movements, including Pre-Raphaelitism—the mid century school of visual art that Dante Gabriel Rossetti also applied to his poetry—and William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, which championed old-fashioned workmanship, simplicity of design, and tasteful home decoration. As previously mentioned, Swinburne's and Pater's respective vindications of what Pater called “the love of art for its own sake” launched the Aesthetic Movement into the public eye in the late 1860s.⁵ Notably, aestheticism and adjacent artistic schools were not concerned merely with fine art and literature, but also with the renovation of the home, the material beautification of public spaces, and the cultivation of taste and style: Clarence Cook's widely read interior decoration manual

⁴ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. William Bynum (London: Penguin, 2009), 65.

⁵ Walter Pater, conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 190.

The House Beautiful (1877), for instance, stoked trans-Atlantic interest in the acquisition and arrangement of “tasteful, pretty, beautiful things.”⁶ Since these movements entailed, and at times explicitly called for, drastic changes in the culture at large, the rise of these movements in the 1860s and 1870s attracted an immense volume of often moralistic and satirical commentary. The most impassioned and contested of these early critiques was the poet Robert Buchanan’s review “The Fleshly School of Poetry” (1871), which responds to a revised edition of Rossetti’s collected poems. Under a pseudonym, Buchanan attacks Rossetti, along with his fellow poets Swinburne and Morris, for what Buchanan sees as their “shameless” and “nasty” fixation on “mere animal sensations.”⁷ By the early 1880s, as Wilde became the public face of the Aesthetic Movement, critics increasingly associated aestheticism in particular with extreme views about beauty.⁸ The illustrator George Du Maurier, in his many cartoons for the satirical magazine *Punch*, famously lampooned Wilde and other aesthetes for their purportedly excessive devotion to the decorative object: in Du Maurier’s “An Aesthetic Midday Meal” (1880), for instance, a Wildean dandy visits a restaurant only to stare lovingly at a lily without eating (see figure 1). An entire industry of satires and farces—including W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s wildly successful opera *Patience* and F. C. Burnand’s play *The Colonel*, both first produced in 1881—similarly spoofed the quintessential aesthete’s perceived vanity and frivolity.⁹

⁶ Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1878), 320.

⁷ Thomas Maitland [Robert Buchanan], “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” *Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 338.

⁸ Denisoff discusses at length Wilde’s popular reputation and the lucrative cultural industry that sprang up around it. Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody*, 82-83, 165.

⁹ Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody*, 60.



AN ÆSTHETIC MIDDAY MEAL.

At the Luncheon hour, Jellaby Postlethwaite enters a Pastrycook's and calls for a glass of Water, into which he puts a freshly-cut Lily, and loses himself in contemplation thereof.

Waiter. "SHALL I BRING YOU ANYTHING ELSE, SIR?"

Jellaby Postlethwaite. "THANKS, NO! I HAVE ALL I REQUIRE, AND SHALL SOON HAVE DONE!"

Fig. 1. George Du Maurier, "An Aesthetic Midday Meal," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 17

July 1880

In the 1880s, these comic riffs on the Aesthetic Movement were accompanied by much earnest, but generally measured, discussion in the press. In his *Pall Mall Gazette* editorial “The Aesthete” (1882), for example, the positivist historian Frederic Harrison grants the need for a return to beauty after the “slough of ugliness which oppressed the first fifty years of the present century.”¹⁰ But Harrison denies that “this new aesthetic zeal for Art” is up to the task: it “is a militant, critical, most disputatious affair,” he concludes, a “thing of fashion” rather than a genuine philosophy.¹¹ Against Harrison, Du Maurier, and other critics, writers such as the American radical Moncure Conway and the essayist Walter Hamilton defended aestheticism by stressing its positive impact on the public taste. Conway’s *Travels in South Kensington* (1882) praises Morris, the painter James McNeill Whistler, and other aesthetic luminaries for helping popularize the desire for “beautiful interiors” among the “great middle classes.”¹² In the short treatise *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882)—one of the earliest attempts to recount the cultural history of the movement—Hamilton impresses on his readers all the good that aestheticism has “wrought...in the improved taste shown in poetry and painting, in dress, furniture, and house decoration.”¹³

However, the tenor of these discussions changed in the 1890s, when aestheticism came to be conflated with popular notions of “decadence”—a capacious term that, as Alex Murray and Jason David Hall explain in their book *Decadent Poetics* (2013), “designat[es] variously a

¹⁰ Frederic Harrison, “The Aesthete,” in *The Choice of Books: And Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 291.

¹¹ Harrison, “The Aesthete,” 292.

¹² Moncure Conway, *Travels in South Kensington: With Notes on Decorative Art and Architecture in England* (London: Trübner, 1882), 171.

¹³ Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1882), 127.

literary form, a movement, and a period in literary history.”¹⁴ As a literary movement, decadence was closely related to both British aestheticism and French Symbolism; its members included Wilde as well as younger poets such as Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and W. B. Yeats, many of whom would become leading figures in early twentieth-century modernism. While modern-day scholars such as Linda Dowling, Murray, and Hall have recuperated some of the stylistic and ideological nuances of the movement, decadence carried a strongly pejorative connotation in its own day and for decades after. The “tendency then and now,” Dowling wrote in 1986, was to see decadence as a “cultural episode with sensational or lurid overtones.”¹⁵ To its critics in the 1890s, the decadents—and, by association, the aesthetes—seemed to embrace, even encourage, the dissolution of the political, linguistic, and moral fabric of British society. Concerns about aestheticism’s sexual and moral character, which had fueled the gentler parodies of the 1880s, were further inflamed by post-Darwinian anxieties about the potential devolution of the species. Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1895) was one of the most influential, and certainly the most notorious, articulations of degeneration panic in the period: in his meticulous critique of modern culture, Nordau declares Rossetti’s and Wilde’s work complicit in an epidemic of apocalyptic feeling that he describes, with characteristic drama, as “a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria.”¹⁶ The movement that Harrison had once dismissed as a misguided but harmless fad had become, for fin-de-siècle commentators such as

¹⁴ Alex Murray and Jason David Hall, introduction to *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. Hall and Murray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

¹⁵ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), ix.

¹⁶ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 537.

Nordau, a social cancer. In the public's mind, Wilde's salacious 1895 trial for homosexuality only cemented a reductive association between aestheticism, perversity, and decay.¹⁷

Given this stigma, a truly scholarly (rather than polemical) interest in the Aesthetic Movement began only after its zenith in the 1890s. Much of this valuable early scholarship attempted to redeem aesthetic and decadent literature by decoupling it from its damaging reputation for degeneracy and immorality. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, revised 1919), for instance, Symons analyzes the work of several French poets, including Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud, whose verse was instrumental in the formation of British aestheticism and decadence. In a departure from previous critiques of fin-de-siècle literature—including his earlier version of the review, “The Decadent Movement of Literature” (1893)—Symons in *The Symbolist Movement* takes care to define “decadence” as a stylistic feature, a “perversity of form” rather than a “perversity of manner.”¹⁸ Symons's assessment thus went some way toward promoting a fairer view of aestheticism as a serious literary movement—and not, as one Victorian observer put it, a fleeting outbreak of “cultured anarchism.”¹⁹ More ambitiously, the journalist and critic Holbrook Jackson, in his book *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), attempts to give a comprehensive picture of the “Zeitgeist of the decade” in which aestheticism thrived.²⁰ Crucially for my discussion of aestheticism's optimistic strain, Jackson contradicts major misconceptions about fin-de-siècle Britain that he traces to the Aesthetic Movement's reactionary critics. Far from being an era of decline and decay, he recalls, “[the

¹⁷ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122-23.

¹⁸ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 6.

¹⁹ Hugh E. M. Stutfield, “Tommyrotics,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 157 (1895): 839.

²⁰ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 46.

eighteen nineties] was a time when people went about frankly and cheerfully endeavoring to solve the question of ‘How to Live’”; “those who lived through the Nineties,” he continues, “will remember that this search for a new mode of life was anything but melancholy or diseased.”²¹ It was exactly this yearning for “a new mode of life”—one that was simultaneously satisfying to the spirit and compatible with new scientific conceptions of the universe—that animated the writings of Pater, Wilde, and the other aesthetes that I examine here.

In the decades after Jackson’s retrospective, several noteworthy works on aestheticism appeared in French, including Albert J. Farmer’s *Le mouvement esthétique et “Décadent” en Angleterre, 1873-1900* (1931) and Louise M. Rosenblatt’s *L’idée de l’art pour l’art dans la littérature Anglaise pendant la période Victorienne* (1931). Curiously, few comparably comprehensive accounts were available in English until Robert V. Johnson’s introductory guide *Aestheticism* appeared in the *Critical Idiom* series in 1969. Among English-speaking academics, critical interest in aestheticism expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, due in part to the publication of several focused studies of the movement: David J. DeLaura’s learned *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (1969), Gerald Monsman’s authoritative *Walter Pater* (1977), Dowling’s *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1986), and Richard Ellmann’s flawed, but moving, *Oscar Wilde* (1987) are four prominent examples.²² The 1990s subsequently witnessed an explosion of scholarship on the Aesthetic Movement and, more broadly, aesthetic theory in late Victorian Britain. The most formative studies from that decade

²¹ Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, 33.

²² As I explain further in the third chapter, Ellmann’s biography is exhaustive, but it contains numerous factual errors. Most famously, Ellmann misidentifies an image of Hungarian actress Alice Guszalewicz in Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome* as Wilde in drag. Horst Schroeder has since compiled a comprehensive list of these inaccuracies. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 430; Joseph Bristow, “Picturing His Exact Decadence: The British Reception of Oscar Wilde,” in *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, ed. Stefano Evangelista (London: Continuum, 2010), 49.

include Leon Chai's *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (1990), Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990), Richard Dellamora's *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (1990), and Kathy Alexis Psomiades's *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (1997). These diverse works helped set the tone for future scholarship by identifying certain key issues within aestheticism. Chai and Freedman, for instance, conceive of aestheticism as a formal response to the sense of alienation inherent in economic and cultural modernity. According to their respective readings, the aesthete's elevation of beautiful artifice over naturalistic realism is part of a strenuous attempt to cultivate what Chai calls a "heightened consciousness," a mode of perception that serves to endow everyday existence "with something of a sacred aura."²³ (To varying degrees, both Chai and Freedman also agree that the aesthetic "quest" for transcendence through literary form continuously resulted in failure.²⁴) In this vein, some of the most compelling recent scholarship on aestheticism—including Joseph Bristow's edited collection *The Fin-de-siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (2005) and Angela Leighton's *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (2007)—foregrounds the movement's distinctive theorizations of literary and artistic form.

Dellamora's and Psomiades's respective books initiated an equally fruitful line of scholarly inquiry regarding the ways in which gender difference and sexual dissidence informed aesthetic philosophy. As Dellamora persuasively argues in *Masculine Desire*, aestheticism often served as a vehicle for articulating passionate bonds between men: in the work of Pater, Alfred

²³ Leon Chai, *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 95, 1.

²⁴ Chai, *Aestheticism*, xi; Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3.

Tennyson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and other male writers, an erotic admiration for masculine beauty (an illicit admiration, at the time) motivated forms of cultural critique that would come to be seen as characteristically aesthetic.²⁵ In *Beauty's Body*, by comparison, Psomiades extends and challenges Dellamora's narrative by revealing the crucial function that "signs of femininity" performed in aesthetic discussions of ideal beauty and queer desire.²⁶ Many significant studies have since expanded on Dellamora's and Psomiades's pioneering research, including Talia Schaffer and Psomiades's anthology *Women and British Aestheticism* (1999), Dennis Denisoff's *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940* (2001), Ana Parejo Vadillo's *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (2005), and Stefano Evangelista's *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (2009). Fortunately, this recent surge of critical work surrounding both queerness and the status of women in the Aesthetic Movement has led to the rediscovery of fin-de-siècle women writers such as Lee, the poet and critic Mathilde Blind, the novelist George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright), and the poetic duo Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (who published under the joint pseudonym Michael Field). Although my study does not deal primarily with questions of gender and sexuality, I look closely at the writings of Michael Field, Blind, and especially Lee—figures whose reintegration into the canon can be credited to scholarly work in this area.

The second major body of scholarship with which "Evolutionary Aestheticism" engages concerns the interaction of science and literature, both generally and in the Victorian period. In a broad sense, my study is guided by Thomas Kuhn's important insights into scientific innovation: as he argues in his monumental work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), paradigm

²⁵ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 46.

²⁶ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8.

shifts in science trigger “transformations of vision” that, in turn, yield new worldviews.²⁷ By analyzing progressive conceptions of evolution within scientific and aesthetic writing, this dissertation tracks one of these new worldviews—a happier “gestalt,” to quote Kuhn, which opposed the grim evolutionism of writers such as Nordau and Thomas Hardy—as it gained cultural authority in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁸ Like all scholarship on science and literature from the past thirty years, my study is also indebted to Gillian Beer’s and George Levine’s respective investigations into what Levine calls the “interplay between scientific and nonscientific discourses.”²⁹ While neither Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) nor Levine’s *One Culture* (1989) discusses the Aesthetic Movement, both of these monographs make the case for expansive and generous readings of the overlap between Victorian literature and science: as Levine explains, “science and literature reflect each other because they draw mutually on one culture, from the same sources, and they work out in different languages the same project.”³⁰ In addition, my emphasis on a particularly affirmative tradition of evolutionary science finds precedent in Levine’s more recent book *Darwin Loves You* (2006), an illuminating history of post-Darwinian efforts to “re-enchant” the world. Levine shows us the diverse ways in which secular naturalists, from Darwin to Clifford to Richard Dawkins, discern “in nonhuman nature the energy, diversity, beauty, intelligence, and sensibility that might provide a world-friendly alternative to otherworldly values.”³¹ In the period immediately after Darwin’s publication of

²⁷ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 112.

²⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 112.

²⁹ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

³⁰ Levine, introduction to *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, ed. Levine (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 7.

³¹ Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), xv.

Origin, as we will see, many of these scientific optimists looked to the program of aestheticism—specifically, its insistence on a refined, imaginative perception of the world—for a possible route toward this re-enchantment.

My dissertation also builds on a growing branch of scholarship, within the wider field of science and literature, which focuses on the Victorian periodical press and its role in the proliferation of scientific ideas. In the introduction to their collection *Science Serialized* (2004), for instance, Sally Shuttleworth and Geoffrey Cantor expound on the ways in which the eruption of new print media in the nineteenth century transformed both the composition and the reception of scientific writing. “Not only did many general periodicals carry a significant portion of articles specifically on science,” Shuttleworth and Cantor observe, “but science often informed and infiltrated articles ostensibly devoted to other topics.”³² Similarly, in their anthology *Science in the Marketplace* (2007), Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman chronicle the nineteenth-century emergence of cross-disciplinary cultural “sites” (lecture halls, generalist and specialist periodicals, museums, etc.) within which scientific knowledge circulated.³³ As Lightman further points out in *Victorian Popularizers of Science* (2007), science in the period had yet to be professionalized and institutionalized: writers from outside the scientific “elite,” including journalists and non-specialists such as Allen and (I would add) Lee, thus occupied surprisingly powerful positions in what Lightman calls “the topography of Victorian science.”³⁴ The present study, keeping this mass of historical scholarship in mind, presumes some element of

³² Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth, introduction to *Science Serialized: Representations of the Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, ed. Cantor and Shuttleworth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 2.

³³ Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, introduction to *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences*, ed. Fyfe and Lightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4-13.

³⁴ Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 9.

interpenetration between aesthetic and scientific discourses. (The historical record also bears this out: as I will reiterate later, Clifford and Pater often published in the same magazines, and Allen and Wilde struck up a correspondence after reading each other's articles in the same issue of the *Fortnightly Review*.) By giving both scientific and aesthetic thinkers a venue for open intellectual exchange, liberal periodicals such as the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and *Macmillan's Magazine* fostered the material conditions within which evolutionary aestheticism could develop.

Above all, "Evolutionary Aestheticism" extends a small, but robust, body of work—which arose in the 1990s and rapidly expanded in the mid 2000s—that brings the history of science to bear on our knowledge of aestheticism. In the chapters that follow, I will have occasion to refer to many scholarly works in this subfield, but here I wish to underscore several studies that have proved especially useful for my own research. The first of these important monographs is Ian Small's edifying *Conditions for Criticism* (1991), which connects the subjective character of Pater's aesthetic criticism to mid-century shifts in the science of psychology. As Small argues, and as we will see again in later chapters, psychological formulations of the sense of beauty shaped the ontological foundations of aestheticism by convincing Pater and his heirs that the "most significant feature of any aesthetic response," in Small's words, "is the *relationship* which exists between the spectator or the reader and the artefact or art-object."³⁵ Along similar lines, Regenia Gagnier, in *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000) and several of her other works, pinpoints two competing paradigms of aesthetic appreciation in the late nineteenth century. The older of these two paradigms hinged on the figure of the "productive body," which Gagnier attributes to the moralistic, proto-Marxist

³⁵ Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 9.

aesthetics of Morris and the critic John Ruskin; the other centered on the “pleasured body,” which she links to the aestheticism of Pater, Allen, and Wilde.³⁶ While Gagnier’s chief concern is the economic model that each of these paradigms furthered, she also astutely argues that the concept of the pleasured body had roots in physiological and biological approaches to aesthetics. Helpfully for this dissertation, both Gagnier and Small uncover the fundamental ideological shifts that allowed the Aesthetic Movement to flourish in its specific historical moment.

Over the past ten years, several scholars have expanded on Gagnier’s and Small’s work, both by investigating how scientific ideas might have passed into the purview of Pater and his followers, and by considering whether ideas ever traveled the other way—that is, whether scientific writers ever responded, consciously or unconsciously, to contemporary aesthetic writers. In *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (2006), for instance, Jonathan Smith documents Darwin’s own intervention in wider debates about the nature of aesthetic sensibility, particularly his career-long disagreement with Ruskin. As Smith observes, “part of the threat posed by scientific naturalism for figures like Ruskin was that it claimed the imaginative, aesthetic realm as its own”: in doing so, scientists such as Darwin necessarily appropriated and questioned concepts that originated in literary aesthetic circles (including work by writers, such as Ruskin, who were hostile to evolutionary theory).³⁷ Gowan Dawson, in his well-researched monograph *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (2007), makes an even more intriguing argument for the bidirectional flow of ideas between scientific naturalists and aesthetic theorists. Dawson makes extensive use of archival material in order to reconstruct the vexed reception of Darwin’s theories in the Victorian press: to many readers, Dawson discovers, the

³⁶ Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 128, 124.

³⁷ Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

materialist aspects of evolutionary thought recalled the “infamously transgressive” verse of Swinburne and other aesthetic poets.³⁸ In order to safeguard the reputation of their nascent secular naturalism, Dawson further argues, scientific figures such as Darwin, T. H. Huxley, and John Tyndall strategically distanced themselves from Swinburne and his heterogeneous coterie of aesthetes, revolutionaries, atheists, and freethinkers.

More recently, in his memorably titled essay “Why is the peacock’s tail so beautiful?” (2013), Laurence Shafe identifies the convergence of aesthetic and evolutionary discourses in popular representations of the peacock feather. The peacock, Shafe argues, functioned as a symbolic link between the Darwinian materialist and the aesthetic sensualist, in part because the peacock’s functionless beauty furnished evidence for sexual selection at the same time its iconic feather became the favored motif of “decadent” artists such as Aubrey Beardsley.³⁹ Shafe also points us to an especially revealing illustration of this popular connection between aestheticism and evolutionary theory. In one of Edward Linley Sambourne’s cartoons from *Punch*, entitled “Mr. Punch’s Designs after Nature” (1871), a fashionable young woman sports a peacock parasol and matching hat; her ostentatious dress, ostensibly tailored to attract mates, is made more ridiculous by its juxtaposition with a satirical notice of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, which had appeared earlier that year (see figure 2). Sambourne’s cartoon thus tellingly collocates its critiques of both aesthetic affectation and scientific naturalism, which appear equally concerned with sexuality and superficial display. As Shafe, Dawson, and Smith demonstrate, and as this dissertation further explains, debates over aestheticism and evolutionism were closely intertwined in the nineteenth-century public sphere.

³⁸ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

³⁹ Laurence Shafe, “Why is the peacock’s tail so beautiful?” in *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History*, ed. Barbara Larson and Sabine Flach (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 43-47.

(A PROSPECTIVE RETROSPECT.)

THE Boat-race is a certain remedy for lassitude, low spirits, loss of appetite, aversion to business, and disinclination to flirting.

The Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race has been witnessed by 15,674,989 delighted spectators since its first institution by the Heads of Houses in the two Universities, for the encouragement of sound and useful rowing; 1,746,911 pairs of gloves, of all sorts, sizes, colours, and descriptions, have been lost and won at the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race; 391,208 engagements date from its successive happy anniversaries; and the Champagne consumed from its foundation after the Battle of Waterloo to the present era, would fill the Suez Canal twice over, with about a hundred and fifty dozen to spare for medicinal purposes.

The Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race undoubtedly encourages Trade, Manufactures, and Commerce by the impetus it gives to the production of blue silk (plain, moiré, and watered), blue satin, blue sarcenet, blue lutestring, blue poplin, blue rep, blue net, blue gauze, and everything else that is blue—except blue devils, for which the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race is a perfect cure.

The Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race is alluded to by WATERLAND, REMIGIUS, UNDIS, and other writers of classical and aquatic antiquity.

The only University "Test" that will never be repealed is the question, "Are you Oxford or Cambridge?" at the time of the Boat-race.

There was a general holiday, followed by illuminations and fireworks at night, on the occasion of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race. All the public offices, Banks, Baths and Washhouses, and other places of business were closed, and everybody went down to the banks of the Thames, from the peer in his robes, to the artisan in his blouse.

troop of the Blues.

"Where to spend a happy day?" In an elegant carriage, in elegant attire, with elegant ladies, and an elegant luncheon, surveying the glories of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race.

When MR. TOOLE returned from the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race, he acknowledged that now at last he was "happy."

The reproach that has hitherto attached to the first of April will be henceforth abolished for ever, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat-race making that day memorable and honoured for all time.

MOST NATURAL SELECTION.

IF MR. DARWIN'S theory of the Descent of Man were true, we should, in consistency with it, have to accept quite new views of marriage. At present, marriages with near relations are generally considered objectionable, and that in proportion to proximity of kin. Accordingly, therefore, the more remote the relationship between a married pair, the more normal the marriage. Now, if we are descended from Anthropoid Apes, the Orang-Outang, the Chimpanzee, and the Gorilla are certainly our poor relations, and they are as distant as they are poor, far more distant than any tribe of natives capable of articulate speech. If, then, we believed the genealogy which MR. DARWIN claims for us, we should conclude that there was no cause or just impediment whatever why we should not marry cousins so very many more degrees removed than any other as those arboreal and quadrumanous ones above-named. We might even go farther, and not, unless Darwinism is nonsense, fare worse.

Any human being, desirous of a perfect mate, would clearly do best of all to marry, if possible, the Larva of a Marine Ascidian.



MR. PUNCH'S DESIGNS AFTER NATURE.

GRAND BACK-HAIR SENSATION FOR THE COMING SEASON.

Fig. 2. Edward Linley Sambourne, "Mr. Punch's Designs After Nature," *Punch*, 1 April 1871

Perhaps most salient for my account of evolutionary aestheticism is Benjamin Morgan's ongoing work, which has recently culminated in his new book *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (2017).⁴⁰ Building on previous research, Morgan "situates aesthetic thought at the intersection of multiple discourses and practices, including art history, the novel, interior design, physiology, and evolutionary biology."⁴¹ In his survey of British aesthetics, which stretches from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, he pays particular attention to the ways in which the burgeoning science of mind provided a framework for the theorization of beauty in a multiplicity of contexts, from the art gallery to the laboratory. Morgan's resulting argument is twofold. He first asserts that many scientific and literary writers viewed aesthetics from a shared materialist perspective, which broke down aesthetic experience into so many "dynamic interactions among nerves, muscles, stone, and ink."⁴² By tracing aesthetic judgment to "nervous reflex" and "mechanistic response," Morgan further argues, this materialist approach "tended to de-emphasize the uniqueness of human aesthetic experience and open up nonhuman frames of reference": he concludes that Victorian aesthetics had the effect of exteriorizing "mind, consciousness, and the self into networks of matter, sensation, and objects."⁴³ To some extent, some of the arguments that Morgan forwards in *The Outward Mind* thus overlap with my own. Like Morgan, I maintain that many evolutionary aesthetic thinkers adopted the same form of neo-Hellenic materialism—a materialism that, as Morgan points out, was "based on an ontology of physical matter as the basis

⁴⁰ Although almost all of the research for this dissertation was conducted before the release of *The Outward Mind*, I have consulted Morgan's dissertation—an early draft of the book—as well as his article "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading" (2012).

⁴¹ Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

⁴² Morgan, *The Outward Mind*, 6.

⁴³ Morgan, *The Outward Mind*, 6.

of all phenomena.”⁴⁴ Similarly, *The Outward Mind* addresses several of the same writers that are central to my project, including Spencer, Pater, Allen, and Lee.

“Evolutionary Aestheticism,” however, both departs from Morgan’s research in pivotal ways and makes several timely contributions to the trajectory of scholarship that I summarize here. First, I question Morgan’s stress on what he calls the “antihumanist energies” of Victorian aesthetics, which, he argues, “denatured rather than recuperated the autonomy and distinctiveness of human beings.”⁴⁵ While I agree that evolutionary aesthetics undercut older, theological aesthetic theories that reserved the sense of beauty for humankind, I would posit that the formulation of aestheticism was in some ways an effort to recover humanism within the parameters of scientific reason. Secondly, I confront some pressing questions about the affinity between evolutionary science and aestheticism that scholars such as Morgan, Dawson, and Gagnier have yet to investigate fully. Why did so many Victorian aesthetes—including the familiar litany of Pater, Wilde, and Lee but also John Addington Symonds, Bernard Berenson, and Michael Field—readily espouse methods of criticism that they deemed not just broadly scientific, but also specifically evolutionary? To what extent did these aesthetic writers participate in, and not just borrow from, contemporary biological and psychological discourses? To what end did scientific writers—and here I am thinking of Clifford, Allen, and even Huxley—utilize the language of aesthetic poetry and prose? Finally, why did evolutionists such as Clifford, Allen, and Spencer endorse certain elements of aesthetic philosophy, Dawson’s arguments notwithstanding? By treating evolutionary aestheticism as a unified intellectual tradition—one made up of a diverse assortment of polymathic art critics, connoisseurs,

⁴⁴ Morgan, *The Outward Mind*, 12.

⁴⁵ Morgan, *The Outward Mind*, 22.

biologists, and philosophers—I hope to deepen our understanding of both evolutionary science and aestheticism in this period.

Thirdly, and most important, my project foregrounds an extraordinary, but as yet little-studied, intersection of evolutionism and aestheticism: namely, their shared inclination toward optimistic and even utopian visions of future progress. While this assertion at first seems to contradict aestheticism's professed rejection of reformist ambition, a few scholars have recognized the affirmative tone that British aesthetes often adopt in their writing. As Diana Maltz demonstrates in *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes* (2005), for instance, Victorian aesthetes often joined forces with social reformers in order to pursue utopian schemes for the dissemination of art and culture among the poor.⁴⁶ Several scholars of Wilde, including John Wilson Foster and Elisha Cohn, have likewise noted his association of science with progress. As we will see, Wilde's zeal for science—which his aphoristic tribute to aesthetics and sexual selection so clearly reflects—was widespread among his aesthetic colleagues. On the whole, then, British aestheticism was a sanguine, forward-looking ideology. Moreover, this progressive strain within aestheticism gained strength from a parallel strain in evolutionary thought that is often lost amid the volume of dystopian fiction and degeneration literature that the post-Darwinian era inspired. Even as evolutionists such as Nordau, E. Ray Lankester, and Cesare Lombroso combed psychiatric hospitals and literary periodicals for evidence of sociocultural and biological devolution, an opposing camp of scientific writers hailed the modern period as one of unprecedented liberalization and growth.⁴⁷ Many of these progressive evolutionists, who were both aware of and repulsed by the violence of Darwinian natural

⁴⁶ Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

⁴⁷ See Lankester's *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) and Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876, translated 1900) for two important examples of degeneration discourse in addition to Nordau's *Degeneration*.

selection, instead looked to the advancement of secular, humane culture for an evolutionary path forward. Allen, for instance, urged his readers to resist the “silly parrot cry” of alarmist reactionaries and to “be a conscious partaker in one of the great ages of humanity”: late nineteenth-century Britain, Allen avowed, was experiencing a period of cultural “expansion” to rival classical Rome and Renaissance Italy.⁴⁸ We can discern Allen’s aspirational sentiments, if not always his florid rhetoric, in countless other examples of post-Darwinian science writing, including that of Clifford, Spencer, and, on occasion, Darwin himself.

This redemptive view of evolutionary process—which we might consider a positivist version of the elevated state of consciousness toward which aestheticism as a whole strived—unites the central figures of my study. All of these aesthetic and scientific writers, I argue, both accepted the validity of modern science and extrapolated evolutionary theories of beauty into a program for long-term generational development, one driven by the promulgation of aesthetic taste rather than competition between individuals. To this end, my dissertation organizes these writers into four principal pairings: Darwin and Spencer, Pater and Clifford, Wilde and Allen, and, finally, Lee and Berenson. (While I discuss other authors in the course of the dissertation—including several, such as Blind, who also belong to this tradition—these eight core figures were the primary theorists and proponents of evolutionary aestheticism.) This arrangement is intended to achieve two main goals. First, these pairings model the collaborative, dialogic process by which both evolutionary and aesthetic ideas developed in this period. The nineteenth century, as Lightman and others have documented, largely predated the professionalization of science and its segregation from the humanities: meaningful participation in scientific conversations was thus not limited to those who identified as naturalists, and scientific writers regularly weighed in on

⁴⁸ Grant Allen, “The Romance of the Clash of the Races,” in *Post-Prandial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), 76-78.

questions of art and culture. By organizing this study into multi-author chapters, I emphasize evolutionary aestheticism's basis in an interdisciplinary network of intellectuals, all of whom either knew each other socially or encountered each other's views in the periodical press. Furthermore, the chronological ordering of the material allows us to follow several turns in evolutionary aesthetic philosophy as it took shape in the late nineteenth century—from its origins in mid century evolutionary theory, to its development into a peculiar form of secular piety in the 1870s, to its more political iterations in the 1880s and 1890s. In brief, each section explicates a particular stage in the formation of evolutionary aesthetic thought, while a coda examines its vestiges in twentieth-century criticism.

The first chapter traces the notion of “art for art's sake” to the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer, who first engaged with questions of aesthetics in the early 1850s. In their attempts to account for the evolution of the sense of beauty—an adaptation with no obvious survival value—both writers exempted a wide swath of aesthetic activities from the natural laws of scarcity and struggle that governed other areas of biological life. Their evolutionary explanations for beauty thus laid the scientific groundwork for later conceptions of aesthetic experience as escapist, salutary, and therefore beneficial for the species. The chapter concludes with an analysis of selected works by Swinburne, Thomas Hardy, and George Meredith, whose respective corpuses help illustrate the diffuse impact that these ideas had on Victorian literary conceptions of the beautiful. In the second chapter, I place Pater in conversation with Clifford and Blind in order to elucidate the impact of evolutionary thought on the founding of the Aesthetic Movement. Around the same time that Pater made the case for “art for art's sake,” Clifford laid out a sweeping secular humanism that strenuously reaffirmed an anthropocentric and pseudo-religious view of the cosmos. Clifford's optimistic reinterpretation of evolutionary

science both reinforced and drew on Pater's contemporary conception of the aesthetic temperament: a receptive personality capable of transforming, in Pater's words, the "ghastly spectacle of the endless material universe" into the "delightful consciousness of an ever-widening kinship and sympathy."⁴⁹ Both Clifford and Pater—and subsequently Blind, who adapted and synthesized their ideas in her own work—hoped to compensate for the dispiriting realities of the material world by inculcating their readers into this attitude of reverent admiration.

Next, I trace these linkages between evolutionary science and aestheticism through the work of Allen and Wilde, who shared a penchant for progressive politics as well as a firm belief in the truth of both Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary theories. More important, Allen and Wilde were similarly repulsed by the cultural implications of social Darwinism, and they thus looked to sexual selection—and, by extension, aesthetics—for a life-affirming alternative to the pressures of Darwinian competition. Over the course of the 1880s and 1890s, both Allen and Wilde grappled with these complex political, philosophical, and scientific concepts in their fiction and critical prose; they eventually arrived at a markedly individualistic and utopian aesthetics that saw self-culture, through the emancipated pursuit of pleasure, as the key to social progress. My fourth and final chapter argues that this evolutionary theory of self-cultivation culminated in the "life-enhancing" aesthetics of Lee and her younger colleague Berenson.⁵⁰ Steeped in Pater's aesthetic philosophy and Spencer's progressive evolutionism, both Lee and Berenson attempted to balance their spiritual passion for Renaissance art with their equally strong commitments to scientific rationalism and (especially in Lee's case) social amelioration.

⁴⁹ Pater, "Giordano Bruno," *Fortnightly Review* (1889): 240-41.

⁵⁰ Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance: With an Index to their Works* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896), 64, 70.

In order to reconcile these impulses, Lee and Berenson embarked on intersecting investigations into the physiological, psychological, and evolutionary *raisons d'être* of the sense of beauty. The most significant result of their turn-of-the-century studies was Lee's influential theory of "psychological aesthetics," which posited that beautiful art improved the species by reinvigorating the minds and bodies of individual observers.⁵¹

Since Lee and Berenson had a peripheral presence in the avant-garde Bloomsbury group, a short coda to the dissertation considers the legacy of their aesthetics in the work of painter and critic Roger Fry, novelist Virginia Woolf, literary theorist I. A. Richards, and several other twentieth-century writers. Although these modernist figures inherited their predecessors' ideas about the counter-utilitarian ethics of beauty, I argue that Woolf, Fry, and their contemporaries rejected the developmental *telos* that defined nineteenth-century evolutionary aestheticism. Nevertheless, some of the more humanistic claims of Lee's psychological aesthetics worked their way into the influential school of New Criticism: a literary critical theory, emerging in part from Richards's work, that privileged form over content and touted the social benefits of good taste. In conclusion, I suggest that the utopian elements of evolutionary aestheticism continue to resurface in present-day debates about aesthetic appreciation and its capacity to facilitate (or hinder) the establishment of a more just and equitable society. The coda thus gestures toward several promising avenues for future expansion of the project: first, the complex intellectual continuity between Victorian and modernist aesthetics, and secondly—and perhaps more intriguingly—the lessons of evolutionary aestheticism for our understanding of aesthetics and politics today.

⁵¹ Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 153-55.

Chapter 1 Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and the Origins of Evolutionary Aesthetics

For a work that relies so heavily on the relentless cataloging of violent encounters—between predator and prey, siblings in the nest, even parents and offspring—Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is suffused with the language of beauty and wonder. His meditation on the “slow, intermittent action of natural selection” is an illustrative example:

Slow though the process of selection may be, if feeble man can do much by his powers of artificial selection, I can see no limit to the amount of change, to the beauty and infinite complexity of the coadaptations between all organic beings, one with another and with their physical conditions of life, which may be effected in the long course of time by nature’s power of selection.¹

Here, Darwin offers us a brief respite from *Origin*’s relentless sense of disenchantment with a natural world that reveals itself, again and again, to be brutal and uncaring.² Darwin dedicates most of *Origin* to proving his theory of natural selection: variations arise randomly in organisms, he argues, and these variations persist only if they confer an advantage in the violent competition for resources that he calls the “struggle for existence.”³ Taken separately, the “coadaptations” that natural selection thus produces are often spectacularly horrifying. Parasitic ants, for instance, enslave their fellows, while queen bees obey a “savage instinctive hatred” that drives them to murder their daughters.⁴ Darwin’s turn to the aesthetic, in this context, is both surprising

¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. William Bynum (London: Penguin, 2009), 104. Unless otherwise noted, citations refer to the Penguin edition.

² This disenchantment is clearest in Darwin’s uncompromising Malthusianism: “We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life.” Darwin, *Origin*, 65.

³ Darwin uses the phrase “struggle for existence” to encapsulate, in a “large and metaphorical sense,” the natural conditions of scarcity that force organisms to compete with one another, either directly or indirectly, for survival. In modern parlance, the struggle for existence is a zero-sum game: an organism’s continued survival necessarily uses up resources that another organism needs to live. Darwin, *Origin*, 65.

⁴ Darwin, *Origin*, 184.

and counterintuitive. The logic of natural selection dictates that the relative success of an adaptation depends on its survival value, not on its aesthetic appeal to a beholder—and yet he counts beauty, alongside “change” and “complexity,” among the chief indices of evolutionary progress. His rhetoric becomes accordingly creative rather than enumerative: the temporal ambiguity of Darwin’s syntax (to what period does “long course of time” refer? Are these coadaptations already extant or yet to be seen?), his use of the conditional, and his aesthetic register make this vision fanciful and speculative, even prophetic. In Darwin’s panoptic and aestheticizing vision, the grotesqueries of natural selection coalesce into a “beautiful and harmonious” system that promises upward development without end.⁵

I begin with this passage from *Origin* partly to point out the easily overlooked lushness of Darwin's prose, which speaks to his theoretical interests in abundance, excess, and ornament—qualities that, ironically, appear to defy the practical etiology he proposes in his theory of natural selection. Moments like this one, in which scientific exactitude is lost in paroxysms of unnecessary admiration, offer us intriguing insights into Darwin’s subtle resistance against a purely instrumentalist view of nature. More important, the passage also underscores the ways in which Darwin's broaching of the aesthetic drives the latent recuperative momentum of much of his writing. For while Darwin nominally seeks to silence his critics on logical grounds, his assertion of the “beauty and infinite complexity” of the natural world is part of a broader claim—one that would reappear more forcefully in *The Descent of Man* (1871)—about the evolutionary potency of the aesthetic. Specifically, he hints at two related theories about beauty that, as I will argue in this chapter, shaped both scientific and literary discussions of the aesthetic from the 1850s onward: first, that the experience of beauty is essentially non-functional and thus set apart

⁵ Darwin, *Origin*, 157.

from the conditions of struggle that determine other areas of biological life; and secondly, that the cultivation of aesthetic taste both signals and furthers humankind's evolutionary progression beyond the bitter, day-to-day violence of natural selection.

This chapter begins by addressing the subversive implications of the beautiful in *Origin*, which led Darwin to focus on evolutionary mechanisms founded on organismic choice rather than environmental circumstance. In later works such as *Descent* and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin configured the aesthetic into a locus of individual freedom within an otherwise oppressive cosmos. I then trace this concept of a non-utilitarian aesthetic in the contemporary work of evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose influential ideas about play and human development promoted scientific views of the aesthetic emotion as a liberating and salutary physiological experience. Finally, I analyze the ways in which several illustrative late nineteenth-century literary writers—including Algernon Charles Swinburne, Thomas Hardy, and George Meredith—responded to Darwinian and Spencerian theory. The contrast between Hardy's famously despairing reception of evolutionary theory and Meredith's comparatively celebratory evolutionism demonstrates how aesthetic writers in particular adopted and developed the revolutionary implications of Darwin's and Spencer's respective evolutionary aesthetics. Darwin's and Spencer's constructions of beauty in this period, I ultimately argue, thus sanctioned many of the unorthodox opinions—that beauty is amoral, that art should be separate from daily life, and that aesthetic emotion is a corporeal phenomenon—upon which Swinburne, Walter Pater, and others founded the Aesthetic Movement.

I. Darwin's Non-Functional Aesthetics

Throughout his career, Darwin expanded his personal affinity for natural beauty into substantive claims about the ways in which aesthetic response resisted the stultifying functionalism of natural selection. The paleontologist Richard Owen, in a blistering review of *Origin*, opined that Darwin's "charming style" betrayed an "imaginative temperament" particularly vulnerable to fantastic and unscientific conjectures.⁶ Although Owen's hostility toward evolution turned out to be misguided, his assessment of Darwin's disposition was not entirely inaccurate. As a young man, Darwin was an ardent reader of poetry, and his early memoir *Journal of Researches* (1839)—better known as *Voyage of the Beagle*—reveals a keen relish for color and composition in landscape: "the colours were intense," he writes of Rio de Janeiro, and "the sky and the calm waters of the bay vied with each other in splendour."⁷ In *Origin*, Darwin generously applies the aesthetic term "beautiful" to both individual morphological features (the "beautiful adaptations [we see] everywhere and in every part of the organic world") and entire natural systems (the "great Tree of Life" with its "ever branching and beautiful ramifications").⁸ His sustained attention to the marvelous within nature culminates in *Origin*'s final sentence, which provides a remarkably affirmative interpretation of the organic order he has uncovered. "There is a grandeur in this view of life," Darwin concludes, "that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."⁹

⁶ [Richard Owen], review of *The Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin, *Edinburgh Review* 111 (1860): 487, 503.

⁷ The young Darwin famously carried a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* aboard the *Beagle*. Darwin, *Journal of Researches*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1845), 19.

⁸ Darwin, *Origin*, 64, 124.

⁹ Darwin, *Origin*, 427.

At first glance, Darwin's deployments of "beauty" in *Origin* may appear merely to aestheticize the practical ingenuity of those material adaptations that allow organisms to compete successfully in the struggle for existence. Along these lines, Jonathan Smith's *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (2006) argues that Darwin's "naturalized aesthetics" define beauty as the "utilitarian means by which individuals secured the best breeding partners and species promulgated themselves."¹⁰ In Smith's account, Darwin's insistence on the organic and functional origins of beauty largely set the tone for evolutionary and physiological approaches to aesthetics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Darwin and his heirs, Smith claims, thus challenged an earlier, theological tradition of aesthetics that considered beauty as evidence of God's beneficent design. The most influential of these mid-Victorian aesthetic theorists was the cultural critic, painter, and naturalist John Ruskin: in his multivolume critical opus *Modern Painters* (1843-60), Ruskin argued that beauty was nothing less than the residual "impress of divine work and character" upon Creation, and he consequently rejected the "false opinion that beauty is usefulness."¹¹ By challenging Ruskin's theological explanation for beauty, Smith asserts, Darwin also dispatched Ruskin's counter-utilitarian aesthetics.¹²

Smith's interpretation of Darwin's aesthetics, however, overstates its commitment to utility. As we have seen, the apparently purposeless experiences of "grandeur," "beauty," and "wonder" feature prominently in the conclusion to *Origin*, and these superlatives (which in part

¹⁰ Jonathan Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 139.

¹¹ In one of the letters from his pamphlet series *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84), Ruskin claimed that he lost his faith in 1858 after he saw Paolo Veronese's painting *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*; in reality, Timothy Hilton observes, Ruskin had been entertaining serious doubts about Evangelical Christianity for years. That Ruskin rejected programmatic Christian doctrine did not prevent Grant Allen, Vernon Lee, and others from associating his aesthetics with a religious paradigm: his many disputes with Darwin likely furthered Ruskin's reputation as a Romantic critic. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, rev. ed. (London: George Allen, 1906), 27, 33; Timothy Hilton, *John Ruskin*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 254-55, 452.

¹² Smith, *Victorian Visual Culture*, 139.

motivated Owen's criticisms of the younger naturalist) become the very watchwords of Darwin's discussion of sexual selection in *Descent*. Over the last few decades, several modern scholars have drawn attention to these elements of Darwin's prose. Gillian Beer, in her groundbreaking monograph *Darwin's Plots* (1983), argues that Darwin's "style and theory" were "lyrical and effusive, rather than sceptical and parsimonious."¹³ While the operation of natural selection depends upon the continuous elimination of unfit organisms—and the consequent preservation, in Darwin's terms, of only "useful variations"—Beer reminds us that his language often foregrounds, by contrast, the "clutter and profusion" of nature.¹⁴ In *Origin* especially, Beer further contends, "affirmative" visions of the "delicate richness and variety of life" tend to overshadow adjacent descriptions of ferocious competition.¹⁵ Simon Reader, in his more recent study of Darwin's notebooks, likewise "assemble[s] a new picture of Darwin, as a man not shackled to a nature 'red in tooth and claw,'" but one who "acts with tenderness and care toward what seems to serve no purpose and without insisting upon its future redemption."¹⁶ Darwin's aesthetic rhetoric, I would add, meshes with his curiosity about the evolutionary history of beauty itself: a trait that, as Darwin immediately recognized, lacked clear survival value in the struggle for existence.

Darwin's association of beauty with uselessness, though perhaps unexpected in an evolutionary context, has precedence in the aesthetics of the Enlightenment. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke

¹³ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 116.

¹⁴ Darwin, *Origin*, 64; Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 116.

¹⁵ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 159.

¹⁶ Simon Reader, "Thinking in Pieces: Victorian Notebooks and Notation" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014), 27.

explicitly distinguishes beauty from function: if “utility...is the cause of beauty,” Burke reasons, then “the wedge-like snout of a swine,...so well adapted to its offices of digging, and rooting, would be extremely beautiful,” and the hedgehog “would be then considered [a] creature of no small elegance.”¹⁷ For Burke, beautiful objects generate a serene pleasure by bringing about a “relaxation in the body” and its various sensory organs (the sublime, in contrast to the beautiful, stimulates those tense feelings of pain and terror that he associates with self-preservation and self-interest).¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), similarly defines the beautiful in non-utilitarian terms: unlike objects that we call “agreeable” or “good,” which gratify us because they somehow enable or ease our existence, the “beautiful” is an ideal form of “satisfaction...without any interest.”¹⁹ Although Kant, according to his system, considers the sensory aspects of art to be merely “agreeable”—truly beautiful art, he argues, prompts us to experience the more elevated pleasures of “cognition”—he nonetheless affirms a categorical separation between the beautiful and the useful.²⁰ Most significantly, both Burke and Kant characterize aesthetic experience as fundamentally disinterested: that is, the type of satisfaction that we derive from beauty is of a different order than the type of satisfaction that we feel when our basic needs are fulfilled.

Darwin’s early writings build on Burkean and Kantian aesthetics by attempting to explain how evolutionary processes might have produced, over time, such a non-essential adaptation as

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95.

¹⁸ Burke’s aesthetics are also theological: he is hesitant to posit the efficient causes of the sublime and beautiful, but he considers it beyond doubt that “the great chain of causes,” however obscure, eventually leads to “the throne of God himself.” Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 136, 117.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96. Although Kant’s treatise is more commonly known as *The Critique of Judgment*, Guyer opts for a title that better reflects the original German.

²⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 184.

aesthetic sensation.²¹ While the first edition of *Origin* mostly concerns natural selection, Darwin occasionally grapples with adaptations that appear to confer no survival advantage: these moments are conspicuous by comparison, and they hint at his evolving ideas about the escapist possibilities of aesthetics. In a chapter entitled “Difficulties on Theory,” for example, Darwin addresses several challenges to the concept of natural selection, chief among them the belief that “many structures have been created for beauty in the eyes of man, or for mere variety.”²² At the time of Darwin’s writing, Ruskin was arguably the most vocal adherent of the theistic view to which Darwin refers.²³ Darwin counters Ruskin and his ideological allies on several fronts, first suggesting that structures of “no direct use”—including traits such as ornamental feathers and behaviors such as dancing and singing—may arise out of environmental conditions, inheritance, or reversion to an ancestral type.²⁴ More important, Darwin also directs his critics to consider his nascent theory of sexual selection, which he introduces in a two-page summary earlier in *Origin*. Sexual selection, as Darwin defines it, is a separate evolutionary process in which females choose the most attractive mates, thereby disseminating beautiful traits (along with the taste for them) through future generations. In contrast to natural selection, sexual selection occurs

²¹ As Barbara Larson points out, Darwin’s conception of natural selection in many ways responds to Burke’s ideas about self-preservation, the corporeality of psychological experience, and the state of nature. Certain passages from *Descent* also refer directly to Kant. Barbara Larson, “Darwin, Burke, and the Biological Sublime,” in *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History*, ed. Larson and Sabine Flach (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 17; Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, ed. James Moore and Adrian Desmond (London: Penguin, 2004), 133. Unless otherwise noted, citations of *Descent* refer to the Penguin edition.

²² Darwin, *Origin*, 181-82.

²³ Many scholars, including Jonathan Smith and George Levine, discuss Ruskin’s life-long difficulties with evolutionary science, which persisted even after Ruskin had abandoned evangelical Christianity in the 1860s. Here, I would only add that Ruskin’s disagreements with Darwin on aesthetics were part of the critic’s more fundamental dispute not with science per se (Ruskin was himself an accomplished geologist), but with what he saw as a coarse and empty scientific materialism—a materialism that the Darwinian revolution helped foment. Smith, *Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture*, 26-27; George Levine, “Ruskin and Darwin and the Matter of Matter,” in *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81.

²⁴ Darwin, *Origin*, 182.

through non-fatal sexual competition rather than violent struggle and mass death. Since sexual selection is both “less rigorous” and “less rigid” than natural selection, Darwin speculates, the process could foster the transmission and gradual augmentation of characteristics that natural selection might otherwise eliminate.²⁵

But Darwin, in positing sexual selection against Ruskin’s natural theology, does not necessarily overturn the non-utilitarian elements of Ruskin’s aesthetics. “The effects of sexual selection, when displayed in beauty to charm the females,” Darwin admits in *Origin*, “can be called useful only in rather a forced sense.”²⁶ Plumage, spurs, and horns, in other words, often perform no function aside from “charm[ing]” potential mates. Darwin’s tentative explanation of sexual selection thus hints at an account of beauty that is perhaps more radically anti-utilitarian than Ruskin’s: while Ruskin, like many of his contemporaries, believed that beauty had intrinsic religious or moral meaning, Darwin here seems to vacate the beautiful of all value (including survival value) beyond the immediate pleasure it gives the beholder. In this context, Darwin’s many exclamations of wonderment at the natural world are not incongruous digressions but celebratory, stylistic enactments of his non-functional and escapist aesthetics. Even as *Origin* uncovers the systematic brutality of nature, which operates through natural selection’s subtractive mechanisms, its rhetorical flourish appeals to the same superfluous sense of pleasure that underlies sexual display as well as aesthetics at large. Furthermore, Darwin in *Origin* urges his audience to follow his lead by regarding nature, despite its cruelties, as a source of aesthetic gratification. At one point, he directs his reader’s gaze toward the “dense clouds of pollen” that fir-trees release, “in order that a few granules may be wafted by a chance breeze on the ovules”:

²⁵ Darwin, *Origin*, 86, 146.

²⁶ Darwin, *Origin*, 182.

although the process dismays us, he explains, we really “ought to admire” nature’s profligacy.²⁷ By discerning “perfect[ion]” in the excesses of nature, Darwin proposes an antidote to the despair that Alfred Tennyson—shocked to discover “that of fifty seeds / [Nature] often brings but one to bear”—so famously captured in his elegiac poem *In Memoriam* (1850).²⁸

In the subsequent editions of *Origin* that appeared throughout the 1860s, Darwin fleshed out these cursory references to sexual selection and reaffirmed the counter-utilitarian elements of his aesthetics. The 1869 version of *Origin* (the last to be published before *Descent* appeared two years later) demonstrates his growing confidence in the theory of sexual selection and its capacity to explain otherwise functionless adaptations: “I willingly admit that a great number of male animals...have been rendered *beautiful for beauty’s sake*,” he writes, “but this has been effected not for the delight of man, but through sexual selection, that is from the more beautiful males having been continually preferred by the less ornamented females.”²⁹ Darwin’s candid admission of beauty for beauty’s sake also seems to license his multiplying usages of “beautiful” and “wonderful,” descriptors that appear more frequently in later editions of *Origin*.³⁰ Spectatorial pleasure also begins to perform a role in his scientific as well as rhetorical practice, in part because deciding which adaptations are produced by sexual selection requires some sensitivity to whatever is beautiful in nature.

Darwin’s shifting theoretical focus—which partly reflected his engagement with the evolutionary work of Herbert Spencer, whose contributions to Victorian aestheticism I discuss

²⁷ Darwin, *Origin*, 184-85.

²⁸ Darwin, *Origin*, 184; Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Erik Gray (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 40.

²⁹ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 5th ed. (London: John Murray, 1869), 247. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ A simple text search demonstrates the increasing frequency with which Darwin applied aesthetic descriptors to objects that he was nominally considering only in a scientific light. The first edition of *Origin* uses “beauty” or “beautiful” 27 times, while the 1876 edition—the last edition Darwin himself edited—uses the same two terms over 60 times. In *The Descent of Man*, these words appear hundreds of times.

later in the chapter—resulted in the publication of *Origin*'s much-anticipated sequel, *Descent*. In *Descent*, Darwin develops his earlier speculations about sexual selection into more assertive claims for its capacity to disrupt the operations of natural selection. To reiterate, Darwin first theorized sexual selection in the 1850s in order to account for examples of useless animal ornamentation, and he had recognized early on that sexual selection was “less rigorous” than life-or-death natural selection. He repeats this point in *Descent*, adding that the “power to charm the female” with eye-catching coloring or a pretty song is often “more important than the power to conquer other males” through combat (these battles, in any case, “rarely” result in death).³¹ Since “unornamented or unattractive males would succeed equally well in the battle for life,” he further reasons, beautiful adaptations such as ornamental plumage do not enhance an organism’s “fitness” in the ordinary sense.³² As Irene Tucker points out, Darwinian sexual selection thus depends, to an unusual degree, on the “desires of the individual...members of the species” rather than the “ever-shifting pressures of survival.”³³ Moreover, Darwin allows that sexual selection, by privileging beauty and charm over strength and speed, often results in adaptations that are advantageous for reproduction but neutral or even disadvantageous in the everyday struggle for existence. Confronted with the preposterously cumbersome horns of certain stags, for instance, Darwin marvels at the “wonderful extreme[s]” produced by sexual selection, many of “which, as far as the general conditions of life are concerned, must be slightly injurious” to the animals that boast them.³⁴ The modifications that sexual selection produces, unlike traits generated via natural selection, can thus accrete *ad infinitum*, with “no definite limit” as to their number or

³¹ Darwin, *Descent*, 262-63.

³² Darwin, *Descent*, 245.

³³ Irene Tucker, *The Moment of Racial Sight: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 183.

³⁴ Darwin, *Descent*, 262.

character.³⁵ In this way, *Descent* frames sexual selection not as a secondary or complementary counterpart to natural selection, but as a separate and competing paradigm of evolutionary success: one that allows organisms to make a genetic contribution to future generations without bowing entirely to the demands of basic survival. Where natural selection rewards efficiency and conformity to an ecological niche, sexual selection not only allows for, but also often encourages, ostentatious deviances from the norm.

In light of the “wonderfully diversified” and seemingly limitless products of sexual selection—and in a stark departure from the environmental determinism of *Origin—Descent* explicitly grants complex organisms a modicum of control over evolutionary process.³⁶ Early on in his study, Darwin attributes the widely varied colors, crests, and mating rituals that he sees in the “lower animals” to their “capricious...sense of beauty” and their apparent “love [of] novelty, for its own sake.”³⁷ Later on in the book, in an attempt to refute theological explanations of beauty, Darwin credits female birds for gradually shaping the appearances of their respective species:

It would even appear that mere novelty, or change for the sake of change, has sometimes acted like a charm on female birds, in the same manner as changes of fashion with us. The Duke of Argyll [Liberal politician and prominent anti-Darwinist George Campbell] says...“I am more and more convinced that variety, mere variety, must be admitted to be an object and an aim in Nature.” I wish the Duke had explained what he here means by Nature. Is it meant that the Creator of the universe ordained diversified results for His own satisfaction, or for that of man? The former notion seems to me as much wanting in due reverence as the latter in probability. Capriciousness of taste in the birds themselves appears a more fitting explanation.³⁸

³⁵ Darwin, *Descent*, 262.

³⁶ Darwin, *Descent*, 401, 432.

³⁷ Darwin, *Descent*, 116.

³⁸ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1871), 230.

Similarly to Campbell, the Darwin of *Origin* deployed “nature” as a convenient shorthand for the confluence of environmental conditions that constituted natural selection—then still the primary process driving evolution. By contrast, the Darwin of *Descent* chides Campbell, and perhaps also himself, for exaggerating the evolutionary sway of monolithic “Nature.” Darwin instead traces the variation among bird species to the purposeless vagaries of “taste”: a striking choice of diction that cedes to animals both the capacity for aesthetic discrimination and, through that ability, some power over evolutionary selection.

Crucially for the late Victorian aesthetic traditions that responded to *Descent*, Darwin further claims that sexual selection has played a part in the development of humankind up to the present day. Although he argues that human males have “gained the power of selection” and placed the onus of decoration on women, this role reversal is far from ubiquitous: “civilised” women, he alleges, enjoy “free or almost free choice” in their mates, and sexual selection acts in a similarly “capricious manner” among both humans and non-humans.³⁹ In his survey of human cultures, as in his study of the “lower” animals, Darwin can neither find “any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body” nor provide a functional reason why “brilliant colours and certain forms, as well as harmonious and rhythmical sounds, give pleasure and are called beautiful.”⁴⁰ From ritualized scarring and the “savage” fascination with feathers to rouge and “the fashions of our own dress,” human aesthetic taste reveals to Darwin the “same desire to carry every point to an extreme”—the same arbitrary love of variety and extravagance for their

³⁹ Darwin’s personal and professional writings indicate some discomfort with the prospect of sexually assertive or otherwise competent women. In *Descent*, he dismisses women’s intellectual capabilities, and women who belied this preconception seemed to disarm him: the brilliant sociologist and novelist Harriet Martineau, for instance, greatly intimidated him when they first met in the 1830s. Darwin, *Descent*, 665, 653, 553; *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. 2, 1837-1843, ed. Frederick Burkhardt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 80.

⁴⁰ Darwin, *Descent*, 651.

own sake.⁴¹ At the same time that he applies the theory of sexual selection to humankind, then, Darwin also suggests—with an understatement that belies the potential radicalness of his argument—that the sense of beauty in humans is as perverse, relativistic, and pleasure-driven as the sense of beauty in other animal species.

Darwinian sexual selection thus jeopardizes two common assumptions at the heart of mid-Victorian aesthetics, especially as Ruskin defined it: first, that the aesthetic sense belongs exclusively to humankind (a view that even many evolutionists, including Alfred Russel Wallace, shared), and second, that beauty always conveys some inherent moral, spiritual, or social meaning.⁴² By establishing a through-line from animal mating rituals to modern fashion, sexual selection proves that even the so-called “higher” emotions are not unique to humans. Furthermore, Darwin’s emphasis on the non-functional nature of the beautiful produces an amoral and (although he might have been mortified by the term) implicitly hedonic aesthetics. Since those physical qualities that humans find aesthetically attractive signal nothing about the organism’s fitness, Darwin can only define the “beautiful” as simply that which “give[s] pleasure.”⁴³ Taste, in its most basic form, derives from an inchoate combination of inherited predisposition, cultural convention, and personal idiosyncrasy: not, as Ruskin believed, from the universal, God-given “theoretic faculty” for perceiving and appreciating divine “intelligence”

⁴¹ Darwin, *Descent*, 651.

⁴² Wallace co-discovered the theory of natural selection and was a staunch proponent of Darwin’s work. However, Wallace doubted whether evolutionary mechanisms could entirely explain certain human abilities, including mathematical and abstract reasoning, morality, and aesthetic emotion. In his essay “The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man” (1870), Wallace concludes that “some higher intelligence may have directed the process by which the human race was developed.” Several critical reviews of *Descent* (in the *Athenaeum* and *Edinburgh Review*, among others) used Wallace’s intelligent design argument to dispute Darwin’s account of human evolution. Alfred Russel Wallace, “The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man,” in *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1870), 359.

⁴³ Darwin, *Descent*, 651.

within nature.⁴⁴ The aesthetic sense, according to Darwin’s theory, was thus the most potent way for organisms to throw off both the constraints of heredity and the pressures of biological competition. In this context, much of the innovation and controversy of *Descent* stemmed less from its assertion that humans evolve—after all, T. H. Huxley had initiated this argument years earlier in his essay collection *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature* (1863)—than from the linkages it made between the irrepressible, insurgent sexual instinct and the development of human culture. (As Gowan Dawson points out, and as I will discuss further in conjunction with the rise of aestheticism, *Descent* thus scandalized several early reviewers with its “veritable obsession with sex and its attendant passions.”⁴⁵)

In a subtler, but no less significant, way, *Descent* further reinforces these claims for the escapist power of the aesthetic by making several revealing concessions to Lamarckian heredity. Put simply, Lamarckian heredity is a theory of inheritance—named after its original theorist, the French naturalist and early evolutionist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck—that allows for the transmission of habits and other acquired traits.⁴⁶ The theory of “hard” inheritance, by contrast, asserts that an individual organism’s actions cannot affect the genetic makeup of its offspring. While Darwinian evolutionism is commonly understood to exclude Lamarckian heredity (often known in the nineteenth century as “use and disuse” heredity), Darwin himself became increasingly receptive to Lamarckian thinking in the 1860s and 1870s, as he struggled to account for

⁴⁴ Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 2, 11.

⁴⁵ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45.

⁴⁶ Lamarck describes the archetypal example of Lamarckian inheritance in his landmark treatise *Zoological Philosophy* (1809). In one much-referenced passage, Lamarck argues that the giraffe’s neck gradually lengthened due to its “long maintained...habit” of reaching for high foliage. Even those scientists amenable to Lamarck’s ideas soon dismissed this particular explanation as crude. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Elliott (London: Macmillan, 1914), 122.

adaptations that he could attribute to neither natural nor sexual selection. In the case of the stag's thunderous bellow, for instance, he concludes that "the frequent use of the voice, under the strong excitement of love, jealousy, and rage, continued during many generations, may at last have produced an inherited effect," even in the absence of external selective pressures.⁴⁷

On one level, Darwin's Lamarckian reasoning reflects contemporary scientific uncertainty about the mechanisms underlying heredity, which would remain a mystery until the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's genetic experiments in the twentieth century. More compellingly, however, both Lamarckian heredity and hard inheritance each evoke distinct sets of beliefs concerning the evolutionary function of competition, choice, and effort. As Mike Hawkins explains, hard inheritance is associated with so-called Darwinian (more precisely, social Darwinian) theories of evolution, which typically share a "commitment to the struggle for survival made necessary for the elimination of the 'unfit.'"⁴⁸ According to this model of inheritance, unfit organisms are "incapable of improvement because of their hereditary disposition," and so a species can only improve through the continuous eradication of its weakest members—in other words, through natural selection.⁴⁹ By contrast, Lamarckian theory conceives of heredity as a more flexible apparatus, one in which the sustained effort of individuals can transform the genetic patrimony of the species. Since this theory granted individual actions some impact on future generations, Hawkins remarks, Lamarckism "could be used to explain cumulative mental or social improvement" and became correspondingly salient to

⁴⁷ Darwin, *Descent*, 590.

⁴⁸ Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 44.

⁴⁹ Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*, 44.

those evolutionists “who believed in progress.”⁵⁰ Spencer, for example, prominently advocated for the viability of Lamarckian inheritance throughout the nineteenth century, claiming in “The Factors of Organic Evolution” (1886) that its share in evolutionary process “has been much larger than [Darwin] supposed even in his later days.”⁵¹

As such, Darwin’s allowance of use/disuse inheritance in *Descent*—coupled with his interest in sexual selection—signals an evolutionary worldview very different from the relatively uncompromising vision that he presented in *Origin*, and which later thinkers subsequently developed into the philosophy of social Darwinism. Through the lens of Lamarckism, Darwin can postulate forms of evolutionary improvement that will not compromise what he sees as the “noblest part of our nature”: our desire to alleviate, through welfare programs and technologies such as vaccination, the “severe struggle” that natural selection requires.⁵² If Lamarckian inheritance and sexual selection obviate the need for selection via violence, he subsequently suggests, then humankind need not resort to what he calls “open competition” (with its “many and obvious evils”) in order to advance the species.⁵³ Darwin, continuing this logic, arrives at what he admits is a “remarkable conclusion”:

⁵⁰ Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*, 44.

⁵¹ “The Factors of Organic Evolution” first appeared in the *Nineteenth Century*, an elite monthly magazine that published critical articles by leading public intellectuals such as W. K. Clifford, T. H. Huxley, and Oscar Wilde. The magazine was closely associated with the Metaphysical Society, founded in 1869 as a forum for gentlemanly debates about science and faith. The *Nineteenth Century* furnished one of the most important venues for the interdisciplinary exchange between scientists and aesthetes within which evolutionary aestheticism developed. Herbert Spencer, *The Factors of Organic Evolution* (New York: Appleton, 1887), 33; Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, eds., *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent: Academia Press; London: British Library, 2009), 336, 456.

⁵² In *Descent*, Darwin addresses and explicitly supports vaccination. While he agrees that vaccination has sidestepped natural selection by “preserv[ing] thousands, who...formerly would have succumbed to small-pox,” he warns against curbing the “sympathy” that drives humans to limit unnecessary suffering. Darwin contrasts this philanthropic spirit with the prevailing attitudes in what he terms “savage” societies, where (he claims) “the weak in body and mind are soon eliminated.” Darwin, *Descent*, 159.

⁵³ Darwin, *Descent*, 688.

Courage, pugnacity, perseverance, strength and size of body, weapons of all kinds, musical organs, both vocal and instrumental, bright colours and ornamental appendages, have all been indirectly gained by the one sex or the other, *through the exertion of choice, the influence of love and jealousy, and the appreciation of the beautiful in sound, colour, or form.*⁵⁴

Nowhere else in *Descent* does Darwin so forcefully articulate the cultural repercussions of his inquiries into non-functional beauty. Here, the vocabulary of fitness and competition (a vocabulary characteristic of *Origin* as well as more modern articulations of social Darwinism) has given way to an aesthetic register of “choice” and “appreciation.” Since, as he argues, the purposeless desires of individual organisms substantially determine the physical and mental capacities of subsequent generations, even seemingly trivial aesthetic decisions—the picking out of an outfit, the selection or rejection of a lover, the decoration of a sitting room—can exert a small influence over the long-term development of the species.

More broadly, Darwin’s acknowledgment of evolutionary alternatives to natural selection—that is, sexual selection and Lamarckian inheritance—results in *Descent*’s comparative openness to ideas of evolutionary progress. While its dour assertion that “progress is no invariable rule” obliquely criticizes an evolutionary optimism that, as I will explain, was closely associated with Spencer, *Descent* nonetheless invests “progress” with an approximate directionality absent in *Origin*.⁵⁵ In *Origin*, Darwin had taken care to restrict “progress” to neutral procession in time. In *Descent*, by contrast, Darwin confidently places human societies on a hierarchical “scale of civilization,” drawing on the ethnographic work of Edward Burnett Tylor and John Lubbock, as well as his own first-hand encounters with indigenous peoples, in

⁵⁴ Darwin, *Descent*, 687. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Darwin, *Descent*, 166.

order to do so.⁵⁶ As the historian George Stocking attests, post-Darwinian anthropologists such as Tylor constructed standards of culture with an “easy ethnocentrism,” in which Western European nations and “savage tribes” represented opposite ends of a developmental continuum.⁵⁷ The problematic aspects of this racist model notwithstanding, Darwin’s turn toward ethnography in *Descent* yields an unexpectedly optimistic appraisal of human evolutionary history: “it is apparently a truer and more cheerful view,” Darwin concludes, “that progress has been much more general than retrogression; that man has risen, though by slow and interrupted steps, from a lowly condition to the highest standard as yet attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion.”⁵⁸ In a maneuver that we will see throughout Spencer’s work, Darwin in *Descent* characterizes evolutionary progress as a kind of transcendence over primitive existence, a movement away from primordial conditions and toward a humane modernity no longer regulated solely by natural selection (hence *Descent*’s endorsement of vaccination, which thwarts natural selection by protecting individuals who might otherwise succumb to disease). Humankind’s “progressive advancement,” Darwin reasons, therefore depends on the same “faculties” that seem to circumvent natural selection, including “the powers of the imagination, wonder, curiosity, an undefined sense of beauty, a tendency to imitation, and the love of excitement or novelty.”⁵⁹ By exempting the sense of beauty from the state of constant, harrowing struggle that enables natural selection, *Descent* proposes more humane evolutionary processes that operate instead through the pursuit of sexual pleasure and the habitual exercise of taste.

⁵⁶ Darwin, *Descent*, 158.

⁵⁷ In Darwin’s time, there was no hard and fast distinction between ethnography and anthropology, but Stocking characterizes anthropology as a more theoretical and systematic discipline, often headquartered in Britain, which made extensive use of ethnographic fieldwork. George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 162, 262.

⁵⁸ Darwin, *Descent*, 172.

⁵⁹ Darwin, *Descent*, 116.

Darwin's next book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*—which appeared the year after *Descent* and was originally conceived as a subsection of that book—expands on his earlier theories about the evolution of expressive behavior. Since these adaptations include facial expressions and gestures, *Expression* represents one of Darwin's most pointed statements concerning the evolution of aesthetic preferences and their correspondence (or lack thereof) with genetic fitness. In the course of his study, Darwin necessarily draws on contemporary research in the burgeoning Victorian fields of psychology and physiology—disciplines that overlapped considerably with the evolutionary school of thought that Darwin had initiated in the late 1850s. Among Darwin's most important psychological sources were Spencer and Alexander Bain, both of whom advanced materialist theories of mind that interpreted mental phenomena in terms of physical processes. In his influential study *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855), for instance, Bain asserts that the “connexion of the mental processes with certain of the bodily organs is...of the most intimate kind.”⁶⁰ In Bain's wake, many late nineteenth-century psychologists (including G. H. Lewes, James Sully, and William James) accepted that cognition was somehow linked to the operation of the nervous system and the brain. This notion—that emotions, including aesthetic emotions, were rooted in physiology and thus capable of evolving in accordance with biological laws—in turn furnished a key theoretical basis for both Darwin and the evolutionary aesthetes who expanded on his ideas.

Building on this materialist psychological tradition as well as his own extant work on non-functional adaptations, Darwin's *Expression* posits an evolutionary account of emotional expression that nonetheless stresses the superfluity and randomness of many expressive behaviors. While Darwin acknowledges the communicative utility of expression, he argues that

⁶⁰ Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), 10.

most expressions cannot be the result of natural selection. “The force of language,” he explains, “is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and body,” but no “muscle has been developed or even modified exclusively for the sake of expression.”⁶¹ As in his explanation of sexual selection in *Descent*, Darwin in *Expression* thus grants the individual some power to intervene in the gradual habituation of expressions and the cultivation of new ones. “Actions, which were at first voluntary,” he remarks, “soon become habitual, and at last hereditary”: once these purposeful gestures pass into hereditary instinct, he further argues, they often shed their “primary purpose or object” and acquire merely expressive import.⁶² Consider the example of the sneer: although this expression once served a purpose in the violent struggle for existence (we inherited the instinct, Darwin argues, from “semi-human progenitors” who bared their canines in preparation for an attack), the sneer has long since lost its practical utility and become a passive signal of contempt.⁶³ In a tacit continuation of his earlier discussions of caprice in sexual selection, Darwin in *Expression* also emphasizes the sheer arbitrariness of certain expressive gestures—shrugging, for instance, bears no obvious symbolic relationship to the emotion that it is purported to express. In this context, Darwin finds it difficult to discriminate between expressions that are “innate or instinctive” and those that are “conventional” or socialized: both types of expression often seem equally arbitrary, and Lamarckian logic dictates that even socially determined habits can become hereditary if given enough time.⁶⁴ Over the course of the book, Darwin thus attributes various expressions to acquired habit, physiological reflex, or some

⁶¹ Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872), 355.

⁶² Darwin, *Expression*, 357.

⁶³ Darwin, *Expression*, 253.

⁶⁴ Darwin, *Expression*, 15.

complex mixture of both, transmitted from generation to generation through Lamarckian hereditary mechanisms.

The implications of this uncertainty for Darwin's conception of aesthetics become clearer in *Expression's* discussions of singing and facial expressions—discussions that provocatively prioritize pleasure over function. In his inquiry into singing, Darwin responds directly to Spencer's essay "The Origin and Function of Music" (1857), in which the philosopher ascribes to the musical instinct long-term social purposes beyond "the direct pleasure it gives"; one of the "indirect benefits" of music, Spencer argues, is its supposed refinement of "the language of the emotions" and its consequent fostering of social cohesion.⁶⁵ Darwin, although he broadly agrees with Spencer's physiological approach, argues instead that the habit of singing began as a courtship ritual "in the early progenitors of man," long before the development of articulate speech.⁶⁶ Gradually, Darwin continues, music "became associated with the strongest emotions of which [these progenitors] were capable,—namely, ardent love, rivalry and triumph."⁶⁷ In Darwin's analysis, the communicative function of music (which Spencer had considered the entire purpose of vocal expression) is actually an extrinsic side effect of a sustained process of sexual selection. Like *Descent*, *Expression* locates the origins of vocal music not in its moral, social, or survival value, but in its gratification of an audience: in most cases the wooed female, whose approval ensures that the singer's talents will be passed on to the next generation. In Darwin's explanation, the purpose of vocal music—and, by extension, other forms of artistic

⁶⁵ Spencer, "The Origin and Function of Music," in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1868), 1:232-33.

⁶⁶ Darwin, *Expression*, 87.

⁶⁷ Darwin, *Expression*, 87.

creation—is simply to give pleasure, while the more complex emotional associations that we attach to music constitute secondary and incidental social conventions.

The essential meaninglessness of expression extends, for Darwin, to the face, which he considers the “chief seat of expression” as well as “of beauty and of ugliness.”⁶⁸ Consequently, he plainly states his skepticism of the “so-called science of physiognomy” and its claims to read character through the study of facial features.⁶⁹ As Sharonna Pearl explains, late nineteenth-century physiognomy was both an anthropological tool and the dominant lay-discourse for discussing faces, temperament, and racial difference, even though an intellectual elite (which included Darwin and his peers) largely dismissed the field as pseudoscience.⁷⁰ While Pearl rightly points out that Darwin’s distancing from physiognomy is strategic—he shuns the field’s “taint of illegitimacy,” Pearl remarks, without altogether eschewing physiognomic terminology—I would argue that his understanding of aesthetic evolution is incommensurate with the very logic that underlies physiognomy.⁷¹ In *Descent*, as we have seen, Darwin argued that beautiful features lacked practical value, precisely because they were the products of capricious tastes. In *Expression*, Darwin further convolutes any attempt to interpret beauty of countenance by attributing facial expressions to an amorphous combination of automatic instinct, acquired habit, and voluntary practice. While he allows that a “small and weak lower jaw,” for instance, is “commonly thought to be characteristic of feebleness of character,” Darwin considers

⁶⁸ Darwin, *Expression*, 329.

⁶⁹ Darwin also announces in *Expression*’s opening sentence that his book is “not here concerned” with the subject of physiognomy. Darwin, *Expression*, 366, 1.

⁷⁰ Sharonna Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 211.

⁷¹ For instance, Darwin frequently refers to the works of Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater and Scottish physician Charles Bell, the latter of whom wrote well-received texts on the facial expressions of mentally ill patients in his care. Pearl, *About Faces*, 199.

this physiognomic association a matter of social custom rather than biological rule.⁷² By using images of asylum patients as archetypes for normative expressive behaviors, he also calls into question physiognomy's claims about the diagnostic power of faces: if the "insane" provide illustrative examples of certain common expressions, as his project assumes, then their faces can hardly be taken as evidence for psychological disorder.⁷³ To Darwin, the face thus yields only contestable information about the personality behind the visage, and a beautiful (or ugly) countenance cannot reliably indicate either genetic health or moral rectitude.

Of the many facial expressions that he touches on, Darwin's account of the blush is perhaps the most disruptive to contemporary literary and aesthetic figurations of human beauty. As Mary Ann O'Farrell argues, the nineteenth-century novel "exploit[ed] the blush for its suggestiveness about character" as well as its capacity to discipline and socialize the body by making it transparent to others: the blush served as a tell, a sign of emotional turmoil that undercut attempts to dissemble or disguise the feelings.⁷⁴ That the blush was also a token of beauty served to link aesthetics and morality in ways that conformed with Ruskin's philosophy, in which the beautiful—if properly interpreted—always revealed some kind of moral content. In Darwin's understanding, however, blushing (like all expressions) resists simple physiognomic interpretation. The blush, he explains in *Expression*, is a physiological reaction involving the flow of "nerve-force" to small arteries in the skin, which is triggered whenever we become aware

⁷² On this subject, Darwin departs from Spencer, whose 1852 essay "Personal Beauty" postulates an "organic relationship" between an "ugly" jaw and a "certain inferiority of nature." Darwin, *Expression*, 236; Spencer, "Personal Beauty," in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 2:152.

⁷³ Darwin, *Expression*, 13.

⁷⁴ Mary Ann O'Farrell, *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 11.

that “others are attending to our personal appearance.”⁷⁵ For Darwin, the blush serves no consistent communicative purpose beyond signaling that the blushing individual believes her or himself to be the object of another’s gaze or critical consideration: since the guilty and the innocent alike will blush under these circumstances, blushing can indicate nothing about one’s “moral conduct.”⁷⁶ O’Farrell, in her analysis of *Expression*, observes that the “vagaries of complexion and the temporal nature of physiology tease efforts to find—or, not finding, to construct—legibility of character and of the body.”⁷⁷ Darwin’s scientific approach to expression, O’Farrell continues, thus destabilizes the “social and novelistic premise of the blush: that blushes exist to be read.”⁷⁸

To be sure, the blush for Darwin is not a sexual selective adaptation. Although he acknowledges that blushing “adds to the beauty of a maiden’s face,” he suggests that the blush is only incidentally an aesthetic ornament: in this regard, the blush differs from those secondary sexual characteristics that are cultivated and transmitted from one generation to the next precisely because they are beautiful.⁷⁹ Like the brilliant plumage and pretty baubles of *Descent*, however, the Darwinian blush derives its aesthetic value purely from the purposeless pleasure it stimulates in an observer. In short, Darwin’s evolutionary account of expression deprives the countenance of fixed physiognomic meaning and clear adaptive purpose, and in doing so implies that personal beauty is a matter of individual taste and cultural custom rather than biological determinism or divine commandment. The same potentially radical logic guides Darwin’s late-career revisions

⁷⁵ Darwin, *Expression*, 327.

⁷⁶ Darwin, *Expression*, 327.

⁷⁷ O’Farrell, *Telling Complexions*, 86.

⁷⁸ O’Farrell, *Telling Complexions*, 84.

⁷⁹ Darwin, *Expression*, 338.

of *Origin* and his exploration of human evolution in *Descent*: the aesthetic, for Darwin, constitutes a special realm of animal life in which pleasure and desire take precedent over the pressures of survival that otherwise dominate the natural world. As the nineteenth century progressed, his theories of expression and sexual selection equipped a robust subset of evolutionary discourses, including a manifestly aesthetic one, which consequently looked to culture as a peaceful mechanism for the evolutionary improvement of the species.

II. Spencer's Progressive Evolutionism and the Play Theory of Aesthetics

At the same time that Darwin was exploring natural selection and its more liberating alternatives, the younger Spencer was both popularizing Darwin's theories and developing his own influential ideas concerning the evolution of aesthetic feeling, which he considered a form of "play." As Spencer's biographer Mark Francis laments, many of Spencer's theories "have been remembered in the form of a caricature": thanks to his coinage of the memorable phrase "survival of the fittest" in 1864, Spencer's name is often linked with an especially chilling form of social Darwinism.⁸⁰ Spencer's modern reputation, however, belies his philosophical investment in aesthetics and culture, his intellectual versatility (he was conversant in an astounding array of disciplines besides biology, including psychology, sociology, and political science), and his consequent prestige in late nineteenth-century intellectual life. Spencer's rising public profile in the 1850s and 1860s is particularly apparent in Darwin's references to the younger writer. The first and second editions of *Origin* make no reference to Spencer or his evolutionary ideas, while the third edition from 1861 briefly acknowledges Spencer's early essay

⁸⁰ In *The Principles of Biology* (1864-67), Spencer uses the phrase to describe the process of natural selection in what he calls more "mechanical terms." Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, vol. 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 445; Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2007), 11.

“The Development Hypothesis” (1852). The fifth edition of *Origin*, published in 1869, bears the unmistakable residue of Spencer’s influence: by this time, the “development hypothesis” had become a byword for evolutionary theory as a whole, and “survival of the fittest” was so well known that Darwin adopts it as a synonym for natural selection.⁸¹

While little read today, Spencer profoundly shaped popular conceptions of evolution in the nineteenth century, in part by giving the process a teleological cast technically inconsistent with Darwinian theory. His aforementioned essay “The Development Hypothesis,” which appeared in G. H. Lewes’s radical journal the *Leader*, argues that simple organic forms develop into more complex forms through “successive modifications” rather than acts of “special creation.”⁸² Spencer thus introduced the *Leader*’s readership to a noticeably progressive concept of evolution several years before *Origin* broached the same topic. A few years later, in “Progress: Its Law and Cause” (1857), Spencer more precisely defines the directionality of organic “development”: it is “beyond dispute,” he contends, that “organic progress consists in a change from the homogenous to the heterogeneous.”⁸³ He further claims that this process of differentiation drives every phenomenon in the universe, from star formation and animal evolution to “the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Language, Literature, Science, Art.”⁸⁴ Crucially, Spencer’s notion of evolution as a continuous process of differentiation and sophistication—an idea that he applied to his work in sociology,

⁸¹ Darwin, *Origin*, 5th ed., vi.

⁸² Lewes, who was an editor and critic as well as a psychologist, founded the *Leader* in 1850 as a venue for “the most advanced opinions on the questions of the day.” “The Development Hypothesis” was one installment in a series of articles called “The Haythorne Papers,” which Spencer penned anonymously. Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*, 351; Spencer, “The Development Hypothesis,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 1:379.

⁸³ Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 1:3.

⁸⁴ Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” 3.

anthropology, and economics as well as biology—distinguished him from Darwin, whose version of evolution is inherently directionless. For Spencer, the cosmos obeyed a grand trajectory, and his evolutionism therefore re-inscribed secular order in a universe that otherwise lacked intelligence and purpose.

Simultaneously comprehensive, rational, and comforting, Spencer's progressivism pervaded later nineteenth-century thought and proved particularly compelling to his diverse literary interpreters. His close friend George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), for instance, incorporated his notion of causality into her mid-career essays, which locate the possibility for a renewed form of faith in the "great conception of universal regular sequence."⁸⁵ Eliot's landmark novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72) is likewise sympathetic to the Spencerian ambitions of country doctor Tertius Lydgate, who sets out to unravel nature's "true order" by discovering what he calls the "primitive tissue" underlying all organic life.⁸⁶ Later in the century, the New Woman novelist Olive Schreiner integrated some of Spencer's work—particularly his treatise *First Principles* (1862), which, Schreiner claimed, "showed [her] the unity of existence"—into her own calls for secular social reform.⁸⁷ In addition, her novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) implicitly invokes Spencer's evolutionism in its structural reliance on generational development, writ small in the narrative's spiral-like movement from Otto's Christian piety to his son Waldo's more sophisticated reverence for "Universal Life."⁸⁸ For Schreiner, as for many of Spencer's followers, the universality of Spencerian evolution provided a substitute for older forms of

⁸⁵ George Eliot, "The Influence of Rationalism" (1865), in *The Essays of "George Eliot,"* ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883), 271.

⁸⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 139.

⁸⁷ Olive Schreiner to Betty Molteno, 24 May 1895, UCT Manuscripts & Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription, 39.

⁸⁸ Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, ed. Joseph Bristow, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 260.

religious feeling that were no longer sustainable in a rational age. Throughout the nineteenth century, Spencer's unshaken faith in progress thus remained a touchstone for rationalists and liberals in a variety of scientific and literary fields, even in the face of physical theories that rendered his law of "increasing complexity" thermodynamically impossible.⁸⁹ As we will see, Spencer's progressive evolutionism also inspired and vindicated the varieties of rational optimism that appear in the work of evolutionary aesthetes such as W. K. Clifford, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee.

Beyond advancing a distinctly teleological cosmology, Spencer also redefined evolution in the public sphere by advancing a model of biology within which organisms had some control over their own evolutionary development. In Spencer's understanding, organic entities—including organisms, ecologies, and societies—perpetuate themselves by absorbing energy from external sources and expending it toward various vital processes: "equilibrium" is Spencer's term for the state in which these processes of absorption and expenditure are balanced.⁹⁰ An organism with enough resources, Spencer further explains, can produce a new equilibrium by growing or modifying itself in a manner that "compensate[s]" for environmental changes.⁹¹ In this view, adaptation depends less on incessant natural checks than on the actions of organisms within a larger economy of vital forces, in which different forms of energy ("nervous energy," "muscular energy," "social energy," "mental energy," etc.) are concentrated, diffused, gained, spent, and

⁸⁹ Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, physicists and mathematicians including Hermann von Helmholtz (whose experiments in optics were important for British aesthetics), James Clerk Maxwell, and Max Planck codified the laws of thermodynamics. The concept of entropy was especially damaging to Spencer's progressivism, because the theory predicts the ultimate "heat death" of the universe. Robert D. Purrington, *Physics in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 100.

⁹⁰ Spencer references the concept of equilibrium throughout his work; this instance in *First Principles* is one of many. Spencer, *First Principles*, 2nd ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), 486.

⁹¹ Spencer, *First Principles*, 501.

recycled.⁹² Spencer, as his term “survival of the fittest” suggests, thus locates the organism itself at the center of evolutionary process. In this way, Spencer departed considerably from Darwin’s early formulations of evolution: while the Darwinian organism is so often at the mercy of natural selection, the Spencerian organism autonomously reacts to, and often counteracts, its environment by applying surplus energy toward activities above and beyond mere continued existence. It was partly in response to this interpretation of evolution that Darwin, as we have seen, gradually softened his view on the evolutionary sway of natural selection. In the fifth edition of *Origin*, for example, Darwin defers to Spencer’s definition of life as “the incessant action and reaction of various forces...tending towards an equilibrium.”⁹³

Spencer’s unique interpretation of organic evolution, which theorized nature as a self-regulating economy rather than an all-out war for resources, calls into question modern-day dismissals of the philosopher as a champion of crude social Darwinism.⁹⁴ As Francis remarks, Spencer found the violence and instability inherent in “the present state of nature”—that is, nature as governed by the law of “survival of the fittest”—to be “morally intolerable.”⁹⁵ For this reason, Spencer concludes *The Principles of Biology* (1864-67) by postulating an end-state to human evolution that is essentially non-Darwinian: the reproductive imperative, he asserts, will “gradually bring itself to an end,” thereby resolving the twin problems of overpopulation and resource scarcity that drive organismic competition.⁹⁶ By devoting its energies toward the

⁹² Spencer, *First Principles*, 507, 179, 219, 265.

⁹³ Darwin, *Origin*, 5th ed., 326.

⁹⁴ Geoffrey M. Hodgson argues that the perceived resemblance between Spencer’s evolutionism and modern social Darwinism is mostly a “myth” originating in the 1930s. Geoffrey M. Hodgson, “Social Darwinism in Anglophone Academic Journals: A Contribution to the History of the Term,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17 (2004): 444.

⁹⁵ Francis, *Herbert Spencer*, 220.

⁹⁶ Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), 507.

improvement of civilization and culture, Spencer speculates, humankind might one day achieve an ideal equilibrium with its environment and thus do away with the need for destructive competition altogether. This ideal “state of things,” he further predicts, would improve our quality of life dramatically, since maintaining equilibrium would require “from each individual no more than a normal and pleasurable activity.”⁹⁷ Regardless of whether he believed this state to be achievable, Spencer (like Darwin in parts of *Descent*) necessarily roots human perfectibility in the gradual suspension, not the intensification, of the struggle for existence.

Importantly for his conception of aesthetics, Spencer’s notion of progress through equilibration required that organisms expend energy in excess of what was necessary for basic survival. From the earliest days of his career, then, he often directed his critical attention to the sense of beauty—a phenomenon that, for Spencer as well as for Darwin, seemed to defy the regime of practicality presiding over both the state of nature and the world of laissez-faire commerce. Spencer first addresses the non-functional aspects of aesthetics in his brief, but significant, early essay “Use and Beauty” (1852), which also appeared in Lewes’s *Leader*. In the essay, Spencer illustrates “the evolution of beauty out of what was once purely utilitarian” using several examples, including fairy lore, Greek mythology, and medieval history.⁹⁸ In all of these cases, Spencer explains, an object (or creed, custom, style, etc.) that “has performed some practical function in society during one era, becomes available for ornament in the subsequent one” only once the object ceases to be considered useful.⁹⁹ To become beautiful, he argues, once-useful objects must shed their associations with the “harsh and dreary facts” and “practical

⁹⁷ Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, 2:506.

⁹⁸ Like “The Development Hypothesis,” “Use and Beauty” also appeared in Lewes’s left-leaning journal the *Leader*. Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 1:429.

⁹⁹ Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” 432.

life-and-death affairs” that make up “stern...prosaic reality”: a Greek temple or pastoral landscape, for example, furnishes picturesque imagery for modern audiences precisely because moderns no longer genuinely fear ancient deities or toil long hours in the field.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, Spencer concludes that the industrialization of society, the concomitant advent of leisure, and the rise of scientific method have opened up countless “past modes of life” to pleasurable aesthetic contemplation.¹⁰¹

“Use and Beauty” encapsulates several of Spencer’s most important contributions to both late Victorian aesthetics and, more precisely, the principles of evolutionary aestheticism. First, Spencer provides a rational, proto-evolutionary gloss on an earlier aesthetic tradition that includes Kant and Burke as well as Johann Goethe (Spencer quotes Goethe’s exhortation to “do our utmost to encourage the Beautiful, for the Useful encourages itself” in the epigraph to the *Leader* version of the essay).¹⁰² Spencer thus lays some groundwork for the emerging science of aesthetics that would dominate late nineteenth-century inquiries into the beautiful, including Darwin’s. Secondly, “Use and Beauty” implies a link between the aesthetic pleasure of individuals and the evolution of humankind at large. While he never expressly states that the ability to appreciate beauty furthers social development, Spencer does conflate the expansion of aesthetic sensibility with the general “progress of Humanity.”¹⁰³ For Spencer, the capacity to appreciate objects, customs, and institutions apart from their uses—to view them as sources of

¹⁰⁰ Later, Matthew Arnold capitalized on similar assumptions in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which poises non-practical culture against an encroaching Hobbesian anarchy he attributes to the “obvious faults of our animality.” Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” 430; Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, in *Culture and Anarchy with Friendship’s Garland and Some Literary Essays*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 99.

¹⁰¹ Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” 433.

¹⁰² Spencer, “The Haythorne Papers: No. I,” *Leader* 3 (Jan. 1852): 18.

¹⁰³ Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” 429.

“relaxation and enjoyment” rather than food or other necessities—coincides with one’s removal from an “aboriginal” state of nature.¹⁰⁴ Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, “Use and Beauty” takes an evolutionary approach to beauty and arrives, nonetheless, at a strikingly subjective and pleasure-oriented aesthetics. Whether or not an observer considers an object “beautiful,” according to Spencer’s formulation, depends on the observer’s perception of that object rather than the intrinsic qualities of the object itself. In other words, beauty is a relative and unfixed quality that refers ultimately to the psychological responses of individual viewers.

The subtly hedonic argument of “Use and Beauty” became more pronounced in Spencer’s influential work on “play,” which he developed in the late 1850s and 1860s. As his career progressed, the tenability of play in turn encouraged him to draw more explicit connections between individual aesthetic experience and the long-term evolutionary development of the species. Spencer’s interest in play first emerged from his investigations into childhood development, which convinced him, as he explains in *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1861), that educators should cultivate students’ “physique[s]” as well as their intellects.¹⁰⁵ To this end, he urges teachers and parents to allow children time to engage in unstructured play, which “makes the pulse bound and ensures the healthful activity of every organ.”¹⁰⁶ His usage of play draws loosely on the work of eighteenth century German poet,

¹⁰⁴ Spencer, “Use and Beauty,” 430, 433.

¹⁰⁵ Spencer here draws inspiration from the contemporary movement known as “muscular Christianity.” Advocates of muscular Christianity, such as liberal clergyman Charles Kingsley, upheld David and Christ as models for the modern Christian man, who would use his physical strength as well as his spiritual fortitude in order to fulfill the “manly work” of social improvement, missionary labor, and imperial expansion. As an agnostic with strongly anti-imperialistic views, Spencer differed in obvious ways from figures such as Kingsley: most important, Spencer considered unforced play intrinsically beneficial for children of both genders as growing individuals, not as auxiliaries of Christ. Later editions of *Education*, however, make an approving reference to the movement’s holistic approach to education. Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (London: G. Manwaring, 1861), 169; Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer, *Education*, 169.

playwright, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller, who traced aesthetic feeling to what he called the “play-impulse”: a universal animal desire, especially strong in humans, for “aimless effusion” and “superfluous life” in excess of “present need.”¹⁰⁷ Like Schiller, Spencer regards play activity as both instinctual and pleasurable, but he moreover emphasizes play’s salutary benefits. For Spencer, the spontaneous and non-functional nature of play—evident in the “riotous glee with which [children] carry on their rougher frolics”—greatly assists in the development of healthy children, since “happiness is the most powerful of tonics.”¹⁰⁸ He therefore endorses recent attempts to make the “acquirement of knowledge pleasurable rather than painful,” and he approves of curricula that incorporate nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and other lighthearted entertainments appealing to infantile aesthetic tastes.¹⁰⁹

Spencer soon brought the concept of play and its counter-utilitarian implications to bear on topics, such as vocal and musical expression, that were adjacent to questions of aesthetics. In the “The Physiology of Laughter” (1860), Spencer applies his understanding of biology to laughter by reducing it to a “display of muscular excitement,” which obeys the “general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action.”¹¹⁰ Although he never explicitly defines laughter as play, his description of its uselessness largely conforms to his existing definition of play. “In general,” he remarks, “bodily motions that are prompted by feelings” are directed toward “special ends” such as escaping danger or finding food, “but the movements...we make when laughing have no object.”¹¹¹ Spencer describes music in similarly

¹⁰⁷ Friedrich Schiller, “Upon the Aesthetic Culture of Man,” in *The Aesthetic Letters, Essays, and the Philosophical Letters of Schiller*, trans. J. Weiss (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 139, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Spencer, *Education*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Spencer, *Education*, 64.

¹¹⁰ Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter,” in *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative*, 1:200.

¹¹¹ Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter,” 201.

physiological terms: at its core, he argues, music is a vocal utterance that occurs when strong emotional impulses stimulate the nervous system and, as a result, generate “contractions” in the “chest, larynx, and vocal chords.”¹¹² For Spencer, expressions such as laughter and singing are instinctual physiological reflexes that give healthy vent to “overflow[s] of nerve-force,” which bodies accumulate in the course of daily life.¹¹³ Like play, he argues, these expressions aid in the maintenance of a healthy body by releasing excess energy that the organism does not require for its mere continued existence.

Over the next two decades, Spencer both elaborated on his idea of play and prominently promoted its wider practice outside the schoolroom. In a revised edition of *The Principles of Psychology* (1870-72), he offers a more precise definition of play as any activity that springs from the animal “tendency to superfluous and useless exercise”; this tendency, in turn, derives from a physiological impulse to use faculties that have lain dormant for an unusually long time.¹¹⁴ While the instinct for play has arisen through evolution, he suggests, play itself carries no survival value in the violent struggle for existence. Instead, Spencer argues, play is evolutionarily beneficial because it stimulates various physiological processes without wearing them out in “the business of life.”¹¹⁵ At “one extreme” on the spectrum of play, he continues, are the “sportive activities”: by diverting our inborn desires to hunt and fight into harmless avenues,

¹¹² Spencer, “The Origin and Function of Music,” 214.

¹¹³ Spencer, “The Physiology of Laughter,” 201.

¹¹⁴ Spencer originally published *The Principles of Psychology* in one volume in 1855, then expanded it to two volumes for inclusion in his ten-volume series *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*. The first edition makes no mention of play, suggesting that Spencer became more interested in the subject as he revised his evolutionary ideas. Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 5 of *A System of Synthetic Philosophy* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), 630.

¹¹⁵ Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 631.

play activities such as wrestling, games of skill, and bantering serve to repair and refine our physical and mental agility. At the “other extreme” are the “aesthetic sentiments,” which we experience when we exercise an otherwise “life-serving” sensory faculty entirely “for its own sake, apart from ulterior benefits.”¹¹⁶ Both forms of play, he explains, allow us to take immediate pleasure in bodily existence—in the perception of color, for instance, or in the tensing and relaxing of muscles—without regard to the practical ends that the body is supposed to serve.

Spencer thus values play for many of the same reasons that Darwin, in his early scientific writing, valued the capacity for wonder: play, like the purposeless admiration of the beautiful, circumvents the cycles of routine violence that so often drive natural, social, and commercial life. As Francis points out, Spencer’s personal “beliefs in play and relaxation” were evident in his own conduct, particularly his flamboyant dress, his love for games, his eccentric affinity for children, and his public advocacy for leisure.¹¹⁷ In a famous lecture that he delivered in New York in 1882, for instance, Spencer presented his audience of arch-capitalist admirers (including Scottish-American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie) with a “revised ideal of life” founded on a “gospel of relaxation.”¹¹⁸ Spencer urged his listeners to seek “a better adjustment of labor and enjoyment” by accumulating, in both their business and personal lives, a “surplus of energies...not absorbed in fulfilling material needs.”¹¹⁹ Surrounded by the pioneers of modern industrial capitalism, Spencer turned to the biological idiom of energy in order to propose an

¹¹⁶ Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 635.

¹¹⁷ Francis, *Herbert Spencer*, 105.

¹¹⁸ John White discusses Carnegie’s warm friendship with Spencer, who Carnegie sometimes addressed as “Dear Master.” White also notes that Carnegie must have been “startled” by the anti-capitalist spirit of Spencer’s New York address. Spencer, “Mr. Spencer’s Address,” in *Herbert Spencer on the Americans and the Americans on Herbert Spencer*, ed. Edward Livingstone Youmans (New York: D. Appleton, 1883), 32, 35; John White, “Andrew Carnegie and Herbert Spencer: A Special Relationship,” *Journal of American Studies* 13 (1979): 58.

¹¹⁹ Spencer, “Mr. Spencer’s Address,” 34.

alternative economy: one that prioritized the accrual of health and happiness through play rather than the circulation of capital through competition. In doing so, Spencer granted aesthetic experience a privileged role in regulating the equilibrium of not only the individual body but also the body politic—or in his terms, the “social organism.”¹²⁰

Spencer’s aesthetics—more so than Darwin’s, which were mostly restricted to the realm of biology—thus intervened in long-standing economic as well as scientific and aesthetic debates about the nature and function of beauty. More precisely, Spencer’s theory of aesthetics articulated a nuanced critique of utilitarianism by making ethical claims for the purposeless enjoyment of beauty. Founded by Jeremy Bentham and developed in the nineteenth century by his protégé, John Stuart Mill, utilitarianism holds that ethically good actions maximize a quality known as utility. Bentham and Mill defined utility in subtly different ways, but they generally agreed that the utility of any given action consisted in the net happiness (or total pleasure minus total pain) that the action produced. Bentham, in one of utilitarianism’s founding treatises, argues that pleasure and pain are the “sovereign masters” of humankind and the sole moral bases for determining right and wrong: strictly speaking, then, Benthamite utilitarianism overlapped with a tradition of philosophical hedonism (from the Greek *hēdonē*, meaning “pleasure”) stretching back to the Greek materialist Epicurus.¹²¹ Bentham, however, both eschewed what he called “the odious name of Epicurean” and rejected Epicurus’s concern for self-development in favor of legislative reform.¹²² Since the competent management of the state was Bentham’s

¹²⁰ In his essay “The Social Organism” (1860), Spencer argues that societies “grow” according to the same natural laws that govern the growth of individual organisms. This idea was foundational to Victorian sociology and historiography. Spencer, “The Social Organism,” *Westminster Review*, n.s., 17 (1860): 96.

¹²¹ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 11.

¹²² Bentham, *Principles of Morals*, 25.

primary objective, he considered the happiness of individuals important only insofar as they counted toward the net happiness of the entire population, and he had correspondingly scant regard for art (Bentham once famously declared that, where happiness is concerned, “the game of push-pin [a children’s game played with sewing needles] is of equal value with...music and poetry”¹²³). By the time Spencer was composing his works, Bentham had come to represent—especially to humanists and freethinkers—a particularly inflexible, miserly, and unimaginative pragmatism.¹²⁴ In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), for instance, the critic Matthew Arnold associates Bentham’s philosophy with “Jacobinism,” a rigid functionalism that Arnold sees as inherently opposed to the serene “sweetness and light” of genuine culture.¹²⁵

Although Mill attempted to humanize many of Bentham’s ideas, Mill’s later theorization of utilitarianism in the mid nineteenth century remained relatively inhospitable to both evolutionism and aestheticism. In his “Essay on Bentham” (1838), Mill challenges his mentor’s “want of imagination,” hostility to literature, and indifference toward “disinterested feelings” such as the “love of *beauty*.”¹²⁶ Bentham, in Mill’s estimation, was personally and theoretically unequipped to appreciate any pleasure pursued for its own sake. Several of Mill’s major works seek to address these shortcomings: his revolutionary polemic *On Liberty* (1859) stresses the importance of diversity, spontaneity, and eccentricity for individual and social wellbeing, and his

¹²³ Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: Robert Heward, 1830), 266

¹²⁴ Bentham was also the original architect of the panopticon, a plan for prisons, schools, and hospitals that would control inmates’ behavior by subjecting them to the constant threat of surveillance. The concept largely defines Bentham’s modern-day legacy: Michel Foucault, in his landmark social critique *Discipline and Punish* (1975), uses the panopticon as a metaphor for modern modes of rapid and generalized social coercion. Bentham, *Panopticon: Or the Inspection-House* (London: T. Payne, 1791); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 208.

¹²⁵ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 109.

¹²⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Bentham*, in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, ed. Mary Warnock, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 69, 70.

treatise *Utilitarianism* (1861) credits Epicurus's contributions to utilitarian thought.¹²⁷ At the same time, however, Mill anxiously distances himself from Epicurean hedonism both by underscoring his own commitment to the useful and by circumscribing "pleasure" so as to downplay its corporeal dimensions. That is, Mill softens Bentham's pragmatism not by embracing the uselessness of certain pleasures, but rather by expanding the definition of "useful" to include these pleasures: "instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental," Mill argues in *Utilitarianism*, the utilitarians "have always declared that the useful means these, among other things."¹²⁸ Mill also repeatedly asserts a distinction between what he considers the intrinsically "higher" pleasures of mind—including the imagination, the "moral sentiments," and other feelings that he associates with poetry in particular—and the purportedly baser pleasures of "mere sensation."¹²⁹ While his privileging of intellectual pleasure allowed him to defend art and poetry on utilitarian grounds, Mill implicitly denied one of the basic assumptions of Spencer's and Darwin's work—namely, the notion that even complex emotions had their basis in physiological process and sexual instincts. Mill's hedonism, such as it was, contradicted evolutionary accounts of aesthetics by trivializing sensory pleasure and upholding the use value of aesthetic feeling.

Against Bentham's and Mill's respective theories of pleasure—theories that frequently renounced the stigmatized name of hedonism—Spencer posits a comparatively daring version of hedonistic philosophy. Throughout his work on aesthetics, but particularly in "Use and Beauty" and his writings on play, Spencer hypothesized that purposeless physical pleasures could yield

¹²⁷ Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, 131-46; Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, 185.

¹²⁸ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 185.

¹²⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 187.

palpable evolutionary benefits for the species. Hedonism, consequently, was one of the pillars of the system of ethics that he derived from evolutionary theory. In *The Data of Ethics* (1879), for instance, Spencer elaborates a particularly evolutionary hedonism that stands in contrast to existing utilitarian theories, including those of both Bentham and the economist Henry Sidgwick, who forwarded a more altruistic utilitarianism. “Happiness,” Spencer maintains, “is the supreme end” of action, because happiness is the “concomitant of that highest life” toward which evolution, as he understands it, tends: in other words, pleasure signals those conditions of abundance and harmony that are best suited to the development of an ideal “social equilibrium.”¹³⁰ Spencer thus expands his theory of aesthetic play and its role in the maintenance of equilibrium into a bolder, more sweeping defense of hedonism as an ethical, as well as rational, stance. As I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the version of hedonism that he lays out in *The Data of Ethics* inspired several of his readers in the Aesthetic Movement: Grant Allen, one of Spencer’s most devoted disciples, courted controversy in the 1890s by advocating for a “new hedonism” that synthesized Spencerian ethics and Darwinian sexual selection with the dissident flamboyance that Allen admired in Wilde.¹³¹

Spencer’s counter-utilitarian ethic of hedonism, coupled with his concept of play and his progressive evolutionism, motivates several remarkably optimistic visions of a future specifically founded on the proliferation of aesthetic pleasure. Of course, Spencer assumed even in his early works that humankind would gradually evolve toward a higher state of equilibrium with its environment: his teleological view of evolution all but ensured this eventuality. His engagements with aesthetics in his later career, however, allowed him to theorize more

¹³⁰ Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 172, 171.

¹³¹ Allen borrowed the phrase “New Hedonism” from Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891). Chapter 3 discusses Allen’s and Wilde’s intellectual relationship in depth. Grant Allen, “The New Hedonism,” *Fortnightly Review* 55 (1894): 377.

specifically how this widespread improvement was to come about. For Spencer, aesthetic experiences divert our energy away from those activities associated with what he calls “predatory life.”¹³² In doing so, aesthetic pleasure guides individuals toward more inherently ethical, because less violent and competitive, courses of action. The history of art and culture, in this context, registers not only humankind's aesthetic sophistication but also its increasing “economization of energy” and its concomitant transcendence over the brutalizing state of nature.¹³³ For this reason, Spencer concludes *The Principles of Psychology* by predicting that the “aesthetic activities in general may be expected to play an increasing part in human life as evolution advances.”¹³⁴ He reiterates this point in *The Data of Ethics*, in which he imagines what the “highest life” might look like in a developed industrial society: “we may recognize as not only possible but probable, the eventual existence of a community” that, having satisfied all its basic desires, can “achieve complete happiness only when a large part of life is filled with aesthetic activities.”¹³⁵

Since Spencer believed that art was both an instrument and a metric of society's progression toward his counter-natural ideal, questions of aesthetic taste became increasingly urgent for him toward the end of his life. The topic appears frequently in his final collection of fragmentary essays, *Facts and Comments* (1902), which he published shortly before his death. In “The Purpose of Art,” for instance, Spencer bemoans the “over-valuation of the intellectual element” in art, a critical tradition that he traces in part to the didacticism of mid Victorian

¹³² Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 648.

¹³³ Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 647.

¹³⁴ Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 648.

¹³⁵ Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, 169.

philosophers such as Arnold.¹³⁶ The “primary purpose” of art, Spencer counters, is “neither instruction nor culture but pleasure,” and music especially diminishes in power whenever we attempt to assign it any “higher meaning.”¹³⁷ Even art’s “culture-effect”—its ability to “awaken [one’s] higher nature” by appealing to more “refined and noble” feelings—is secondary, for Spencer, to its capacity to satisfy the aesthetic appetite.¹³⁸ In “Barbaric Art,” another essay from the same collection, he cautions his readers against styles of art that threaten larger political trends toward “Imperialism and Re-barbarization.”¹³⁹ While he singles out the artist and critic William Morris—an associate of both the Arts and Crafts movement and the Aesthetic Movement—Spencer aims his critique less at Morris’s aestheticism than at his preference for medieval design. The medieval period, to Spencer, was fraught with a superstition, militancy, and despotism in which contemporary art was complicit: a renewed vogue for the medieval aesthetic, he fears, could once again enable “coercive” regimes by socializing individuals to admire, and thus tolerate, the autocrat’s ornamental pomp.¹⁴⁰

Both “The Purpose of Art” and “Barbaric Art,” two of Spencer’s final statements on the subject, thus leave unquestioned the basic tenets of the evolutionary aesthetics that he developed in the 1870s and 1880s: first, that the primary focus of aesthetic analysis should be the spectator or listener rather than the art-object itself, and second, that aesthetic culture can have either beneficial or pernicious effects on social development. Along with his theory of play, these

¹³⁶ Spencer, “The Purpose of Art,” in *Facts and Comments* (New York: D. Appleton, 1902), 44.

¹³⁷ Spencer, “The Purpose of Art,” 48.

¹³⁸ Spencer, “The Purpose of Art,” 48.

¹³⁹ Spencer, “Barbaric Art,” in *Facts and Comments*, 269.

¹⁴⁰ “Barbaric Art” represents Spencer’s limited foray into the alarmism of late nineteenth-century degeneration discourse. Spencer’s progressivism, however, remained incompatible with the premises underlying much of degeneration literature, especially Max Nordau’s and Cesare Lombroso’s respective polemics. Spencer, “Barbaric Art,” 265, 267.

claims about taste and evolutionary development were among Spencer's most significant interventions in the broader field of aesthetics. The philosopher and political theorist Bernard Bosanquet, in a revealing passage from his encyclopedic *History of Aesthetic* (1892), hails Spencer as one of the few English writers to make a "real contribution" to aesthetic theory.¹⁴¹ However inept or outdated, Bosanquet continues, Spencer deserves credit for recognizing the real "value of beauty for human life."¹⁴² As Bosanquet's assessment shows us, Spencer's classification of aesthetic experience as an elevated form of play was not a dismissal of beauty and art: on the contrary, Spencer believed that play would determine humankind's evolutionary destiny, precisely because play was utterly noncritical in day-to-day life.

III. Evolutionary Aesthetics and the Movement to Aestheticism

Darwin's and Spencer's respective theories of the beautiful, far from remaining ensconced in the sciences, helped usher in the innovative methods of art criticism that came to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Ian Small observes in *Conditions for Criticism* (1991), both Darwin and Spencer made decisive interventions in the discipline of aesthetics by establishing "that aesthetic response could be investigated scientifically"—a view, Small explains, that "was never seriously doubted until the last years of the century."¹⁴³ Spencer's application of economic and psychological theories to this burgeoning field, Small further argues, was particularly instrumental in the rise of a new, recognizably aestheticist approach to cultural criticism in the 1870s. This new form of criticism, which Small associates

¹⁴¹ Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*, 2nd ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 441.

¹⁴² Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*, 2.

¹⁴³ Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 69.

with the impressionistic prose of Pater and Swinburne, “assert[ed] that subjective—rather than inter-subjective, communal, or objective—experiences of art were the only ones which were valuable or indeed possible.”¹⁴⁴ As such, this critical method broke from an older school of criticism that presupposed art’s capacity to express what Small terms “shared symbolic knowledge.”¹⁴⁵ Small points out that these critical approaches were epistemologically antithetical: the older criticism focused on “art-objects, their origin and what they expressed,” while the new approach “limited its concern to ‘aesthetic states’ or attitudes (and, in doing so, to psychological affects).”¹⁴⁶ By treating the art object “only as the cause of a sensation or an emotional condition in the spectator, listener, or reader,” Small observes, psychologists such as Spencer, Bain, and Sully erected a scientific framework for the impressionistic style of criticism.¹⁴⁷ Spencer’s aesthetics thus underwrote the view—one central to the Aesthetic Movement—that art had no absolute moral, social, or communicative purpose beyond the feelings it stimulated in an observer. It is on these grounds that Swinburne defends his contentious collection *Poems and Ballads* (1866): as he explains in his pamphlet *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866), good poetry does not express the “author’s personal feelings” on issues of morality or faith, but instead conveys strong emotions such as “fierce fondness” and “passionate

¹⁴⁴ Small, *Conditions for Criticism*, 8.

¹⁴⁵ Small, *Conditions for Criticism*, 11.

¹⁴⁶ Small, *Conditions for Criticism*, 10.

¹⁴⁷ Bain’s work in the mid nineteenth century helped cement the theoretical hegemony of two assumptions about psychology: one, that conscious and unconscious mental processes occurred largely through association; and two, that these mental processes could ultimately be explained through the physiology of the brain and nervous system. Small calls this concept of psychology—shared by Spencer and Darwin—“affective psychology,” as it broke down consciousness into an “uncontrolled accumulation of impressions.” To the extent that affective psychologists emphasized the “fragmentary nature of sensation and...perception,” they often considered perception unreliable and highly subjective. As we shall see in later chapters, the solipsistic implications of this psychology both troubled and intrigued aesthetic thinkers, especially Pater and Clifford. Small, *Conditions for Criticism*, 71, 65-66.

despair.”¹⁴⁸ As Small suggests, Swinburne’s claim that poetry should concern itself with arousing feelings in the reader tacitly draws on the aesthetics that Spencer and Darwin helped popularize. More provocatively, Swinburne’s wholehearted espousal of affective aesthetics allows him to argue that his verse has achieved a level of artistic “purity” higher than the moralistic “prudery” of his critics.¹⁴⁹

Similarly, Regenia Gagnier credits Darwin and Spencer for initiating subjective conceptions of aesthetics structured around what she describes as the “pleasured body” of the observer.¹⁵⁰ As Gagnier argues, developments in science as well as the economy gave rise in the mid nineteenth century to an “aesthetics of taste or consumption.”¹⁵¹ In the last quarter of the century, Gagnier continues, this aesthetics of taste supplanted an older “theory of creative production” that focused on the artist as the source of aesthetic meaning (Ruskin and Morris, Gagnier adds, were the most prominent supporters of this critical paradigm).¹⁵² For proponents of the new aesthetics of taste, including Allen, Pater, and Wilde, the art object could only be analyzed in terms of its psychological and physiological effects on an audience, which consumed art as they would any other luxury good: art was valuable, in this view, insofar as it pleased its consumer. Spencer’s and Darwin’s respective theories, although they differed on important points, generally agreed that the quality of beauty inhered in the observer’s sensory perception of an external object, not in the object itself. Spencer argued that the aesthetic sense was immanent in the internalized, physiological process of play; according to Darwinian sexual selection, the

¹⁴⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1866), 6, 11.

¹⁴⁹ Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, 21.

¹⁵⁰ Regenia Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics, in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 130.

¹⁵¹ Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure,” 130.

¹⁵² Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure,” 134.

sense of beauty evolved because generations of spectators (typically females) preferred certain phenotypes to others. For many Victorian aesthetes—particularly those who had a firm grounding in evolutionary theory, such as Wilde and Lee—Spencer and Darwin thus corroborated the notion that aesthetic perception took place entirely within the spectator’s body. As I explain in later chapters, many of these critics looked to the cultivation and refinement of taste, rather than the creation of art, as a means for improving aesthetic culture at large.

The ideological congruencies between aestheticism and evolutionary aesthetics were apparent to Victorian readers and writers: early reviews of *Descent*, for instance, immediately identified in its scientific approach to beauty an implicit endorsement of the emerging Aesthetic Movement. As Gowan Dawson observes, several of these critics charged Darwin with sanctioning certain subversive ideas—including materialism, atheism, and promiscuity—that they associated with the “lascivious philosophies of the corrupt pagan world.”¹⁵³ In the *Edinburgh Review*, the geologist William Boyd Dawkins warns that Darwin’s evolutionism threatens nothing less than “a revolution in thought...which will shake society to its very foundations.”¹⁵⁴ While Richard Owen, as we have seen, once dismissed Darwin’s “imaginative temperament” as merely unscientific, Dawkins offers a far more sinister reading of Darwin’s prose by asserting a resemblance between the visionary naturalist and the “heathen poet” Lucretius.¹⁵⁵ A follower of Epicurus, Lucretius was an atomic materialist who believed that everything in the universe was reducible to finite particles of matter. These particles, Lucretius explains in his first-century BCE poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), are neither

¹⁵³ Dawson, *Darwin*, 45.

¹⁵⁴ [William Boyd Dawkins], review of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, by Charles Darwin, *Edinburgh Review* 134 (1871): 196, 234-35.

¹⁵⁵ Owen, review of *Origin*, 503; Dawkins, review of *Descent*, 235.

created nor destroyed, but rather cycle through different forms for all eternity, in accordance with fixed natural law.¹⁵⁶ Importantly for Dawkins's critique of *Descent*, Lucretius also inveighs bitterly against religion and superstition, which he considers inherently violent.¹⁵⁷ For Lucretius, scientific investigation is an act of heroism, and the concomitant demystification of the world a moral imperative. He thus concludes his introduction to *De Rerum Natura* with a scientific call to arms:

Then it be ours with steady mind to clasp
The purport of the skies—the law behind
The wandering courses of the sun and moon;
To scan the powers that speed all life below;
But most to see with reasonable eyes
Of what the mind, of what the soul is made.¹⁵⁸

Dawkins's review suggests that Darwin and his scientific contemporaries obey, almost to the point of blasphemy, Lucretius's command to investigate the material composition of the "soul." In *Descent*, for instance, Darwin provides an evolutionary explanation for the "ennobling belief in God," a faculty that "naturally follows from other mental powers."¹⁵⁹ Although he attempts to assuage religious readers by distinguishing the evolution of religion from the "higher" matter of the existence of a deity, Darwin's gesture toward orthodoxy is trivial in comparison to his lengthy discussions of animism and other primitive forms of belief.¹⁶⁰ For Dawkins, Lucretius's

¹⁵⁶ Frank O. Copley's introduction to his translation of Lucretius provides a useful overview of Epicurean thought and Lucretius's contributions to the tradition. Frank O. Copley, introduction to *The Nature of Things*, by Lucretius (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 7-20.

¹⁵⁷ Victorian readers had access to several verse and prose translations of Lucretius. H. A. J. Munro's 1864 translation, which went through several editions, was popular in Darwin's time. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. E. Leonard (New York: Dover, 2004), 4.

¹⁵⁸ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ Darwin, *Descent*, 151.

¹⁶⁰ Darwin, *Descent*, 116.

impiously inquisitive spirit lives on in Darwin and his evolutionist supporters, all of whom subject the once-sacrosanct realms of morality and faith to a menacing scientific empiricism.

Even more shockingly for Dawkins, Darwin's palpable relish for beautiful adaptations—the products, in his theory, of sexual selection—also seems to echo Lucretius's invocations of Venus. For the atheistic Lucretius, Venus is not a real deity but instead a symbol for the “procreant” forces that guide the cosmos: since these forces spur civilization and give rise to the richness of material experience, Lucretius ritually thanks the goddess for all that is “joyful” and “lovely” in the world.¹⁶¹ Like Lucretius, Dawkins contends, Darwin makes sexuality “the dominant force of life” by attributing the sense of beauty—from its lowest to its highest cultural expressions—to countless consummations of erotic desire.¹⁶² In Dawkins's estimation, the theory of sexual selection endows desire with transcendent, semi-mystical qualities, even as it reduces mind and spirit to physiological processes. (Elsewhere in the same issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, Thomas Spencer Baynes attacks Swinburne in similar terms: Swinburne's verse, Baynes remarks, immodestly exalts the body by depicting “sensual enjoyment” as the “crown of life.”¹⁶³) In this context, Dawkins's comparison of Darwin to Lucretius conveys an unstated accusation of sexual immorality—an indecency made more insidious by its incongruity with what Dawkins calls the “purity and elevation of [Darwin's] own life and character.”¹⁶⁴

Dawkins was hardly alone in his dismay at the recent turn in Darwin's studies: the anatomist St.

¹⁶¹ Lucretius, *Nature*, 1, 2.

¹⁶² Dawkins, review of *Descent*, 235.

¹⁶³ Baynes praises Swinburne's prosody but chides him for using his poetic “gifts” for “vicious ends”: namely, the “glorification of sensual appetites and sensual indulgences.” Baynes's review appeared one month before Robert Buchanan's better-known critique, “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” which decried the materialism of poets such as Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Dawson, *Darwin*, 46-47; [Thomas Spencer Baynes], “Swinburne's Poems,” review of *Songs before Sunrise*, by Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Edinburgh Review* 134 (1871): 83, 72.

¹⁶⁴ Dawkins, review of *Descent*, 235.

George Mivart, in the *Quarterly Review*, likewise warns his readers to remain vigilant against *Descent's* “radically false metaphysical system,” which Darwin presents in a seductively “clear and attractive” style.¹⁶⁵ Darwin’s contemporaries, as Dawkins’s and Mivart’s reviews demonstrate, identified his theory with sexual licentiousness and neo-Hellenic materialism.

As such, Darwin’s scientific elevation of sexuality reflected the ways in which early aesthetic poets such as Swinburne addressed the body, particularly their assumption of what Dawson calls a “sensuous materialist epistemology.”¹⁶⁶ Consider, for example, Swinburne’s “Anactoria,” a dramatic monologue that appeared in the controversial *Poems and Ballads*. As we will see in the next chapter, Swinburne’s poetry resonates with several aspects of progressive evolutionary thought, but for now I want to foreground how “Anactoria” literalizes the aesthetics of consumption that Darwin and other scientists advanced. In the monologue, the lesbian poet Sappho addresses her beloved Anactoria, who has left Sappho for another lover. Embittered by her abandonment, Sappho alternately bemoans Anactoria’s coldness and fantasizes about enjoying her sexually once again: “That I could drink thy veins as wine,” Sappho cries, “and eat / Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet / Thy body were abolished and consumed, / And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!”¹⁶⁷ Here, Sappho’s desire for Anactoria’s beauty is a desire not only to see, but also to cannibalize Anactoria’s body and integrate its physical atoms into her own flesh. Significantly, the poem acknowledges no substantive difference between the bodily function of eating and the sensation of beauty. Although older critics such as Ruskin and Mill often considered aesthetic emotion a spiritual experience, beauty in “Anactoria” is a distinctly

¹⁶⁵ [St. George Mivart], review of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, by Charles Darwin, *Quarterly Review* 131 (1871): 89, 47.

¹⁶⁶ Dawson, *Darwin*, 19.

¹⁶⁷ Swinburne, “Anactoria,” in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin, 2000), 50.

physiological phenomenon. So, too, is poetry: Swinburne's Sappho asserts that she will immortalize her beloved in her famous "songs" as well as in her own body.¹⁶⁸ As Yopie Prins argues in her reading of the poem, "Anactoria" is thus a "song of the body" that also seeks to "resuscitate the Sapphic corpus as a living body of song."¹⁶⁹ That Swinburne parallels Sappho's aesthetic consumption of Anactoria's body with her creative endeavors further conflates physiological experience with supposedly higher cultural pursuits. Certainly, Swinburne's poetry does not respond directly to Darwin's or Spencer's work: the poet inherited his corporeal aesthetics from both his Classical education and his reading of French decadent writers such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire. Nonetheless, Darwin and Spencer lent scientific validity to the eroticized and embodied notion of beauty that Robert Buchanan, in his 1871 critique "The Fleshly School of Poetry," associates with Swinburne as well as Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁷⁰

Beyond sanctioning the notorious fleshliness of Swinburne's aesthetic poetry, Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary aesthetics also shaped literary discussions of beauty in the period. In particular, the progressive and escapist aspects of Darwin's and Spencer's aesthetics motivated a certain secular optimism that we can see more clearly in the work of George Meredith and his erstwhile protégé Thomas Hardy.¹⁷¹ As Gillian Beer and Richard C. Stephen have pointed out, both writers admired Darwin, and their work was similarly indebted to both Darwinian and

¹⁶⁸ Swinburne, "Anactoria," 54.

¹⁶⁹ Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 144.

¹⁷⁰ As I have already hinted, Buchanan's reactionary critique of aestheticism belonged to an entire genre of polemics that included Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) and Hugh E. M. Stutfield's "Tommyrotics" (1895). Thomas Maitland [Robert Buchanan], "The Fleshly School of Poetry," *Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 338.

¹⁷¹ Meredith and Hardy met through their work at the publishing house Chapman and Hall. Although Meredith greatly respected his younger colleague, one biographer notes that Meredith was nonetheless "grieved by Hardy's pessimism." Mervyn Jones, *The Amazing Victorian: A Life of George Meredith* (London: Constable, 1999), 222.

Spencerian evolutionary theory.¹⁷² Meredith's and Hardy's writings, I would add, also evince an intense interest in evolutionary aesthetics and its ramifications for the evolutionary worldview. Their respective depictions of the blush, for instance, demonstrate an awareness of Darwin's work on expression. From Darwin, both writers had gleaned that the blush was an unstable signifier: their novels consequently describe blushes that alternately indicate shame, innocence, pleasure, embarrassment, and a host of other contradictory emotions. As the astute Mrs. Mountstuart explains to a blushing Clara Middleton, the protagonist of Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), "flaming cheeks won't suffice" as evidence of emotion since blushes indicate little more than "dim apprehension" acting upon a "nervous frame."¹⁷³ Similarly, in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), the lovely Tess Durbeyfield blushes for such diverse reasons as "joy," "excitement," and gratitude, while her rakish cousin Alec Stoke-D'Urberville "superimpose[s]" a flush of libidinous excitement over his already "heated" face.¹⁷⁴ The narrator of *Tess* also reverses our physiognomic expectations about the beauty of countenance by connecting Tess's blushes only tenuously to her emotional state: "when she was pink she was feeling less than when pale," the narrator informs us, "her more perfect beauty accorded with her less elevated mood; her more intense mood with her less perfect beauty."¹⁷⁵ In keeping with Darwin's and Spencer's aesthetics, Tess displays her "best face physically" under the influence of serene emotions, including her feelings of "sweet pleasure" and "rekindled" energy, her pleasant sense

¹⁷² In *Darwin's Plots*, Beer analyzes at length Hardy's adaptation of Darwinian ideas, including his Romantic materialism. Stevenson discusses Meredith's relationship to contemporary science in several contexts. Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 220-41; Richard C. Stevenson, *The Experimental Impulse in George Meredith's Fiction* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 101.

¹⁷³ The worldly-wise Mrs. Mountstuart adds that even "the old serpent can blush like an innocent maid on occasion." George Meredith, *The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative*, ed. Richard C. Stevenson (Toronto: Broadview, 2010), 393, 318.

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, ed. Scott Elledge (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 193, 173, 251.

¹⁷⁵ Hardy, *Tess*, 81.

of “Pagan” kinship with the landscape, and her rediscovered “zest for life.”¹⁷⁶ Tess’s personal beauty, as Hardy represents it, bespeaks little more than an overall feeling of wellbeing.

More generally, Hardy’s and Meredith’s representations of the beautiful evoke positive, if not always optimistic, conceptions of aesthetic pleasure as a temporary escape from the everyday struggle for existence. Hardy’s vision of the natural world was especially bleak, in part because he subscribed to a relatively unforgiving model of “hard” inheritance that he derived from the German biologist August Weismann.¹⁷⁷ Beer argues that Hardy discerned in this biological determinism a kind of “malign tautology”: a brutal logic that justified any behavior so long as it resulted in evolutionary success.¹⁷⁸ The sole source of relief from this oppressive cosmology, Hardy suggests in *Tess*, lies in what the narrator calls (in reference to Tess’s lover, Angel Clare) an “aesthetic, sensuous, Pagan pleasure in natural life.”¹⁷⁹ While the novel indicts several of Angel’s character flaws—including his lack of sympathy, which leads him to reject Tess after he learns that Alec once raped her—Hardy’s prose mirrors Angel’s sensualism in its many interludes of vivid and enthusiastic description.¹⁸⁰ In some of the novel’s most luminous moments, Tess and Angel take refuge from “cruel nature’s law” in the “irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere,” whether in the “oozing fatness and warm ferments” of the Wessex countryside, the dazzling “polychrome” of weeds, or the “thin notes of a

¹⁷⁶ Hardy, *Tess*, 81-82.

¹⁷⁷ Weismann argued that the genetic makeup of offspring was determined entirely by germ cells, not somatic cells, thus negating the possibility of use/disuse inheritance. On this subject, Weismann was more “Darwinian” than Darwin: like Hardy, Weismann defended the theory of natural selection even at the nadir of its acceptance in the 1890s. August Weismann, *Essays upon Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems*, ed. Edward B. Poulton, Selmar Schönland, and Arthur E. Shipley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), 104.

¹⁷⁸ Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 240.

¹⁷⁹ Hardy, *Tess*, 124.

¹⁸⁰ Hardy, *Tess*, 124.

second-hand harp.”¹⁸¹ For Hardy, as for Darwin, the enjoyment of beauty constitutes a way of being in the world that liberates the individual, however briefly, from the day-to-day pressures of Darwinian competition. For this reason, the novel’s only hope for “human progress” lies in the advent of what the narrator describes as a “finer intuition,” a keener sexual (and also aesthetic) instinct that could have attracted Angel to Tess before she ever encountered Alec.¹⁸² Although the narrator dismisses his speculation as a counterfactual—Tess, he states, is tragically “doomed to be seen and coveted...by the wrong man”—the very possibility of progress in *Tess* is inextricable from the more tractable process of sexual selection.¹⁸³ Had Angel “select[ed] Tess” earlier on, the narrator suggests, their marriage might have been a social and genetic success, culminating not in “Sorrow”—Tess’s quixotic name for her “tender and puny” child by Alec, which dies in infancy—but in healthy, happy offspring.¹⁸⁴

Meredith, by contrast, synthesized contemporary evolutionary theories into a far more optimistic worldview: one that “saved him,” as his biographer Mervyn Jones observes, “both from a relapse into traditional religion and from a surrender to hopeless pessimism.”¹⁸⁵ As we can see in his life and work, Meredith’s affirmative, even neo-Pagan attitude toward the cosmos was entirely consonant with his modern scientific rationalism.¹⁸⁶ His circle of acquaintances and correspondents included a diverse assortment of literary and scientific freethinkers, including the

¹⁸¹ Hardy, *Tess*, 115-17, 81, 96-7.

¹⁸² Hardy, *Tess*, 31.

¹⁸³ Hardy, *Tess*, 30.

¹⁸⁴ Hardy, *Tess*, 95, 72.

¹⁸⁵ Jones, *Amazing Victorian*, 138.

¹⁸⁶ J. B. Priestley, in his retrospective *George Meredith* (1926), calls Meredith a “pure pagan” who took “Evolution in his stride” by integrating evolutionary ideas into his brand of pantheism. Qtd. from Jones, *Amazing Victorian*, 128.

poets Rossetti and Swinburne (with whom Meredith lived for a time), the popular science writers Grant Allen and Edward Clodd, and the agnostic critic Leslie Stephen. While Meredith probably never met Darwin or Spencer in person, Jones makes note of the writer's special "rapport" with Darwin, and Meredith recommended Spencer's work to a friend on at least one occasion.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, Meredith appears to have accepted the scientific accuracy of evolution without the existential anguish of his fellow poets Tennyson and Hardy: in "Whimper of Sympathy" (1887), for instance, Meredith ridicules an unnamed "sweet sentimentalist" (likely Tennyson) for his histrionic, "totter-knee'd" verse.¹⁸⁸

Similar to Hardy, however, Meredith was acutely aware of the brutality of Darwinian nature. We can see the impact of Meredith's reading of *Origin* in the unusually cynical tone of his semi-autobiographical sonnet sequence *Modern Love* (1862), which chronicles the decline and breakdown of a marriage.¹⁸⁹ As modern-day scholars such as Arthur L. Simpson, Jr. observe, the poem's bitterness reflects not just the circumstances of Meredith's failed first marriage, but also the poet's pervasive disillusionment with the post-Darwinian world.¹⁹⁰ In one revealing sonnet, the speaker ruminates on the pitilessness of "Nature," who laughingly professes to "play for Seasons; not Eternities": "scarce any retrospection in her eye," the speaker continues,

¹⁸⁷ Jones, *Amazing Victorian*, 128; Meredith to André Raffalovich, 16 January 1884, in *Letters of George Meredith, Collected and Edited by His Son*, vol. 2, 1882-1909, ed. William Maxse Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 352.

¹⁸⁸ According to Jones, Meredith had both political and artistic differences with the older Tennyson, although Tennyson had been supportive of Meredith's career. From the 1860s onward, Meredith was especially critical of what he saw as Tennyson's complicity in a plutocratic social order. Jones, *Amazing Victorian*, 176; Meredith, "Whimper of Sympathy," in *The Poems of George Meredith*, vol. 1, ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 342.

¹⁸⁹ Arthur L. Simpson, Jr., "Meredith's Pessimistic Humanism: A New Reading of *Modern Love*," *Modern Philology* 4 (1970): 341.

¹⁹⁰ Meredith's first wife, Mary Peacock, left him for the painter Henry Wallis and died shortly thereafter. These details bear rough similarities to the plot of *Modern Love*. The speaker, having grown distant from his wife, discovers her infidelity and engages in an affair of his own. The couple's attempts to reconcile fail, and the poem sequence ends with the wife's suicide. Jones, *Amazing Victorian*, 80-90.

“for she the laws of growth most deeply knows, / Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag—there, an urn.”¹⁹¹ Nature, as Meredith depicts her here, disseminates both life and death in equal measure, and she is correspondingly less adversarial than Tennyson’s iconic vision of “Nature, red in tooth and claw.”¹⁹² But Meredith’s portrayal of nature in *Modern Love* also diverges considerably from the image he presents in early pastoral lyrics such as “South-West Wind in the Woodland” (1851), in which the speaker affirms that “every elemental power / Is kindred to our hearts.”¹⁹³ In the early 1850s, before Darwin published *Origin*, Meredith could picture the earth in Romantic sympathy with humankind: by the time he composed *Modern Love*, however, he understood that nature’s cosmic processes were crushingly indifferent to the solitary organism. By personifying nature as an inconstant woman, Meredith in *Modern Love* retroactively dissolves the marital “union” between humankind and nature that the speaker of “South-West Wind” once declared to be “eternal.”¹⁹⁴ In this context, the plot of *Modern Love*—the story of a world-weary husband’s alienation from his wife—reenacts microcosmically what Meredith sees as a larger crisis in the relationship of humankind to the cosmos.

Many of Meredith’s early-career nature poems seek to repair this rift by concertedly aestheticizing the natural world—while recognizing, at the same time, the material reality of a universe in constant flux. The speaker of “Ode to the Spirit of the Earth in Autumn” (1862), for instance, revels in the sumptuous sights and sounds of a spectacular storm. In the speaker’s imaginative vision, trees become dryads and nature transforms into the awe-inspiring but generous “Bacchante Mother,” whose fecundity is evident in the rich sensory stimuli that she

¹⁹¹ Meredith, *Modern Love*, in *Poems*, 123.

¹⁹² Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 41.

¹⁹³ Meredith, “South-West Wind in the Woodland,” in *Poems*, 28.

¹⁹⁴ Meredith, “South-West Wind in the Woodland,” 29.

offers.¹⁹⁵ Midway through the poem, the speaker's orgiastic "night of Pagan glee" precipitates soberer contemplation about his place within the cosmos: he imagines his life "shining a moment" before being disintegrated and reabsorbed into the "onward-hurrying stream" of material life.¹⁹⁶ Here, Meredith recalls Lucretius's atomism as well as its modern iterations in Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary theories. More important, Meredith's description of material flux also anticipates Pater's foundational essay "Poems by William Morris" (1868), which reduces physical life to a "perpetual motion" of "elements" and "forces."¹⁹⁷ We can see in Meredith's "Ode" the beginnings of this aesthetic engagement with contemporary scientific thought: in the face of a vast and ever-shifting cosmos, Meredith's speaker concludes that the only way to "attain the glee / Of things without a destiny" is by taking immediate pleasure in "the joy of motion, the rapture of being."¹⁹⁸ The speaker thus asks "Great Mother Nature" to "teach [him], like thee, / To kiss the season and shun regrets," so that he may experience a "life thoroughly lived" in the present.¹⁹⁹ As I explain in the next chapter, Pater responded to Darwinian evolution by cultivating an aesthetically sensitive temperament that might make the most of life's fleeting pleasures—the Aesthetic Movement largely coalesced around this ideal. Before Pater began articulating the tenets of aestheticism in the late 1860s, Meredith was

¹⁹⁵ Meredith, "Ode to the Spirit of the Earth in Autumn," in *Poems*, 198.

¹⁹⁶ Meredith, "Ode to the Spirit of the Earth in Autumn," 196, 198.

¹⁹⁷ Tennyson also addresses Lucretius's philosophical legacy in his dramatic monologue "Lucretius," which appeared the same year as Pater's "Poems by William Morris." While Tennyson's association of Epicurean atomism with nihilism—Lucretius eventually commits suicide—departs from Meredith's and Pater's materialisms, "Lucretius" does capture the emotionally fraught nature of atomism in the later nineteenth century. There are hints of Darwin in Tennyson's representation of the Lucretian worldview: Lucretius is horrified by Nature's ability to "smile / Balmier and nobler from her bath of storm," and his "manlike" suicide is partly an attempt to escape his "beastlike" self. Walter Pater, "Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review* 34 (1868): 310; Tennyson, "Lucretius," *Macmillan's Magazine* 18 (1868): 6-8.

¹⁹⁸ Meredith, "Ode to the Spirit of the Earth in Autumn," 199.

¹⁹⁹ Meredith, "Ode to the Spirit of the Earth in Autumn," 198, 199.

exploring the ways in which recent scientific understandings of nature justified, even demanded, the gratification of aesthetic desires.

The Bacchanalian pleasures that Meredith proposes in “Ode,” however, are ultimately solitary rather than social: while a “life thoroughly lived” can reconcile the speaker to his own mortality, it can offer him no hope of a “destiny” beyond the moment of death. In *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883), his belated follow-up to *Modern Love*, Meredith consequently develops his Pagan relish for nature into a more sweeping humanistic philosophy that might recuperate the possibility of long-term evolutionary progress. To this end, in the intervening decades between *Modern Love* and *Joy of Earth*, Meredith adapted Spencer’s teleological model of evolution—which, as we have seen, was as prominent as Darwin’s—into his own secular program for the advancement of the human race. Humankind, according to Meredith’s reading of evolutionary history, has proceeded through three stages of development: “blood,” “brain,” and “spirit,” each of which he associates with a component of human nature. “Each of each in sequent birth,” he asserts in “The Woods of Westermain” (1883), “Blood and brain and spirit, three / ... / Join for true felicity.”²⁰⁰ For Meredith, a complete life required a “union” of all three of these qualities—corporeal vigor, intellect, and an ennobled sense of self—but he nonetheless conceived of the triad in a hierarchical way, as markers of evolutionary development.²⁰¹ As his biographer George Macauley Trevelyan observes in *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* (1906), “soul is to [Meredith] the flower of evolution,” an “autochthonous” product of nature that both emerges from and transcends the “primitive slime of Mother Earth.”²⁰² Like

²⁰⁰ Meredith, “The Woods of Westermain,” in *Poems*, 217.

²⁰¹ Meredith, “The Woods of Westermain,” 217.

²⁰² George Macauley Trevelyan, *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith* (London: Archibald Constable, 1909), 178, 177.

Spencer and Darwin, then, Meredith defines evolutionary progress as the gradual taming of humankind's bestial instincts through the development of more humane faculties—faculties that, importantly, are immanent in the animal life of the body.

Meredith's blood-brain-spirit triad undergirds many of the themes in *Joy of Earth*, including its faith in the inherent good of civilization and its commitment to the viability of generational improvement. As John Holmes argues, Meredith's verses from this period often “urge us to repudiate the animal within and strive towards a higher level of evolution.”²⁰³ The sonnet “Progress,” for instance, counters its pessimistic interlocutor with an anecdote about two nations that “deferred / The bloody settlement of their disputes” in order to tend to their struggling crops: their prioritization of communal wellbeing over brute “interests” and “base hates” is emblematic, the speaker proposes, of humankind's overall movement away from its animal origins.²⁰⁴ Similarly, the longer lyric “Earth and Man” offers a heartening allegory for humankind's evolution under the nourishing, though distant patronage of a maternal Earth. Over the course of the poem, the titular Man gradually passes through the three stages of development and eventually achieves “order, high discourse, / And decency.”²⁰⁵ When Man's spirit falters, Meredith's Earth encourages him to find solace in the prospect of future generations rather than the religious “fables of the Above”: “live in thy offspring,” Earth says to Man, “as I live in mine.”²⁰⁶

²⁰³ John Holmes, *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 59.

²⁰⁴ Meredith, “Progress,” in *Poems*, 291.

²⁰⁵ Meredith, “Earth and Man,” in *Poems*, 270.

²⁰⁶ In a subtler way, Meredith also explores the blood-brain-spirit triad in his prose works: his widely read essay “On the Idea of Comedy” (1877), for example, invests evolutionary potential in the “sensitiveness to the comic laugh,” which he heralds as both a “step in civilization” and an index of “refinement in men.” Guided by this reformist notion of comedy, his novel *The Egoist* uses the monstrously self-absorbed Sir Willoughby Patterne in

Significantly for our understanding of evolutionary aestheticism, Meredith's poetic invocations of the triad demonstrate how pleasurable sensory experience came to occupy a crucial place in literary conceptions of evolutionary progress during the period. His long, often cryptic poem "The Woods of Westermain" offers a particularly nuanced account of the important roles that sensation and beauty play in his optimism. In the poem's first lines, the speaker invites his audience to embark on a journey through the "enchanted woods" of Westermain, which serve as an extended metaphor for the arduous process of self-development.²⁰⁷ Over the course of the poem, the speaker guides us through the many wonders and dangers of the woods, at the same time narrating our progression through blood, brain, and spirit. As he explains toward the end of "Westermain," this spiritual awakening can only occur through the experience of "pleasures pure": "pleasures," he further elaborates, "that through blood run sane, / Quickening spirit from the brain."²⁰⁸ In contrast with the facile Bacchanalian glee of Meredith's early "Ode," "pleasure" in "Westermain" demands a disciplined, penetrating, and yet noticeably aestheticized, vision of the earth, which Meredith models in the poem's plentiful metaphors. The enjoyment of "sane" and "pure" sensory pleasure nourishes (or in his procreative verb, "quicken") spirit by "unfold[ing]" to the otherwise cold intellect "the heaven of things"—that is, the true majesty of the material universe and the dignity of a civilized life within it.²⁰⁹ (His poem "Melampus," also from *Joy of Earth*, recasts this ideal vision as specifically proto-scientific: Melampus, the titular physician and soothsayer, walks the earth "luminous-eyed," his "ears...charged / With tones of

order to satirize what he considers "primitive egoism." Meredith, "Earth and Man," 272; "On the Idea of Comedy and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit," *New Quarterly Magazine* 8 (1877): 35; *The Egoist*, 271.

²⁰⁷ Meredith, "The Woods of Westermain," 207.

²⁰⁸ Meredith, "The Woods of Westermain," 217.

²⁰⁹ Meredith, "The Woods of Westermain," 223.

love,” and his sensual passion for nature grants him privileged insight into its inner workings.²¹⁰) Just as Darwin, with his much-mooted imaginative powers, grasped the true “beauty and infinite complexity” of evolutionary process, Meredith scrutinizes nature carefully and takes comfort in the rich beauties of its infinite, progressive order. Inducting readers into this mode of joyous apprehension emerges as one of the chief missions of “Westermain”: nature “show[s] a kind face and sweet,” the speaker implores, “look you with the soul you see’t.”²¹¹ As Tess Cosslett observes, Meredith thus replaces a “sentimental” view of nature with a “rational attitude” characterized by “selflessness, respect for and delight in the object itself, sympathetic insight, receptivity, [and] alertness to hidden beauty.”²¹²

Through these works, we can trace Meredith’s reevaluation of the evolutionary possibilities of beauty, a decades-long shift in his thinking that approximately maps onto the history of evolutionary aesthetics that I have delineated. In the early poems *Modern Love* and “Ode,” which appeared shortly after Darwin published *Origin*, Meredith palpably struggles with the new view of nature that Darwin uncovered.²¹³ Many of Meredith’s early nature poems also answer the naturalist’s call to “admire” nature despite its violence: hence Meredith’s use of classical and druidic landscapes—which aim for charm rather than verisimilitude—and his famously elaborate prosody.²¹⁴ In the decades after *Origin*, as we have seen, Darwin’s and

²¹⁰ Meredith, “Melampus,” in *Poems*, 248.

²¹¹ Meredith, “The Woods of Westermain,” 209.

²¹² Tess Cosslett, *The “Scientific Movement” and Victorian Literature* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 123.

²¹³ Darwin, *Origin*, 184.

²¹⁴ Meredith’s tendencies toward mixed metaphor and complicated, highly wrought syntax can make both his poetry and his prose difficult to understand. Trevelyan addresses at length the “charges of eccentricity” and “obscurity” that critics sometimes leveled at Meredith’s style, particularly those “tricks of omission, which, when they do not violate grammar, at least confuse the construction and delay the appearance of meaning.” In his dialogic essay “The Decay of Lying” (1889, revised 1891), Wilde’s speaker Vivian calls Meredith’s style “chaos illuminated by flashes of lightning.” Trevelyan, *The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith*, 67, 74; Oscar Wilde, “The

Spencer's respective aesthetic theories helped recast evolutionary thought: Meredith's later poems, such as "Earth and Man" and "Westermain," reflect this more optimistic and redemptive evolutionism. For the agnostic Meredith, the recognition of a positive cosmos—a recognition that requires a certain level of aesthetic sensitivity—invests individual lives with evolutionary purpose and constitutes the only viable form of religious feeling. Hardy, by contrast, never accepted the Spencerian reinterpretation of evolutionary theory that his mentor gladly embraced. While Hardy always appreciated the lush beauty of the natural world, his nature poetry from this period is fraught with a sense of clear-eyed despair that no flight of imagination can overcome. In his anti-Romantic lyric "In a Wood" (1887), for instance, Hardy's demoralized speaker hopes to find in "nature a soft release / From men's unrest": he is horrified to discover, however, that even the trees must fight for resources and are "to men akin— / Combatants all!"²¹⁵ Meredith's neo-Pagan optimism, which looked to nature for confirmation of the teleological structure of the universe, in many ways represents the obverse of Hardy's pessimistic materialism.

Meredith's lyric "Hymn to Colour," from his 1888 collection *A Reading of Earth*, neatly captures the connection between evolutionary aesthetics and progress that many aesthetes—not just Meredith but also Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde—assimilated into their own work. Like "Westermain" and "Earth and Man," "Hymn to Colour" uses a dreamlike allegory to explain the natural processes by which individuals as well as societies grow and improve. In the poem's first stanzas, the speaker walks alongside the personifications of Life and Death; they are soon joined by the figure of Love, who undertakes to teach the speaker about the intricacies of the human spirit. Love proclaims "Colour" the "soul's bridegroom": in his description, the experience of

Decay of Lying," in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.

²¹⁵ Hardy, "In a Wood," in *Wessex Poems and other Verses: Poems of the Past and the Present*, vol. 18 of *The Writings of Thomas Hardy in Prose and Verse* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898), 81.

color is a kind of sexual consummation in which the feminized soul wanders “through widening chambers of surprise to where / Throbs rapture near an end that aye recedes.”²¹⁶ In a recapitulation of Darwin’s central argument in *Descent*, Meredith figures Colour as an alluring lover who continuously stimulates and fulfills (but never fully quenches) the erotic desire for sensual pleasure. This desire for and ability to appreciate beauty, Love further explains to the speaker, ennobles the soul by lending “her homeliness in the desert air, / And sovereignty in spaciousness.”²¹⁷

In the triumphant second half of “Hymn to Colour,” Meredith extols the spiritual and evolutionary potential of the aesthetic sense. Love, continuing his lesson to the speaker, attributes humankind’s higher powers to the “joy of sight”: “this way,” he sings, “have men come out of brutishness / To spell the letters of the sky and read / A reflex upon earth else meaningless.”²¹⁸ Humankind’s sexual attraction to the beautiful, Love explains here, inspires its impulse to invest meaning in the natural world by “read[ing]...upon” it, an act that for Meredith is both interpretive and creative (the importance of astute “reading” is a common refrain in Meredith’s works, including his collections *A Reading of Earth* and *A Reading of Life* [1901]). Interestingly, the poem remains ambivalent about the ontological accuracy of these readings: that is, the “reflex” that “men” perceive in nature may signify some genuine sympathy between earth and humankind, or (as the physiological denotation of “reflex” suggests) may simply emerge from the species’ innate tendency to anthropomorphize the external world. Certainly, much of Meredith’s optimistic nature poetry favors the former conclusion by insisting on humankind’s privileged relationship to a maternal natural world. Contemporary anthropology, however,

²¹⁶ Meredith, “Hymn to Colour,” in *Poems*, 450.

²¹⁷ Meredith, “Hymn to Colour,” 450.

²¹⁸ Meredith, “Hymn to Colour,” 451, 452.

offered a rational explanation for these animist feelings of kinship with nature: in his landmark study *Primitive Culture* (1871), which I also discuss in the next chapter, Edward Burnett Tylor traces all mythology to early “anthropomorphic myths of nature,” which arose, in turn, out of deep-seated psychological instincts common to all humans.²¹⁹ In an unspoken concession to the most recent science, “Hymn to Colour” both conspicuously declines to personify “earth” and, more important, acknowledges that the material world is “meaningless” except for the significance that humans “spell” or “read” upon it. Consequently, humankind owes its progress “out of brutishness” not to earth’s maternal generosity, but to its own aesthetic faculties: humans themselves, the poem claims, are responsible for their cultural and evolutionary development.

In the conclusion to “Hymn to Colour,” Meredith expands this humanistic idea into a rousing prediction of humankind’s evolutionary transcendence. Before parting, Love offers the speaker a prophetic and comforting vision of the future: “more gardens will [men] win than any lost; / The vile plucked out of them, the unlovely slain. / Not forfeiting the beast with which they are crossed, / To stature of the Gods will they attain.”²²⁰ In a continuation of the poem’s re-assessment of “earth,” Meredith chooses the garden as his central metaphor, rather than the woods that feature so prominently in his other poems. Unlike wild, uncultivated forest, the man-made garden evokes Darwinian discussions of artificial and sexual selection: discussions that privilege, as we have seen, novelty, choice, and pleasure over environmental constraint and the pressures of survival. This notion of selection looms large over Meredith’s image of the garden as a non-natural space where organisms are selected exclusively for their beauty, and whatever is “vile” or “unlovely” is consequently weeded out. The syntax of this stanza, moreover, diverts the

²¹⁹ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:287.

²²⁰ Meredith, “Hymn to Colour,” 452.

violence of selection—which requires that maladapted organisms be “plucked” out and “slain”—onto undesirable traits (“the vile,” “the unlovely”) rather than individuals. By deemphasizing the acts of elimination that enable evolution and foregrounding instead the progress of universal “Man,” Meredith proposes a more humane, less nihilistic view—or in his terms, a “reading”—of an otherwise “meaningless” world. As the laudatory title of “Hymn to Colour” suggests, this process of apotheosis depends on the capacity for aesthetic emotion: humankind only reaches the “stature of the gods” in the revolutionary space of the garden, where taste and desire supersede questions of fitness and necessity.

Of course, many of Meredith’s ideas—his sincere naturalism, his insistence on the labor and struggle of intellectual life, and his consequent distaste for self-indulgence, which verged on moralism—set him apart from many of his contemporary aesthetic writers. Nonetheless, the trajectory of Meredith’s work concisely illustrates the logic by which evolutionary aesthetes, in the decades after Darwin’s *Origin*, deduced a particularly anthropocentric and humanistic brand of evolutionism. Like Meredith, aesthetes such as Pater, Wilde, and Lee accepted the fact that species evolved through both Darwinian and Spencerian processes; they furthermore acknowledged that this idea necessarily demolished older, theological models of the universe. On the one hand, the rise of evolutionary science in the 1850s thus seemed to deprive human life of purpose and importance—it is this strain of post-evolutionary thought that animates Hardy’s prose and verse writings. On the other hand, as Meredith’s poetry reminds us, evolutionary theories of aesthetics also offered Victorian thinkers a way of reinvesting meaning in the individual human life by stressing the long-term efficacy of the aesthetic instinct. While humankind would never regain its place of honor at the center of a divinely-ordered universe, aesthetic experience promised individuals leverage over evolutionary process: through the

purposeless enjoyment of beauty, individuals could both escape the struggle for existence and exert their own selective pressure, however small, on the world around them. The notion that aesthetic taste was a form of evolutionary selection—one that could countermand natural selection and thus further humankind’s transcendence over the state of nature—powerfully influenced scientific as well as aesthetic thought in the late nineteenth century.²²¹ As we will see in the next chapter, both Pater and Clifford premised their respective philosophies on these scientifically inflected conceptions of the aesthetic sense. In doing so, they introduced a progressive and humanistic evolutionism into the very foundations of British aestheticism.

²²¹ Even T. H. Huxley, whose unsentimental defenses of natural selection earned him the nickname “Darwin’s bulldog,” takes a similar comfort in the promise of aesthetics: in his late essay “Prolegomena” (1894), he calls upon future generations to establish “an earthly paradise, a true garden of Eden, in which...the coarse struggle for existence of the state of nature...should be replaced by a state of art.” Huxley, “Prolegomena,” in *Evolution & Ethics*, ed. James Paradis and George C. Williams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 77.

Chapter 2
A Religion of Humanity:
The Evolutionary Aestheticism of W. K. Clifford, Walter Pater, and Mathilde Blind

The mastery of new powers, whose mere exercise is delightful, . . . multiplies at once the intensity and the objects of our pleasures. This, I say, is especially and exceptionally true of the pleasures of perception. Every time that analysis strips from nature the gilding that we prized, she is forging thereout a new picture more glorious than before, to be suddenly revealed by the advent of a new sense whereby we see it—a new creation, at sight of which the sons of God shall have cause to shout for joy.

—W. K. Clifford, “Cambridge Notebook”

In this remarkable passage from the notebook he kept at Cambridge in the late 1860s, the mathematician W. K. Clifford gives voice to a productive friction between evolutionary theory and the burgeoning Aesthetic Movement in Britain. For Clifford, materialist “analysis” such as Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) both “strips” the natural world of its beauty and furnishes the procedure by which we will recover the “pleasures of perception.”¹ No matter how much science compromises our belief in nature’s benignity, Clifford argues, the evolutionary hypothesis also allows for the spontaneous adaptation of a “new sense” through which we will recognize the wonder of the universe afresh. In making this move, Clifford attempts a secular reclamation of aesthetic pleasure: despite his reference to God, he attributes the spectacular “new creation” to a sensory adaptation that takes place within the individual spectator. This line of argument aligns him not only with older scientific luminaries such as Darwin and Herbert Spencer—whose contributions to British aestheticism I examined in the last chapter—but also with contemporary aesthetes such as the critic Walter Pater and the poet Mathilde Blind. In “Poems by William Morris” (1868), Pater likewise couches his aesthetic philosophy as a

¹ Qtd. from Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, introduction to *Lectures and Essays*, by W. K. Clifford, ed. Stephen and Pollock, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1901), 1:46-47.

response to modern science and the accompanying emergence of a new “sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity.”² Twenty years later, in her epic poem *The Ascent of Man* (1889), Blind attributes the upward evolution of humankind to its growing sensitivity to the “shows of things in colour, sound, and form.”³ The intriguing overlap between Clifford’s, Pater’s, and Blind’s ideas alerts us to the fact that both aesthetic and evolutionary discourse in this period evince shared concerns about the nature of perception, the social and evolutionary value of beauty, and the status of the human in the post-Darwinian universe. Certainly, scholars such as Helen Hawthorne Young, Gerald Monsman, Elisha Cohn, and Gowan Dawson mention Clifford’s association with Pater and other aesthetes—but few, if any, have studied the legacy of Clifford’s own aesthetics and his consequent place in the history of aestheticism.⁴

In this chapter, I locate Clifford, Pater, and Blind within the tradition of optimistic evolutionism that I have traced through Darwin’s and Spencer’s respective works on aesthetics as well as George Meredith’s poetry. I argue that Clifford’s optimistic vision of the progressive evolution of humankind—and the liberating role that he thought aesthetic experience could play in this process of gradual perfection—draws into focus Pater’s parallel interests in evolutionary aesthetics during the 1860s and beyond. A committed evolutionist, Clifford championed an

² Walter Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” *Westminster Review* 34 (1868): 309, 312.

³ Mathilde Blind, *The Ascent of Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), 27.

⁴ Clifford is best remembered today for his influential research in mathematics and his outspoken denunciations of religious belief. As M. Chisholm notes, “Clifford algebras” have applications in modern geometry, physics, and computing. Clifford’s most anthologized literary work, “The Ethics of Belief” (1877), is included in several philosophical textbooks. See Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau’s *Reason and Responsibility* (2013) and Linda Zagzebski and Timothy D. Miller’s *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary* (2009). M. Chisholm, *Such Silver Currents: The Story of William and Lucy Clifford 1845-1929* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002), 159; Helen Hawthorne Young, *The Writings of Walter Pater: A Reflection of British Philosophical Opinion from 1860-1890* (New York: Haskell House, 1933), 36, 86, 95, 101; Gerald Monsman, *Walter Pater* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), 28; Elisha Cohn, “‘One single ivory cell’: Oscar Wilde and the Brain,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17 (2012): 191; Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17, 24.

aesthetics that he believed would rescue Darwinian theory from its dehumanizing implications: namely, its subjection of the individual to the various deterministic pressures (natural selection, heredity, instinct, and so on) that constituted natural law in the post-Darwinian era. Clifford thus scientifically legitimated an alternative ethics of freedom—freedom from convention, from nature, from what Pater called the “magic web” of “necessity”—around which Pater's conceptions of aesthetic temperament and cultural development coalesced.⁵ Though nominally opposed to metaphysical conjecture, Clifford and Pater similarly fashioned these libertarian principles into an almost religious creed founded on the ideal of a refined, richly varied life. For both writers, individuals could make a positive contribution to the long-term evolution of the species by cultivating a disciplined, and yet joyous, receptivity to a wide range of ideas and experiences. In this way, I suggest, these writers expanded the theoretical details of evolutionary aesthetics into a humanistic philosophy that might supersede older, now untenable, forms of faith. To conclude, I examine the influence of Clifford's and Pater's evolutionary aestheticism in Blind's lecture, “Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin's” (1886), and in *The Ascent of Man*. In these works, Blind envisions an evolutionary teleology propelled not by cold Darwinian processes, but by emancipation, through the humanities, from these very Darwinian conditions—in her words, a “delivery in the realm of art.”⁶

Beyond elaborating on how this particularly progressive version of evolutionism came to be a fundamental part of British aestheticism, this chapter also makes several more general additions to existing scholarship on the Victorian period. First, this project recognizes Clifford's

⁵ Pater first published “Winckelmann” in the *Westminster Review* in 1867 and then included it in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in 1873. He made numerous changes to the second edition of *Studies*, which he subsequently retitled *The Renaissance*. This chapter typically cites the original periodical versions of Pater's articles. When referring to revised materials that appear in *Studies*, I cite Donald L. Hill's edition of *The Renaissance*. Pater, “Winckelmann,” *Westminster Review* 31 (1867): 110.

⁶ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 51.

significant intervention in late Victorian discussions about the relationship between evolutionary theory—only recently codified in Darwin's *Origin and Descent of Man* (1872)—and human culture. In the decades following *Origin*, Victorian intellectuals as varied as biologist T. H. Huxley and critic John Ruskin deciphered Darwin's findings for the public by applying (or, in Ruskin's case, refusing to apply) the lessons of evolution to the conduct of life. Though little read today, Clifford was one of the most original and emphatic voices in this chorus of Darwinian interpreters. Secondly, this juxtaposition of Clifford's and Pater's writings foregrounds the easily overlooked impact that popular scientific writing had on the formation of British aestheticism in the 1860s and 1870s, and vice versa. As Bernard Lightman argues in *Victorian Popularizers of Science* (2007), developments in mass publication in the mid nineteenth century radically changed the “dynamics of authorship and audience” by providing a surplus of print venues for the fluid exchange of ideas across disciplines and coteries.⁷ A more comprehensive understanding of Clifford's and Pater's participation in periodical culture offers us a clearer picture of the material as well as ideological origins of British aestheticism. Thirdly, this chapter's concluding reading of *Blind* contextualizes her work and underscores her importance in the development of fin de siècle aestheticism: figures such as Oscar Wilde, Grant Allen, and Vernon Lee, as we will see in subsequent chapters, formulated their own progressive evolutionary aesthetics partly by drawing on *Blind*'s synthesis of Clifford's and Pater's respective humanisms.

⁷ Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13.

I. Clifford on “Absolute Receptivity” and the “Kingdom of Man”

Born in 1845 to a modest Exeter bookseller, Clifford earned a scholarship to Trinity College, where he was renowned for his polymathic genius, his eccentric dress, his daring athleticism, and his witty, often blasphemous, conversation.⁸ In 1868, he achieved the rank of second wrangler in the mathematical tripos and was elected a fellow of the College: he gave his first lecture at the Royal Institution (and launched his short but storied career in public speaking) that same year.⁹ Three years later, Clifford left Cambridge to join the faculty of University College London, where he began building a reputation as a scientific materialist and nonbeliever.¹⁰ In addition to delivering his University lectures and working on his mathematical papers, Clifford published eloquent and often controversial articles on numerous topics in the *Nineteenth Century*, the *Fortnightly Review*, and other liberal general interest periodicals. He also gave popular public talks on a range of topics including evolution, psychology, religion, and the philosophy of science. His attempts to appeal to a wide audience produced an eminently readable style that blended precision and clarity with gentle self-deprecation, a diffuse literariness, and an aphoristic wit: Blind, reflecting back on Clifford’s body of work, remarks on “his magical faculty of illuminating the most abstruse subjects by his vivid directness of exposition.”¹¹ By the time of his early death in 1879, Clifford had become, in Dawson’s words, “perhaps the most infamous scientific firebrand in Victorian Britain” (in 1896, William James still remembered Clifford as “that delicious *enfant terrible*”).¹² As such, Clifford and his spouse,

⁸ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 13-19.

⁹ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 27-28.

¹⁰ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 28-30.

¹¹ Blind, *George Eliot*, 2nd ed. (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1883), 84.

¹² Dawson, *Darwin*, 164, 168; William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longman, 1896), 8.

novelist Lucy Lane Clifford, maintained close friendships with other prominent Victorian rationalists and regularly welcomed Huxley, G. H. Lewes, Leslie Stephen, and Grant Allen, among others, to their London home.¹³

As Dawson colorfully asserts, Clifford “could always be relied upon flamboyantly to stick the boot into orthodoxy in all its forms.”¹⁴ Clifford’s commitment to free thought—he concluded his 1868 lecture with the provocative pronouncement, “*it is not right to be proper*”—extended to his literary tastes and associations.¹⁵ If the British “salon,” as Susanne Schmid argues, was one of the foremost “formative cultural sites” in nineteenth-century Britain, then the Clifford home was a veritable crucible for trends in later Victorian literature.¹⁶ Writers such as Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, with whom William and Lucy were especially intimate, attended the Cliffords’ Sunday gatherings.¹⁷ Clifford supported young Robert Louis Stevenson, whom he had met through the art critic Sidney Colvin, in his bid for admission to the Savile Club.¹⁸ The flair with which Clifford overturned bourgeois morality on a scientific basis inspired then-undergraduate Oscar Wilde.¹⁹ After William died, Lucy, who published as “Mrs. W. K. Clifford” until her death in 1929, became the center of a thriving literary circle that

¹³ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 41.

¹⁴ Dawson, *Darwin*, 168.

¹⁵ W. K. Clifford, “On Some of the Conditions of Mental Development,” in *Lectures and Essays*, 1:117.

¹⁶ Susanne Schmid, *British Literary Salons of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

¹⁷ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 41.

¹⁸ Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places, 1852-1912* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), 119-20.

¹⁹ Wilde took careful notes on many of Clifford’s articles. He was particularly intrigued by Clifford’s concept of the “tribal self”: an expanded form of selfhood that evolved, Clifford argued, in order to align the individual’s sense of self-interest with the interests of his or her entire tribe. For Wilde, the “tribal self” served to divorce notions of collective good from the Victorian ideal of self-sacrifice. Wilde, “Commonplace Book,” in *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 129-30.

included the critic and aesthete Vernon Lee, who incorporated some of Clifford's ideas into her own work.²⁰ The importance of this literary milieu is evident in Clifford's argumentative practices: he frequently peppered his already inflammatory arguments with quotations from the aesthetic poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose celebration of "the joys of the flesh" and "art for art's sake" made him a contentious figure to the British reading public.²¹ Clifford himself also composed fragmentary verses and published wryly satirical, proto-Wildean fairy tales for children. With his diverse interests, he emblemized an interdisciplinarity characteristic of Victorian intellectual life: the "one culture," to use George Levine's term, in which literary writers routinely published alongside scientific writers, especially in secular journals such as the *Fortnightly Review*.²²

Clifford's interest in the aesthetic dates to his earliest days at Cambridge, when he began searching for a philosophy that might fulfill the emotional and spiritual functions of his once-robust Christian faith. He grew up in a pious High Church household; as an undergraduate, he clung to grandiose visions of nature even as he abandoned his religious beliefs, partly in response to Darwin's recent formulation of natural selection.²³ Further on in his meditation on the "pleasures of perception," Clifford attempts to restore "romance" to a natural world that science was rapidly redefining, often to devastating effect:

²⁰ A catalog of Vernon Lee's letters in the Colby College archive includes nearly twenty mentions of visits to Lucy Clifford's home. "List of 'Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) Letters Home,'" Colby College Libraries, last updated 25 March 2015, http://libguides.colby.edu/ld.php?content_id=1059875.

²¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Dolores," in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin, 2000), 122; *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), 101.

²² The November 1874 issue of the *Fortnightly Review* demonstrates, in miniature, the collocation of liberal-leaning science and literature in this period. In one sitting, readers encountered Pater's "Fragment on *Measure for Measure*," Swinburne's elegiac poem "In Memory of Barry Cornwall," Huxley's landmark essay "On the Hypothesis that Animals Are Automata," and chapter seven of Meredith's serial novel *Beauchamp's Career*. George Levine, introduction to *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3. See John Morley, ed., *Fortnightly Review* 16 (1874): 555-700.

²³ Chisholm, *Silver Currents*, 18.

What now shall I say of this new-grown perception of Law...? Why, that it kills our sense of the beautiful, and takes all the romance out of nature... But wait a moment. What if this combining and organising is to become first habitual, then organic and unconscious, so that the sense of law becomes a direct perception? Shall there not be a new revelation of a great and more perfect cosmos, a universe freshborn, a new heaven and a new earth? *Mors janua vitae* [death the door to life]; by death to this world we enter upon a new life in the next. A new Elysium opens to our eager feet, through whose wide fields we shall run with glee, stopping only to stare with delight and to cry, "See there, how beautiful!"²⁴

At first, the discovery of cold natural "Law" seems to dim the once pleasurable spectacle of a divinely ordered universe. But as Tess Cosslett points out, Clifford finds "consolation for the loss of his religious faith in a new perception of the beauty of scientific Law," which he "express[es] in the old religious terminology."²⁵ In other words, he recuperates spectatorial pleasure by adapting the mystical idioms of his childhood Christianity to the material reality of the world around him: hence Clifford's quasi-religious reverence, which is sustained here in his resplendent and curiously hybridized language. Over the course of this short paragraph, he calls upon Biblical imagery ("a new heaven and a new earth," lifted from Revelation [21:1]), liturgical tradition (the common epitaph *mors janua vitae*), classical myth ("a new Elysium"), and psychological and biological discourse ("habitual," "organic," "unconscious," "perception"). By fusing so many varied intellectual realms—the sciences, we should keep in mind, were in the process of being professionalized and differentiated from literary and historical disciplines—Clifford assembles a kind of meta-vocabulary in which gradual "perfect[ion]" emerges as nature's organizing principle.²⁶ Insofar as Clifford's "sense of Law" describes a sensorial receptivity to the beauties of cosmic order, his revelatory mission also necessitates a form of

²⁴ Qtd. from Stephen and Pollock, introduction to *Lectures and Essays*, 46-47.

²⁵ Tess Cosslett, *The "Scientific Movement" and Victorian Literature* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 105.

²⁶ As Lightman and others have pointed out, science was in the early stages of professionalization in this period. Several Victorian naturalists, especially Huxley, encouraged this process by attempting to codify scientific practice into a set of experimental procedures and agnostic beliefs. Generally speaking, Clifford bucked this trend. Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science*, 12-13.

aesthetic education, one that cultivates a mindset at once empirical and imaginative, scientific and poetic. Toward the end of his life, and with a homiletic conviction essentially unchanged from his undergraduate years, Clifford prophesied a future in which such thinking will be commonplace: the “good time is coming,” he writes in an 1878 essay on science education, in which “Dynamics and Prose Composition [will] have met together” and “Literature and Biology [will] have kissed each other.”²⁷

Clifford’s resolute optimism regarding the advent of what he calls “whole culture” points to the ways in which he theorized and popularized already extant connections between aesthetic theory and evolutionary science.²⁸ His rose-tinted revision of material reality had roots in what Gillian Beer calls “Romantic materialism”: a strain of idealism that, as we have seen, not only survived the shock of the Darwinian revolution but also flourished in the work of both Darwin and his followers.²⁹ For Darwin, as for the younger Clifford, sensitivity to the beauties of nature constituted a precious antidote to the bitter reality of an indifferent and directionless cosmos. Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, to reiterate the argument of my first chapter, further codified this escapist aesthetics by vacating beauty of all survival value and emphasizing instead the arbitrariness of aesthetic taste. Darwin’s conception of the constructed and mutable character of beauty in turn distinguished his evolutionary aesthetics from that of earlier critics such as Edmund Burke and John Ruskin: unlike his predecessors, Darwin considered the beautiful a privileged category of natural phenomena over which individual taste (rather than the functionalist demands of nature or the moralistic dictates of God) had complete sway. Spencer’s

²⁷ Clifford, “Virchow on the Teaching of Science,” *Nineteenth Century* 3 (1878): 715.

²⁸ Clifford, “Virchow,” 715.

²⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.

classification of aesthetic pleasure as a type of disinterested and generative “play”—which formed the bedrock of his uniquely optimistic projection of human evolution—lent further support to this progressive and non-functional aesthetics. For Darwin and Spencer, the sense of beauty defied the desolate functionalism of natural selection and unlocked alternative modes of evolutionary development that relied on the desires and exertions of individual organisms—not on violent encounters between organisms and their environments, or between organisms and other organisms. Darwin’s and Spencer’s evolutionary accounts of beauty thus cleared the way for aestheticism’s major cultural innovation, inklings of which we can discern in Clifford’s undergraduate journal: that is, the notion that aesthetic pleasure (the “pleasures of perception”) need not abide by the crushing rules that govern other areas of life.

Much of Clifford’s work also draws on mid century trends in the psychological study of aesthetics. As Regenia Gagnier, Carolyn Burdett, and other modern-day scholars have shown us, the study of aesthetics in the 1860s and 1870s fell increasingly under the purview of psychology, which was gaining rapid recognition as an institutionalized branch of life science.³⁰ In his study *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855), as we have seen, Alexander Bain argues that psychological states are the complex byproducts of muscular and nervous reactions to physical stimuli; these states, he reasons, are altered and organized according to acquired associations unique to every brain.³¹ His assertion that emotion is physiological in origin influenced late Victorian aesthetic thought in several ways. Most obviously, Bain’s materialist psychology—an approach that Spencer, Lewes, and James Sully, Bain’s protégé, also helped popularize—had the effect of

³⁰ Regenia Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 136-39; Carolyn Burdett, “‘The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’: Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 12 (2011), 7-15.

³¹ Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), 362.

subjecting once-metaphysical properties of mind to physical laws, including the law of evolution. A contemporaneous tradition of German experimental optics, pioneered by Johannes Müller and Hermann von Helmholtz, further convinced many in the British intellectual elite that aesthetic perception was a quantifiable, corporeal phenomenon. Bain and other proponents of the new “psychological aesthetics,” Benjamin Morgan observes, thus “pursued a surprisingly decadent aesthetics” that fed directly into the work of Pater and his heirs.³²

Significantly for both Clifford’s and Pater’s humanist philosophies, Bain’s physical model of sensation also internalized the act of perception within the body and, consequently, called into question the individual’s ability to access objective reality through the senses. As Jonathan Crary argues, the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual reorganization of the observer into “both the site and producer of sensation.”³³ Bain’s psychology was instrumental in this wider movement toward a subjective view of perception: “the sense of the external,” he states outright in *The Senses and the Intellect*, “is the consciousness of particular energies and activities of our own.”³⁴ While his reduction of sensation to “energies and activities of our own” deprives the observer of direct contact with the external world, his theory of perception simultaneously grants the individual the powerful capacity to shape her own view of the world. Bain’s psychology thus contributed to late nineteenth-century figurations of what Crary calls a “newly empowered body”—one in which every impression, in psychological fact, was an

³² Benjamin Morgan, “The Matter of Beauty: Materialism and Self in Victorian Aesthetic Theory,” PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2010), xix.

³³ Crary traces this notion of “subjective vision” through a lineage of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophers including George Berkeley, Johann Goethe, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 75.

³⁴ Under Bain’s tutelage, Sully presupposed the “duality” of internal and external, and Lewes similarly declined to “separate in a sensation what is objective from what is subjective.” Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, 371; James Sully, *Sensation and Intuition: Studies in Psychology and Aesthetics* (London: Henry S. King, 1874), 72; G. H. Lewes, *The Physical Basis of Mind*, vol. 2 of *Problems of Life and Mind* (London: Trübner, 1877), 356.

autonomous act of original creation.³⁵ It is in this context that Clifford, writing in Bain's wake, continually lionizes the perceiving subject as the god-like creator of the world around him. In one of the lectures from his collection *Seeing and Thinking* (1879), for instance, Clifford asks his audience to consider their view of him at the lectern: that sensation, he remarks, "appears to come from outside of your mind," but "of course it is entirely in your mind; any sensation you have got belongs to you, and is part of you, and is just a change of your consciousness."³⁶ Since the processes of perception take place entirely in our own bodies, Clifford continues, we can determine our sense of the external world by "direct[ing] our attention to particular things by an effort of the will."³⁷ Clifford's early engagements with this idea—that is, the notion that the sensate body actively fashions a world that only appears to be outside our control—culminated in his theorization of "mind-stuff," his term for a hypothetical elementary particle of consciousness.³⁸ As his friend and biographer Frederick Pollock later noted, Clifford's mind-stuff hypothesis ultimately postulates that "mind is the one ultimate reality."³⁹

In this vein, Clifford's inaugural lecture "On Some Conditions of Mental Development" (1868) advocates for a "creative rather than acquisitive" temperament on the basis that this "attitude of the mind" is most "likely to change for the better."⁴⁰ In brief, Clifford argues that physical and mental growth occurs through the "spontaneous action" of organisms themselves rather than the "direct action of the environment" on the organism: spontaneous actions are in

³⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 150.

³⁶ Clifford, "The Brain and Thinking," in *Seeing and Thinking* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 80.

³⁷ Clifford, "The Eye and Seeing," in *Seeing and Thinking*, 73.

³⁸ Clifford, "On the Nature of Things-in-Themselves," *Mind* 3 (1878): 65-66.

³⁹ Stephen and Pollock, introduction to *Lectures and Essays*, 50.

⁴⁰ Clifford, "Mental Development," 116, 103.

turn enabled, he adds, by a “store of force...necessarily accumulated within the organism.”⁴¹ Since every “effect of the environment” on the organism leads to its gradual ossification, Clifford summarily dismisses natural selection in favor of a Spencerian and Lamarckian evolutionism that considers adaptation a “matter of habits and desires” rather than competition and fitness.⁴² Here, Clifford clearly premises his arguments on Spencer’s concept of play as well as his theory of organic evolution, which tended to regard the organism as the agent of its own adaptation. In Clifford’s turn toward choice and desire, we also recognize the logic of sexual selection, which Darwin had expanded in later editions of *Origin*.

Clifford applies this counter-functionalist evolutionary logic to the temperaments suitable for science and art, which were for him analogous pursuits. “If scientific,” Clifford argues, “[the mind] must not rest in the contemplation of existing theories,” but must instead “create things not immediately useful.” (While Clifford admits that he is “putting in a word” for abstract mathematics, his rejection of the useful also echoes the increasingly publicized mantra of “art for art’s sake,” a phrase associated in this period with Swinburne’s *William Blake* [1868] and Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873].) Similarly, the artistic mind “must not sit down in hopeless awe before the monuments of the great masters”; “still less,” he adds, “must it tremble before the conventionalism of one age, when its mission may be to form the whole life of the age succeeding.”⁴³ Clifford concludes his first lecture with a call for intellectual dissent and artistic originality, unfettered by considerations of utility or propriety.⁴⁴ “A mind that would grow,” Clifford asserts,

⁴¹ Clifford, “Mental Development,” 112.

⁴² Clifford, “Mental Development,” 112, 116.

⁴³ Clifford, “Mental Development,” 115.

⁴⁴ Dawson, *Darwin*, 168.

must maintain an attitude of absolute receptivity; admitting all, being modified by all, but permanently biased by none. To become crystallised, fixed in opinion and mode of thought, is to lose the great characteristic of life, by which it is distinguished from inanimate nature: the power of adapting itself to circumstances. Propriety, in fact, is the crystallisation of a race....In the face of such a danger *it is not right to be proper*.⁴⁵

As in the undergraduate diary, Clifford in “Mental Development” yokes the possibility of progress to the widespread cultivation of a particular temperament: one that is passionate but non-dogmatic, creative rather than reactive in the face of change, and radically receptive to, but never governed by, new ideas and external impressions.⁴⁶ In doing so, Clifford extrapolates his understanding of modern psychological and biological theory into a deliberately iconoclastic claim for the evolutionary potential of idiosyncrasy.

“Mental Development” puts this valorization of free expression into practice by subtly and strategically quoting Swinburne’s “Ilicet,” from the collection *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Specifically, Clifford uses several lines from the fourth stanza—“There is not one thing with another, / But Evil saith to Good: My brother, / My brother, I am one with thee”—in order to illustrate an infantile state of consciousness, in which the developing child cannot distinguish objects from one another.⁴⁷ Although *Poems and Ballads* was several years old by the time Clifford delivered his lecture, the collection was still controversial for its sumptuous (one reviewer said “filthy”) language, its deviant eroticism, its moral relativism (captured in the

⁴⁵ Clifford, “Mental Development,” 116-17.

⁴⁶ Clifford later defined “scientific thought” in much the same terms. For Clifford, scientific thought is a mode of cognition that reacts to environmental change in innovative and generative ways. As such, scientific thought is responsible for progress in all disciplines, including science, ethics, and art: “when a poet finds that he has to move a strange new world which his predecessors have not moved,” Clifford writes, the “procedure” by which he refines and improves existing poetic forms in accordance with the circumstances of his milieu “is nothing greater or less than scientific thought.” Scientific thought, as Clifford concludes triumphantly, constitutes “not an accompaniment or condition of human progress, but human progress itself.” Clifford, “On the Aims and Instruments of Scientific Thought,” *Macmillan's Magazine* 26 (1872): 512.

⁴⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Ilicet,” in *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, 61.

selection from “Ilicet”), and its political radicalism.⁴⁸ Several years later, as we have seen, Robert Buchanan would count Swinburne, along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, among the most offensively immoral poets of his generation.⁴⁹ In an implicit repudiation of this line of criticism, Clifford’s lectures and essays from the late 1860s and early 1870s often encourage his audience to reassess their assumptions about what he calls Swinburne’s “splendid” poetry.⁵⁰ As Dawson points out, Clifford was one of the few scientific figures in this period willing to endorse not only Swinburne but also Walt Whitman, the contentious American poet whose sensual verse was similarly associated with Lucretian materialism (many of Clifford’s “more circumspect” colleagues, including Huxley, Darwin, and John Tyndall, preferred to cite less problematic writers such as Alfred Tennyson and William Shakespeare).⁵¹ In “Mental Development,” Clifford’s divisive references to the avant-garde Swinburne enact, on a rhetorical level, the refusal to be “proper” that the mathematician considers indispensable to evolutionary progress.

Importantly for his late-career essays, Clifford also seriously engaged with the philosophic content of Swinburne’s poetry, particularly the poet’s spiritual reinterpretation of evolutionary thought. As Lionel Stevenson observes, Swinburne refined the “materialistic assumptions” of evolutionary science into a “metaphysical system of explanation,” a “positivist ‘religion of humanity’” in which humankind occupied the position of supreme deity.⁵² In

⁴⁸ [John Morley], “Mr. Swinburne’s New Poems,” review of *Poems and Ballads*, by Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Saturday Review* 22 (1866): 145.

⁴⁹ Thomas Maitland [Robert Buchanan], “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” *Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 338.

⁵⁰ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” *Nineteenth Century* 2 (1877): 424.

⁵¹ For this reason, Clyde K. Hyder, in his assessment of Swinburne’s critical legacy, considers Clifford’s acknowledgement of Swinburne a “landmark” in the poet’s reception. Dawson, *Darwin*, 25, 21; Clyde K. Hyder, *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), xxxi.

⁵² Lionel Stevenson, *Darwin Among the Poets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 52-53.

“Hymn of Man” (1871), for instance, Swinburne gleefully deposes the Christian God and exalts in his place the transcendent human race: “Glory to Man in the highest!” the speaker concludes, “for Man is the master of things.”⁵³ Elsewhere in “Hymn,” Swinburne poetically reimagines the Spencerian concept of the social organism by envisioning humankind as one “manifold body and breath,” in which individual “lives are as pulses or pores”; for Swinburne, this figure of collective “Man” continues to live and grow, even as the individual lives that constitute his body perish.⁵⁴ Clifford, as the nineteenth-century literary critic Edmund Gosse notes, “early insisted on the intellectual importance of Swinburne’s idealism,” including the poet’s triumphant vision of “Man.”⁵⁵ By giving Swinburne pride of place in “Mental Development” and other works, Clifford publicly connected his own evolutionism not only to Swinburne’s transgressive social agenda—including his espousal of republicanism, sexual liberation, and Pagan materialism—but also to the aesthete’s more fundamental idealization of humankind’s place in the cosmos.

In the eleven years between “Mental Development” and his death, Clifford’s subordination of scientific accuracy to the imaginative vision allowed him to stake unique ground in the Victorian critical landscape. On the one hand, he launched withering rationalist critiques of organized religion and conventional morality.⁵⁶ On the other hand, he consciously appropriated scriptural rhetoric, and he often discussed physical health and intellectual freedom in a spiritualized, even moralistic register reminiscent of Swinburne’s poetry. This contradiction, far from constituting an ironic derision of religious feeling, speaks to Clifford’s desire to

⁵³ Swinburne, “Hymn of Man,” in *Songs before Sunrise* (London: F. S. Ellis, 1871), 112, 124.

⁵⁴ Swinburne, “Hymn of Man,” 112; Spencer, “The Social Organism,” *Westminster Review*, n.s., 17 (1860): 90-121.

⁵⁵ Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 194.

⁵⁶ For example, Clifford had progressive opinions on divorce and sexuality, which he expressed in an unpublished essay entitled “Mistress or Wife.” After Clifford’s death, the manuscript came into Blind’s possession and has since been lost. Dawson, *Darwin*, 178.

colonize the spiritual and moral functions of religion by recasting his atheistic worldview into a noble humanism akin to faith. His humanism was one expression, as Charles Taylor has shown, of a larger tradition of secular humanism that philosophers such as John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and Auguste Comte advanced in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Significantly for later British aesthetes such as Wilde and Lee, Clifford expanded on philosophical precedent by closely tying his secular ethics to the cultivation of particular modes of seeing and representing the world. For example, in “The Unseen Universe” (1875), Clifford counts the “love of action which would put death out of sight” as an inherent “good, as a holy and healthy thing.”⁵⁸ Since our “present life,” he asserts, “in so far as it is healthy, rebels once for all against its own final and complete destruction,” it is “right and good...to cover over and dismiss the thought of our own personal end.”⁵⁹ Similarly, he continues, we “give the most worthy honour and tribute” to our friends and loved ones “if we never say nor remember that they are dead, but contrariwise that they have lived.”⁶⁰ In other words, we must aestheticize human life by deliberately excising from our thoughts the ugly truths of death and decay; a sacred idiom, for Clifford, was the natural vehicle for such aesthetic revision. Also implicit in Clifford’s exhortation is the assumption, grounded in Bainian psychology, that this habitual diversion of our attention can transform our immediate perception of the material world. With practice, he suggests, we can suppress our dread of death and cultivate a more spiritually fulfilling consciousness of the sheer joy and triumph of living.

Many of Clifford’s later essays, including “The First and the Last Catastrophe” (1875), “The Ethics of Religion” (1877), and “Cosmic Emotion” (1877), seek to foster this renewed

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 562.

⁵⁸ Clifford, “The Unseen Universe,” *Fortnightly Review* 17 (1875): 779.

⁵⁹ Clifford, “The Unseen Universe,” 779.

⁶⁰ Clifford, “The Unseen Universe,” 779.

consciousness by representing physical life through a kind of vitalist lens. Of course, we cannot call Clifford a vitalist in the strictest sense: as Sebastian Normandin and Charles T. Wolfe explain, in this period vitalism denoted “the idea of a life force that somehow transcends the known material world.”⁶¹ While Clifford denied the existence of such a force, he still deployed a *mélange* of literary and scientific language—culled in part from Swinburne’s sensual imagery and Spencer’s theory of organismic energy—in order to elevate organic life as a “holy and healthy thing.” To the extent that this idealistic view of life poses a “middle way” (to quote Normandin) “between the extremes of materialism and spiritualism,” Clifford’s philosophy emerges as a form of rhetorical, if not literal, vitalism.⁶² More precisely, Clifford’s ennoblement of the organic belongs to a particular strain of vitalism that Michel Foucault attributes to the late eighteenth-century French anatomist Xavier Bichat, who defined “life” as “the sum of the functions by which death is resisted.”⁶³ After Bichat’s intervention, Foucault argues, the organism becomes “the visible form of life in its resistance to that which does not live and which opposes it.”⁶⁴ For Clifford, and subsequently for Pater, the enjoyment of life thus constituted an act of noble struggle against the external, inorganic forces of decay, degeneration, and “crystallisation.” Clifford’s frequent references to Baruch Spinoza’s aphorism, “the freeman

⁶¹ Sebastian Normandin and Charles T. Wolfe, “Vitalism and the Scientific Image: An Introduction,” in *Vitalism and the Scientific Image in Post-Enlightenment Life Science, 1800-2010*, ed. Normandin and Wolfe (Heidelberg: Springer Dordrecht, 2013), 9.

⁶² Normandin, “Wilhelm Reich: Vitalism and its Discontents,” in *Vitalism and the Scientific Image*, 183.

⁶³ Xavier Bichat, *Physiological Researches on Life and Death*, trans. F. Gold (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1815), 21.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2003), 189-90.

thinks of nothing so little as of death,” stems partly from its encapsulation of this concept of organic life as resistance.⁶⁵

Through the versatile discourse of vitalism, Clifford strengthens the causal link between the liberated conduct of life (in his parlance, not being “proper”) and the long-term good of both the individual and the species. In “Cosmic Emotion,” for instance, he defines “good action” as any “mode of action...which makes an organic thing more organic, or raises it in the scale.”⁶⁶ In a noticeably Spencerian gesture, Clifford further asserts that only the “overflowing energy” of living tissue can generate the “quasi-spontaneous” actions necessary for this evolutionary progress: by contrast, the “dead stuff” that forms a part of every complex organism belongs properly to “the external world,” and is thus anathema to “that *me*, whose free action tends to progress.”⁶⁷ Consequently, the zealous accumulation of vitality—which organisms gain by acting spontaneously, according to their impulses—becomes for Clifford nothing less than a sacred duty. He concludes “The First and the Last Catastrophe” with a proclamation to this effect, which he adapts from both Isaiah 22:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:32: “Do I seem to say, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die?’ Far from it...I say, ‘Let us take hands and help, for this day we are alive together.’”⁶⁸ Clifford here revises an iconic expression of Pagan abandon into an alternative moral code, one that he premises on the inherent good of being fully “alive.”

Within a broader cultural context, Clifford’s vitalist vocabulary emerges as a scientific

⁶⁵ Clifford’s fondness for the phrase was so well known that several of his friends cite it in their posthumous tributes to him. Qtd. in Clifford, “The First and the Last Catastrophe,” *Fortnightly Review* 17 (1875), 484; Stephen and Pollock, introduction to *Lectures and Essays*, 31; Blind, “Perfect Union,” in *The Prophecy of St. Oran and Other Poems* (London: Newman, 1881), 125.

⁶⁶ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 423.

⁶⁷ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 425-426.

⁶⁸ Clifford, “The First and the Last Catastrophe,” 484.

counterpart to Swinburne's literary aestheticism: both approaches seek to spiritualize matter by describing physical life in metaphysical terms.

Clifford further expands this mystical understanding of organic life into a secular religion that grants individuals, insofar as they contribute to the development of future generations, a kind of abstract immortality. His depiction of cultural inheritance as an afterlife recalls Comte's notion of "subjective immortality," which held that the individual brain "assimilate[d] the feelings and conceptions of all its peers" as well as its predecessors.⁶⁹ Those who "left great results," Comte asserts in his *System of Positive Polity* (1854), "acquire in others a subjective immortality," because their work "is perpetuated and even extended" in the minds of their readers.⁷⁰ Clifford reworks Comte's predominately sociological "religion of humanity" within an expressly evolutionary framework by channeling religious feeling toward universal "Man," the personification of the evolutionary future that he adapts in part from Swinburne's verse.⁷¹ More so than Swinburne, however, Clifford's invocations of "Man" combine the authority and excitement of empirical discovery with the sentimental force of Christian revelation. In "The Unseen Universe," for instance, Clifford urges his readers to hold fast to their memories of deceased loved ones as they were in life, "that hereby the brotherly force and flow of their action and work may be carried over the gulfs of death and made immortal in the true and healthy life which they worthily had and used."⁷² Perhaps counter-intuitively, Clifford's atomism—that is, his translation of "life" into the phenomena of "force," "flow," "action," and "work"—allows him to posit a scientifically tenable form of afterlife in which the individual's efforts cascade in

⁶⁹ Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, vol. 4, trans. Richard Congreve (London: Longmans, 1877), 90.

⁷⁰ Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, 90.

⁷¹ Clifford, "The Ethics of Religion," *Fortnightly Review* 22 (1877): 51.

⁷² Clifford, "The Unseen Universe," 780.

an endless and unbroken chain of action and reaction. He concretizes this vision of immortality both in his own syntax, with its exhausting accumulation of conjunctions, and in the metaphor of a wave: to the “noble and great ones, who have loved and labored yourselves not for yourselves but for the universal folk,” Clifford promises “life as broad and far-reaching as your love,...[and] life-giving action to the utmost reach of the great wave whose crest you sometime were.”⁷³ In essays such as “The First and the Last Catastrophe” and “The Ethics of Religion,” Clifford similarly diverts “our pious allegiance” away from a “superhuman deity” and toward “our father Man,” or the spirit of the species that speaks to each of us through our “conscience.”⁷⁴ Since scientific “truth will not allow us to see” a deity, he continues in “The Ethics of Religion,” the “shadowy outlines” of the gods “fade slowly away before us”; as the illusion dissolves, however, “we perceive with greater and greater clearness the shape of a yet grander and nobler figure,” whom he names the “Great Companion.”⁷⁵ Through figurative contrivances such as the “Great Companion,” the “universal folk,” the “great wave,” and “our father Man,” Clifford reinvests spiritual meaning in evolutionary process even as he dismantles traditional religious beliefs. His brand of humanism—which required from its followers a degree of aesthetic sensitivity—thus proposes a more consciously scientific, but also more emotionally gratifying, version of Comte’s religion of humanity.

Clifford’s essay “Cosmic Emotion,” with its rousing appeals to freedom and prophecies of an imminent “kingdom of Man,” compelling connects this humanistic evolutionism to the methods and objectives of aestheticism.⁷⁶ In the essay, Clifford differentiates between two forms

⁷³ Clifford, “The Unseen Universe,” 780.

⁷⁴ Clifford, “The First and the Last Catastrophe,” 484; “The Ethics of Religion,” 51.

⁷⁵ Clifford, “The Ethics of Religion,” 52.

⁷⁶ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 429.

of cosmic emotion, although both describe the manner in which “men contemplate the world, the temper in which they stand in the presence of the immensities and the eternities.”⁷⁷ The simpler type of cosmic emotion, activated in response to the “Macrocosm or universe surrounding us,” consists in feelings analogous to Burke’s established definition of the sublime, including “awe,” “veneration,” and “submission.”⁷⁸ By comparison, the more complex form of cosmic emotion, which refers to the “universe of our own souls,” results from totalizing conceptions of the human race, the social and psychological laws that govern human action, and the place of the individual within the destiny of “Man.”⁷⁹ In his own day, Clifford continues, the experience of cosmic emotion has shifted in accordance with contemporary empirical science, which daily attests to the provisionality and relativism of all knowledge of the universe. Clifford declares the shift a happy one: for him, this new conception of the universe has “a character of incompleteness about it, a want, a stretching out for something better to come,” and those with the right “temperament” can look forward with “hope” to “greater mysteries yet...behind the veil.”⁸⁰ Darwinian and Spencerian theory, Clifford further argues, has challenged longstanding views on the immutability of human nature, conscience, and reason, proving instead “that the nature of man and beast and of all the world is changing, is going somewhere.”⁸¹ Crucially, this aestheticized interpretation of the world—an updated version of the “glorious...new Elysium” that he sketched in his Cambridge notebook ten years earlier—allows Clifford to recuperate an affirmative, anthropocentric view of the cosmos. “Inorganic chaos” gradually gives way to what Clifford,

⁷⁷ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 412.

⁷⁸ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 411.

⁷⁹ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 411.

⁸⁰ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 420.

⁸¹ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 422.

quoting Swinburne, calls the “mother of life”: an emblem for the cosmic tendencies toward organic order and sophistication.⁸² To experience cosmic emotion in the modern era, as Clifford defines it, is to recognize the “mother” at work,” to perceive the universe in such a way that one feels neither alienation nor disappointment but instead pleasure, curiosity, pride, and hope.

For Clifford, the sense of vitality and wellbeing that springs from the experience of cosmic emotion—which, in essence, is an aesthetic experience—helps to cultivate freer, more evolutionarily generative individuals. “Cosmic Emotion” thus concludes by laying out an ethics of self-determination that will protect the autonomous subject (“that *me*, whose free action tends to progress”) from both the “pressure of external circumstance” and the pull of primitive instinct (“that *baneful strife which lurketh inborn in us*”).⁸³ Clifford derives his evolutionary idea of freedom, or “*action from within*,” from many progressive scientific discourses, including Spencerian and Darwinian evolution, vitalist conceptions of matter, and Bain’s subjective psychology.⁸⁴ His concomitant wariness of “survivals in the mind”—inherited “rudiments” that compromise the individual’s ability to think and act freely—also borrows from the evolutionary anthropology of Edward Burnett Tylor, which I touched on in the last chapter. In his influential monograph *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor argues that various “processes, customs, opinions, and so forth” are sometimes “carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home”—he terms these vestigial cultural features

⁸² Clifford here quotes a long passage from Swinburne’s ode “Mater Triumphalis.” Swinburne’s speaker begins the poem by hailing the “mother of man’s time-travelling generations,” who emerges as a deific personification of the ruthless, but also wondrous, principles of cosmic harmony and change. Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 424; Swinburne, “Mater Triumphalis,” in *Songs before Sunrise*, 171.

⁸³ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 426.

⁸⁴ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 426.

“survivals.”⁸⁵ As George Stocking has shown, Tylor’s insistence on “the progressive rather than degenerative character of human history,” which swayed anthropological thought for a generation, was closely connected to his conception of survivals.⁸⁶ By cautioning against “survivals in the mind,” then, Clifford invokes Tylor’s reformist imperative to “mark...out for destruction” those “remains of crude old culture” that persist into modernity.⁸⁷ For Clifford, as for Tylor, the growth of civilization depends on the continuous excision of undesirable survivals from every branch of human culture: a process to which individuals actively contribute by throwing off the fetters of tradition in their own lives. Self-willed action and creation become for Clifford the highest ethical goods, and freedom itself becomes a kind of divine emanation—here Clifford quotes Swinburne’s “To Walt Whitman in America” (1871)—of the “great god Man.”⁸⁸ To do anything for its “own sake,” in obedience to no force or system save one’s own genuine desire, is to participate in the larger project of active self-making that underpins Clifford’s optimistic evolutionism. Equipped with this understanding of evolution, Clifford “read[s] the signs of the times”—including the spread of democracy, the relaxation of social mores, and the rise of sociological thinking—and declares: “the kingdom of Man is at hand.”⁸⁹

As we can see in the dramatically prophetic denouement of “Cosmic Emotion,” Clifford’s confidence in the evolutionary apotheosis of humankind was very nearly a form of religious faith: hence his evangelical crusade of public education, which he pursued both in the periodical

⁸⁵ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:15.

⁸⁶ George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 160.

⁸⁷ In the conclusion to *Primitive Culture*, Tylor calls anthropology “essentially a reformer’s science.” Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2:453.

⁸⁸ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 429.

⁸⁹ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 429.

press and in lecture halls.⁹⁰ Above all, his willingness to merge scientific rationalism with the spiritual consolation, aesthetic pleasure, and utopian impulse of religious feeling distinguishes him from scientific contemporaries such as Huxley and Spencer, who sought to replace magical thinking with a more clinical scientism. Clifford's nuanced view of the social and evolutionary possibilities of faith emerges with particular clarity in his flippant fairy tale "The New Crown," which presents the fantasy kingdom of Nequesdhour as a humorous case study in Tylorian cultural evolution. Midway through the tale, an accident involving the titular crown leaves the most powerful woman in the kingdom with burnt fingers. Courtiers, eager to please their queen, quickly adopt the "fashion of having red finger-tips," and the custom undergoes the same process of mythicization through which all religious customs, according to Tylor, arise: gradually, Clifford's narrator drily observes, the fashion comes "to be regarded as one of very high antiquity, resting on deep reasons connected with the welfare of the human race, and, in fact, as a sacred custom of which it would be a sacrilege and profanity to question the wisdom or the necessity."⁹¹ On one level, Clifford intends for his readers to laugh at the ludicrousness of this superstition—and, while laughing, to question the contingency and mutability of those beliefs that they themselves hold sacred. On another level, however, given Clifford's own sanctification of "Man," the example of Nequesdhour models how his religion of humanity might eventually unseat older forms of religious orthodoxy. Both in "The New Crown" and throughout his work, Clifford's aim is not to extinguish his audience's sense of the "sacred," but instead to direct their feelings of cosmic emotion toward evolutionary processes that, in his view, really will promote the "welfare of the human race."

⁹⁰ Clifford was very prolific: his friends were so alarmed by his work habits that they more than once started a collection to send him to southern Europe to recuperate. Chisholm, *Such Silver Currents*, 55.

⁹¹ Clifford, "The New Crown," in *The Little People: And Other Tales* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), 46.

II. Pater, the Aesthetic Temperament, and the “Regeneration of the World”

In October 1868, only seven months after Clifford made his audacious debut before the Royal Institution, Pater published “Poems by William Morris”: in his essay’s famous defense of the “love of art for art’s sake,” which he later adapted for the much-maligned “Conclusion” of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Pater spelled out the philosophical foundations of the Aesthetic Movement.⁹² His intellectual stance toward evolutionary theory was unique among the cultural critics of his generation, in part because he so clearly connected his own risqué criticism to the pioneering natural sciences. As Gerald Monsman points out, Pater’s “excited acceptance of what he took to be aspects of the scientific spirit” (especially its “covert or direct materialism”) set him apart from other men of letters and antagonized his hidebound superiors at Oxford, where he was an instructor.⁹³ Of course, Pater had already articulated major portions of his response to evolutionary science before Clifford rose to prominence in the 1870s: in “Winckelmann” (1867), for instance, Pater advocates a “nobler...attitude” capable of looking on bleak material reality with “blitheness and repose.”⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Pater’s search for modes of thinking and being that could redeem human experience in an apparently purposeless universe bears notable resemblances to Clifford’s contemporary concerns. Beyond this early ideological congruence, elements of Pater’s thinking also provide evidence of more substantive engagement with Clifford’s ideas after the mid 1870s, when the two writers began publishing regularly in the *Fortnightly Review*. Pater’s late-career explorations of ethical aestheticism also acquire an evolutionary character—perhaps best exemplified in his 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*—that reflects and revises Clifford’s famous discussion of “cosmic emotion.”

⁹² Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 312.

⁹³ Gerald Monsman, *Walter Pater* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977), 29, 62-64.

⁹⁴ Pater, “Winckelmann,” 110.

As Monsman, Billie Andrew Inman, and other scholars have noted, it is difficult to trace Pater's scientific reading with any precision, since he often incorporated ideas into his richly referential writing without explicitly citing his sources.⁹⁵ Undoubtedly, however, Pater was both a voracious reader and a full participant in the interdisciplinary culture of late Victorian periodical print. Pater's own essays, for instance, often appeared alongside articles by contemporary scientists such as Tyndall and Huxley. Monsman points out that Pater's earliest pieces consequently "espouse the predominately Positivist philosophy" of the journals in which they appeared, including *Macmillan's Magazine* and the *Fortnightly Review*.⁹⁶ Pater's prose, Monsman adds, "clearly...draw[s] imaginatively on biological, chemical, physical, and geological terminology"; Monsman also hears subtler echoes of Clifford, Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, and Tyndall in the general "empirical-scientific spirit" of Pater's work.⁹⁷ In her exhaustive study of Pater's library borrowings and literary references, Inman finds that Pater studied and discussed *Origin* shortly after its publication, and she further speculates that he read Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864-67) before composing his famous review of Morris's poetry.⁹⁸ Similarly, Ian Small suggests that Pater's writings demonstrate "considerable familiarity" with Bain's psychological theories.⁹⁹ Although we cannot say for certain whether Pater read Clifford's articles or attended his lectures, Pater surely came into contact with

⁹⁵ Billie Andrew Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of His Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858-1873* (New York: Garland, 1981), xv, xvi.

⁹⁶ Monsman, *Walter Pater*, 28.

⁹⁷ Monsman, *Walter Pater*, 28.

⁹⁸ Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading*, 6, 14, 184.

⁹⁹ Although Inman finds no direct evidence that Pater read Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect*, Pater might have absorbed Bain's ideas through his reading of Lewes or the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine. It also seems likely that Pater read Bain's work in periodical form—perhaps in Bain's journal *Mind*, which published several notices of Pater's publications in the 1880s. I. C. Small, "The Vocabulary of Pater's Criticism and the Psychology of Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1978): 86; Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading*, 230.

Clifford's philosophy—and, at times, his very language—in the work of the younger aesthetes who Pater mentored (Vernon Lee, as we will see in the fourth chapter, quotes Clifford in several of her essays and presents a fictionalized sketch of him in her 1884 novel *Miss Brown*). Pater may have also met Clifford in person at the Century Club, a London-based organization of like-minded liberals to which both writers belonged; many of Pater's scientific and literary interlocutors, including Huxley, Tylor, Spencer, and the historian John Addington Symonds, were also members.¹⁰⁰

The influence of these various thinkers is evident in the materialist vision of the natural world that Pater presents in “William Morris” and, subsequently, the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. While his materialism owed much to his reading of classical philosophers such as Heraclitus and Lucretius, Pater drew a through-line from Greek atomism to modern-day natural science. Much later, in 1893, he linked the Heraclitean “burden” (“all things are in motion and nothing at rest,” which also serves as the epigraph to the “Conclusion”) directly to Darwin and other “physical enquirer[s] of to-day,” who daily prove that “races, laws, arts...are themselves ripples only on the great river of organic life.”¹⁰¹ As Monsman argues, Pater's earliest works agonize over “a problem deriving from the new science” of Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley: namely, how best to live in the conditions of constant flux to which biology, psychology, and

¹⁰⁰ The Century Club met in London from 1865 until 1881. Many of its members, including Pater and Clifford, had also belonged to one of the elite university debating clubs: the Old Mortality Society at Oxford and the Cambridge Apostles. As Frederic Harrison, one of the club's founders, later recalled, the Century Club upheld “very strict principles of political and religious liberalism,” and its members saw themselves as “keen workers in the causes of freedom of thought and popular progress.” While the Century Club was short lived, it did spawn the powerful Liberal Club, which still exists today. Christopher A. Kent, “Century Club (act. 1865-1881),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept. 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/95110>; Frederic Harrison, *Realities and Ideals: Social, Political, Literary and Artistic* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 371.

¹⁰¹ Pater, “Plato and the Doctrine of Motion,” *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 14, 15.

physics had reduced the universe.¹⁰² It is the self-annihilating nature of this flux that occupies the most recognizable passage of “William Morris.” “Our physical life,” Pater observes,

is a perpetual motion of [elements]—the passage of the blood, the wasting and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain by every ray of light and sound—processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces.... Far out on every side of us these elements are broadcast, driven by many forces; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resulting combinations.... This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence renewed from moment to moment of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.¹⁰³

As Inman and others have observed, Pater’s language broadly evokes both Tyndall’s discussions of the conservation of energy and Helmholtz’s experimental work on the physiology of the eye.¹⁰⁴ Pater’s equation of biological processes with physical forces, I would add, also recalls Spencer’s theorization of organic life as the accumulation, expenditure, and transfer of energy: the natural world, for Spencer, is an exchange economy, and an organism lives only so long as it can maintain a delicate “moving equilibrium” between the forces within and outside its body.¹⁰⁵ With characteristic finesse, Pater’s “William Morris” captures the Heraclitean instability of such an existence in his own syntax, which surges relentlessly through numerous non-terminal punctuation marks—polysyndetons, em-dashes, and semicolons—often nested in the same sentence. In the proverbial blink of an eye, elements and energies cohere into a body, live briefly, then dissolve and reform into a new “combination”: the graveside violets, which “spring” upward with a force recycled from the “gesture” that once animated the matter in its human form. In a departure from Spencer’s teleological view of evolution, however, Pater’s rendition

¹⁰² Monsman, *Walter Pater*, 57.

¹⁰³ Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 310.

¹⁰⁴ Inman, *Walter Pater's Reading*, 104-105.

¹⁰⁵ Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, vol. 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), 306, 92.

of biological process is noticeably cyclical and, as a result, non-directional. Both here and throughout his oeuvre, Pater often resists teleology in favor of the Heraclitean view of the world—a world that “properly *is* not but is only always *becoming*.”¹⁰⁶ Crushing for Pater, this materialism forecloses the possibility of spiritual immortality. “Well, we are all *condamnés*,” he reasons, quoting Victor Hugo: “we have an interval and then we cease to be.”¹⁰⁷

Like Clifford, however, Pater emphasizes the “seem[ingly] desolate” materialism of science so that he may advance an aesthetic attitude best suited to these circumstances.¹⁰⁸ Pater’s articulation of the aesthetic life thus sustains scientific materialism insofar as it authorizes intellectual deviance and experiential variety. As Carolyn D. Williams argues in her analysis of the “Conclusion,” Pater takes the nihilistic and hedonistic ramifications of modern thought to their “extreme limits,” only to “devote the full force of his rhetorical, figurative, and philosophical energies to proposing an alternative”: the philosophy of aestheticism.¹⁰⁹ Following a line of reasoning that bears comparison with Clifford’s, Pater’s aestheticism seeks both to assimilate scientific understandings of natural law and to resist their most dehumanizing implications. For instance, Pater responds to scientific assertions of our mortality—we enjoy no more than a “counted number of pulses,” he reflects, in the brief “interval” of life—by proposing a cognitive praxis that might allow us “to be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy.”¹¹⁰ Tellingly, Pater’s alternative to the

¹⁰⁶ Pater, “Plato and the Doctrine of Motion,” 14.

¹⁰⁷ In the “Conclusion,” Pater revises this passage to read, “we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more.” Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 312; conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 190.

¹⁰⁸ Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 311.

¹⁰⁹ Carolyn D. Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 12-13.

¹¹⁰ Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 311.

potential nihilism of the scientific worldview comes not from a position of anti-scientific spiritualism, but from within science itself: his quantification of “vital forces,” and his consequent assumption that we might increase our quality of life by maximizing our contact with these forces, builds on Spencer’s connection of organismic growth to the “spontaneous overflow of energy.”¹¹¹ Clifford’s evolutionary conception of social and intellectual deviance in “Mental Development” also resonates powerfully in Pater’s early writing. Confronted with the same specter of a cold and ever-changing universe, Pater delineates an ideal method of vision and cognition remarkably congruous with Clifford’s notion of “receptivity.” “What we have to do,” Pater famously concludes in both “William Morris” and the “Conclusion,” “is to be for ever curiously testing opinion and courting new impressions” without “acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy.”¹¹² Since Pater shares with Clifford an understanding of “life” as receptivity and impressibility—the prerequisites of adaptability—Pater rejects “habit” as a “failure” akin to Clifford’s notion of degenerative “crystallisation.”¹¹³

In the early essays that he collected in *The Renaissance*, Pater expands this notion of intellectual receptivity into his more comprehensive concept of the exemplary temperament, an ideal that would come to define the art for art’s sake movement. Pater’s “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci” (1869), for instance, enthuses over the painter’s “boundless curiosity,” his insuppressible “restlessness,” and his “intolerance of the common forms of things,” which spurred both his scientific studies and his extraordinary, at times “profane,” artistry.¹¹⁴ Leonardo’s ineffable

¹¹¹ Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, 1:172.

¹¹² Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 311.

¹¹³ Pater, “Poems by William Morris,” 311.

¹¹⁴ “Notes” was reprinted as the chapter “Leonardo da Vinci” in *The Renaissance*. Pater’s emendations were minimal, though he prefaced the chapter version with an epigraph from Francis Bacon. Pater, “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci,” *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1869): 499, 489, 494.

“strange[ness],” Pater suggests, is one manifestation of the liberated, intellectually fearless character that might “make as much as possible of the interval” of life.¹¹⁵ In his essay “Pico della Mirandola” (1871), Pater is likewise sympathetic to the Renaissance philosopher’s quixotic attempts to reconcile Paganism with Christianity. Although Pater acknowledges that Pico’s scholarship is historically inaccurate—in part because he predated what Pater calls the modern “idea of development”—Pater discerns in Pico’s “rehabilitation of human nature” the more valuable hallmarks of the “true *humanist*.”¹¹⁶ Pico’s humanism, Pater elaborates, anticipated both the High Renaissance and modern science: anthropology and psychology, in a retroactive validation of Pico’s approach, now trace all religion to “the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself.”¹¹⁷ Importantly, Pater’s understanding of Leonardo’s and Pico’s respective temperaments taps into the vitalist celebration of life that Clifford later integrated into his scientific writing. For Pater, the “essence” of Pico’s humanism—and what makes his example so enlightening—is his conviction “that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality.”¹¹⁸ As Pater elaborates elsewhere, the ideal temperament is thus “elastic” and capacious, and it “cries out against every formula less living and flexible than life itself.”¹¹⁹ In this sense, Clifford’s energetic endorsement of uninhibited

¹¹⁵ Pater, “Notes on Leonardo”; “Poems by William Morris,” 312.

¹¹⁶ Like “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci,” “Pico della Mirandola” was later incorporated into *The Renaissance* (as “Pico della Mirandola”). In “Pico,” Pater responds specifically to Matthew Arnold, whose 1864 lecture “Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment” postulates a “real difference in spirit and sentiment” between the two periods. Arnold’s rigid dichotomization conflicted with the doctrine of “psychic unity” that, as George Stocking explains, formed the basis of evolutionary anthropology; like the evolutionists and the humanist Pico (and unlike Arnold), Pater assumes the fundamental sameness of all minds in all eras. Pater, “Pico della Mirandola,” *Fortnightly Review* 10 (1871): 386; Matthew Arnold, “Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment,” in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, vol. 3 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 216; Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 142, 160.

¹¹⁷ Pater, “Pico della Mirandola,” 386, 379.

¹¹⁸ Pater, “Pico della Mirandola,” 386.

¹¹⁹ Pater, “Coleridge’s Writings,” *Westminster Review* 29 (1866): 132.

“receptivity” on rational grounds provides a model for Pater’s own project in the “Conclusion”—to “achieve,” as Kate Hext observes, “autonomy under the conditions of modernity through aesthetic experience.”¹²⁰

Pater’s reassertion of freedom, like Clifford’s before him, depends upon the sensory enjoyment of the material universe, in part because contemporary science (as we have seen in the first chapter) defined the aesthetic sense as an organic function relatively unconstrained by the deterministic pressures of natural selection and heredity. In his 1867 essay on Johann Winckelmann, Pater describes these stultifying external forces metaphorically, as a “magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world”: for Pater, it is this understanding of the inexorable “universality of natural law, even in the moral order,” that defines modernity.¹²¹ In the face of this new paradigm, Pater asserts that art and culture must train individuals to adopt a more spiritually fulfilling outlook on the otherwise demoralizing “conditions of modern life.”¹²² A truly “modern” art, Pater continues, should “represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom” that the new sciences have jeopardized.¹²³ “Natural laws we shall never modify,” he allows, “but there is still something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch their fatal combinations.”¹²⁴ The pleasures of beauty, Pater adds in his later essay “On Wordsworth” (1874), help foster this attitude by “withdraw[ing] the thoughts

¹²⁰ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 4.

¹²¹ Pater, “Winckelmann,” 110.

¹²² Pater, “Winckelmann,” 110.

¹²³ Pater, “Winckelmann,” 110.

¹²⁴ Pater, “Winckelmann,” 110.

for a little while from the mere machinery of life.”¹²⁵ In a remarkable reframing of Darwin’s and Spencer’s non-functionalist aesthetics, Pater argues that aesthetic contemplation—in his words, a life of “*being* as distinct from *doing*”—offers an escape from the “meanness” of daily life, precisely because beauty has no “end” aside from the “mere joy of beholding.”¹²⁶ “To treat life in the spirit of art,” Pater concludes, “is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified.”¹²⁷ Certainly, Pater’s repudiation of “doing” as a concession to the utilitarian pressures of survival departs from Clifford’s insistence on the vitalizing “love of action.” But Clifford, as we have seen, consistently rejected utilitarian standards of value in both science and art, and he accordingly considered an action ethically “good” only insofar as the individual could act freely, without regard to custom or practicality. Pater’s and Clifford’s views converge in this escapist impulse: both writers focus on the cultivation of an aesthetic disposition toward the world that might allow one to break free, however briefly, from the pall of material life.

This attitude of “sustained, not unpleasurable awe” in the midst of an otherwise unlovely universe is central to Pater’s dissection of psychological growth in his later imaginary portraits, many of which are motivated by the same humanist sentiment that suffuses Clifford’s writings.¹²⁸ As Hext argues, Pater’s depictions of nature in this period often invite their reader “to envisage evolution with the perverse pleasure of a decadent” and to make a spectacle of one’s “own fate within evolutionary history.”¹²⁹ For example, in “The Child in the House” (1878), a semi-fictionalized sketch of Pater’s earliest memories, the child puts Clifford’s perceptual

¹²⁵ Pater, “On Wordsworth,” *Fortnightly Review* 15 (1874): 465.

¹²⁶ Pater, “On Wordsworth,” 464-65.

¹²⁷ Pater, “On Wordsworth,” 465.

¹²⁸ Pater, “Imaginary Portraits I: The Child in the House,” *Macmillan's Magazine* 38 (1878): 321.

¹²⁹ Hext, *Walter Pater*, 137.

program into practice by instinctively detecting a “higher and more consistent harmony” behind the “acts and accidents of daily life.”¹³⁰ The child’s proto-aesthetic sensibility allows him to superimpose an imagined perfection onto what Pater’s narrator calls “every-day existence,” with all its small, unsightly troubles.¹³¹ In his imaginary portrait “Sebastian van Storck” (1886), Pater advances a similar revision of dismal cosmology—not, in this case, post-Darwinian materialism, but instead Sebastian’s pre-Darwinian belief that all “vividly-coloured existence” is just a “transient perturbation of the absolute mind.”¹³² The same theory that leads Sebastian to frigid, “well-reasoned nihilism,” Pater argues, might have instead prompted a humane sense of “joy and love...allied to the poetical or artistic sympathy, which feels challenged to become acquainted with and explore the various forms of finite existence all the more intimately, just because of that sense of one lively spirit circulating through all things.”¹³³ Sebastian, in other words, might have accepted the premises of his “well-reasoned” worldview without succumbing to nihilism, if only he had tempered his rationalism with an all-embracing admiration for the resplendent beauty of the universe.

In his late portrait “Giordano Bruno” (1889), Pater correspondingly relates this sense of harmony to the scientific temperament. Among Bruno’s many admirable qualities, Pater reserves special praise for the Franciscan friar’s pantheism, for which he was eventually burned at the stake: in Bruno’s vision, Pater writes, the “ghastly spectacle of the endless material universe” transformed into “the delightful consciousness of an ever-widening kinship and

¹³⁰ Pater, “The Child in the House,” 321.

¹³¹ Pater, “The Child in the House,” 321.

¹³² Pater, “Sebastian van Storck,” *Macmillan's Magazine* 53 (1886): 356-57.

¹³³ Pater, “Sebastian van Storck,” 357.

sympathy.”¹³⁴ Pater specifically attributes Bruno’s generative heterodoxy to the “largeness of mind” that gave rise to such scientific innovators as Bacon and Darwin.¹³⁵ In many ways, Pater’s Bruno is an exemplar of Clifford’s, as well as Pater’s, ideal thinker: consider Bruno’s ceaseless curiosity, his consequent ability to form “true ideas” in acts of demiurgic creation, his “mystic recognition” of the divine uniformity of nature, and his eager desire to study nature and disentangle its “delightful tangle of things.”¹³⁶ The seemingly selfish, solipsistic hedonism for which Pater was pilloried in the conservative press thus had its basis in a larger effort to address the individual’s spiritual needs in ways that conformed with up-to-date biological and psychological knowledge—an effort in which Clifford played a prominent part.¹³⁷ As Dawson argues, both supporters and detractors of Pater’s movement consequently regarded the “language and assumptions” of science and aestheticism as “virtually interchangeable” (most infamously, W. H. Mallock’s 1877 roman à clef *The New Republic* charges both Clifford and Pater, caricatured respectively as Saunders and Rose, with a dangerous moral relativism).¹³⁸ Pater’s concluding critique of Bruno’s “loose sympathies,” too, might easily have been addressed to Clifford’s standard of “absolute receptivity”: Bruno is so open-minded that he lacks an apparatus

¹³⁴ Pater, “Giordano Bruno,” *Fortnightly Review* 46 (1889): 240-41, 239.

¹³⁵ Pater, “Giordano Bruno,” 239.

¹³⁶ Pater, “Giordano Bruno,” 236, 239.

¹³⁷ R. M. Seiler has collected many illustrative responses to Pater’s *Renaissance*. The “Conclusion” in particular received several unfavorable and sometimes scathing reviews in the years after its publication—many took issue with Pater’s elaborate style and purported hedonism (see, for instance, Colvin’s review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*). Monsman, Hext, DeLaura, and others have addressed and disputed these contemporary critiques of Pater. R. M. Seiler, ed., *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1980), 53.

¹³⁸ In one scene of Mallock’s satire, both Rose and Saunders express their approval of the general decline in religious belief: Saunders dismisses religion as gross superstition, and Rose declares that a sense of uncertainty about the afterlife heightens worldly pleasure. Saunders’s atheism and flamboyant dress often align him more closely with the sexually indeterminate Rose than with the novel’s more respectable scientists, Storks (Huxley) and Stockton (Tyndall). Dawson, *Darwin*, 101; W. H. Mallock, *The New Republic: Or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House*, 3rd ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), 2:137.

for discriminating, either ethically or aesthetically, between “good, bad, and indifferent” qualities.¹³⁹ His generous spirit and intellectual flexibility, Pater explains in a noticeably Darwinian idiom, “discourage[ed] any effort at selection.”¹⁴⁰

This tension between personal freedom (which underpinned a humanistic response to evolution that started with Darwin himself) and ethics troubled Pater in the final decade of his career. As Hext argues, Pater often gestured toward ethical conceptions of “humanity at large” even as he struggled to articulate how his doctrine of self-culture could translate into widespread social benefit.¹⁴¹ I suggest that Pater found some resolution to this paradox in Clifford’s humanistic evolutionism, which asserted that the individual, by assuming an aesthetic attitude toward the cosmos, exerted some semi-mystical influence over future generations. Clifford, we will recall, took pains to demonstrate continuity between the short-lived individual and divine, universal “Man,” in whom one could achieve an abstract kind of immortality. Clifford’s religion of humanity, coupled with Darwin’s and Spencer’s evolutionary aesthetics and Tylor’s theories of the heritability of culture, raised the stakes of individual aesthetic experience and consequently magnified the importance of cultivating an aesthetic perspective on the world. In this context, Pater finally placed his trust in rarefied evolutionary mechanisms to preserve and proliferate what he considered the ideal temperament. It is in his evocations of generational progress that Pater comes closest to renewing his youthful claim that “a majority of [aesthetic personalities] would be the regeneration of the world.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Pater, “Giordano Bruno,” 244.

¹⁴⁰ Pater, “Giordano Bruno,” 244.

¹⁴¹ Hext, *Walter Pater*, 172-73.

¹⁴² Pater makes this ambitious argument in his early essay “Diaphaneité,” which he read aloud at an Old Mortality Society meeting in 1864. The essay includes some of his earliest opinions on the aesthetic temperament. While he never published the piece in his lifetime, Pater incorporated elements into his later writings, and his friend and

Pater's intensely psychological novel *Marius the Epicurean*, which follows the titular protagonist as he explores the numerous philosophical systems flourishing in Antonine Rome, hints at the ways in which evolutionary process might amplify self-cultivation into larger cultural renewal. Repulsed by pure Epicureanism and chilled by Stoicism, Marius embodies an intellectual middle ground between these extremes: his "unclouded and receptive soul" revels in the "full stream of refined sensation," while his "hieratic refinement" prompts him to "the selection, the choice, of what was perfect in its kind."¹⁴³ Marius's receptivity, in other words, is counterpoised against an instinct for tasteful discrimination that Pater once again expresses in the scientifically inflected term "selection." Marius's course of self-education, the narrator remarks, thus requires "the enlarging and refinement of the receptive powers," especially "those powers... which are directly relative to fleeting phenomena—the powers of sensation and emotion."¹⁴⁴ Unlike the more hedonistic Epicureans who he encounters, however, Marius realizes that this contemplative and aesthetic "manner of life might itself even come to seem a kind of religion—an inward, visionary, mystic piety or religion."¹⁴⁵ Marius's sense of piety, in turn, gives him a rigorous standard of "perfect[ion]" by which to judge the "traits of nature and of man": in this way, he moderates his desire for sensory pleasure with a disciplined and fastidious sense of taste.¹⁴⁶

former pupil, Charles Shadwell, had the essay published posthumously in *Miscellaneous Studies*. Pater, "Diaphanéité," in *Miscellaneous Studies*, ed. Charles Shadwell (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 222.

¹⁴³ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), 297, 177, 229.

¹⁴⁴ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 98.

¹⁴⁵ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 98.

¹⁴⁶ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 98.

Throughout the novel, Pater imbues Marius's religious attitude toward life with explicit evolutionary ramifications. Although Marius himself is unaware of the precise mechanisms by which humankind evolves, Pater's narrator freely adapts Tylor's ideas about cultural development: the novel opens with a discussion of Pagan "survival[s]," and its history of early Christianity is premised on the maxim, reminiscent of Tylor, that religions "must...grow by the same law of development which has prevailed in all the rest of the moral world."¹⁴⁷ Similarly to "Poems by William Morris," *Marius* remakes this basic scientific fact—that is, Tylor's conception of religion as an anthropological phenomenon rather than a revealed truth—into a broad basis for individual choice. Since no religion can claim absolute validity, the narrator reasons, Marius can assemble his personal philosophy with a "generous eclecticism" that is as organic and unconstrained as the "very spirit of life itself."¹⁴⁸ With his vital adaptability and refined taste, Marius embraces the best elements of Roman culture, including the beautiful liturgical survivals of Paganism, the compassionate humanism of early Christianity, and the joyous self-determinism of Epicureanism. Over the course of his life, Marius also rejects those modes of thinking that lead to the suffering of others: during his service to Marcus Aurelius, for instance, Marius disavows the Stoic renunciation of the body that allows the otherwise fair-minded emperor to tolerate the sight of violence in the gladiatorial arena. Free to choose whatever is "perfect" from a diverse pool of religious beliefs, art objects, and ethical principles, Marius becomes, in effect, the selective agent for a form of cultural evolution.

Given the possibility of Marius's evolutionary influence, Pater can recast his aesthetic creed of self-perfection into an unexpectedly pro-social form of ethics. Marius, the narrator

¹⁴⁷ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 7, 241.

¹⁴⁸ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 241.

reminds us, is “no frivolous dilettante” but a serious “economist” who sets about “mak[ing] the most, in no mean or vulgar sense, of the few years of life.”¹⁴⁹ In keeping with Clifford’s affirmative vision of Spencerian biology, Pater situates Marius’s individual practice of “economy” within a grander cooperative undertaking: by living out his philosophy, Marius “gives a meaning of his own, but quite a real and sincere one, to those old words [from the Gospel of John]—*Let us work while it is day!*”¹⁵⁰ Like Clifford, Pater transmutes a potentially decadent Pagan sentiment—i.e., the idea that we should enjoy what little time we have by indulging our every desire—into an urgent appeal for collaborative labor. (The quotation from John also bears a rhetorical likeness to Clifford’s own pseudo-Biblical entreaty, “Let us take hands and help, for this day we are alive together.”) Marius’s “heresy,” the narrator declares, instead “becomes a counsel of perfection,” a permutation of “that larger, well-adjusted system of the old morality, through which the better portion of mankind strive, in common, towards the realisation of a better world than the present.”¹⁵¹

For this reason, the childless Marius can still entertain an optimistic deathbed vision of his “link...to the generations to come”:

Yes! through the survival of their children, happy parents are able to think calmly, and with a very practical affection, of a world in which they are to have no direct share; planting, with a cheerful good humour, the acorns they carry about with them, that their grandchildren may be shaded from the sun by the broad oak-trees of the future...It was thus, too, surprised, delighted, that Marius, under the power of that new hope among men, could think of the generations to come after him. Without it, dim in truth as it was, he could hardly have dared to ponder the world which limited all he really knew, as it would be when he should have departed from it.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 176.

¹⁵⁰ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 176. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵¹ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 177.

¹⁵² Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 298.

At the novel's conclusion, Pater thus arrives at a more consciously humanitarian aestheticism, one oriented toward the gradual amelioration of the species through self-culture. Pater's departure from the stark, cyclical materialism of "William Morris" also becomes clear in his reconsideration of what the narrator of *Marius* calls the "merely sceptical doctrine" of "perpetual flux," which on deeper reflection appears to be "but the preliminary step towards a great system of almost religious philosophy."¹⁵³ In a moment of Cliffordian "appreh[ension], in what seemed like a mass of lifeless matter, [of] the movement of the universal life," Marius sees that Heraclitus really postulated a form of divine "continuance...maintained throughout the changes of the phenomenal world."¹⁵⁴ Marius's generational hopes, which render his lifetime of aesthetic self-cultivation evolutionarily beneficial, have their genesis in this revelation of "harmony in...mutation" at play in the cosmos.¹⁵⁵ On these grounds, David J. DeLaura determines that "Pater's aestheticism, for all its confusion of ethics and aesthetics, is essentially a special *morality*—not art for art's sake but for the sake of a special conception of the perfected life."¹⁵⁶

Clifford's optimistic evolutionism helps explain how Pater could conceive of perfected living—with its delicate equipoise of sensual license and intellectual discipline—as a moral and social good. Long after Clifford's death, we can still discern traces of the mathematician's divine, universal "Man" in Pater's discussion of the "*Zeit-geist*" in his lecture "Plato and the Doctrine of Number" (1893): "it is humanity itself now—abstract humanity—that figures as the transmigrating soul, accumulating into its 'colossal manhood' the experience of ages; making

¹⁵³ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 87-88.

¹⁵⁴ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 88.

¹⁵⁵ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 88.

¹⁵⁶ David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 179.

use of, and casting aside in its march, the souls of countless individuals.”¹⁵⁷ Pater, ever suspicious of teleology, remains equivocal about the directionality of this “march,” in which an indiscriminate humankind accrues “experience” without necessarily benefitting from its hoard. Yet, the hereditary continuity that he terms “*metempsychôsis*” here stands as a kind of immortality; this immortality, though imposing and unsentimental, is ultimately more humane and aspirational than the mindless shuffling of atoms that he explicated in “William Morris” over twenty years earlier. For Pater, the function of art in modern life was always to reaffirm the integrity of the individual within cosmic processes that seemed inimical to that integrity, such as the almost monstrous cultural accretion (the “sweeping together” of “ten thousand experiences”) that he describes in his famous reading of *La Gioconda* in “Leonardo da Vinci,” or the transmigration that he imagines in “Plato and the Doctrine of Number.”¹⁵⁸ But Pater, building on Clifford’s philosophy, ultimately makes a larger, evolutionary claim for the aesthetic individual, whose “liberty of soul” and “beatific vision...of our actual experience of the world” contribute to the sublime life of the species.¹⁵⁹

III. Blind and the “Triumph of the Human Mind”

I turn briefly now to the radical aesthetic poet and critic Mathilde Blind, whose works from the 1880s bring together Pater’s philosophy of aesthetic self-cultivation with Clifford’s program for transformation on an evolutionary scale. Although only rediscovered in the twentieth century, Blind was part of the cosmopolitan assemblage of famous progressives (many associated with Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic Movement) that gathered around her

¹⁵⁷ Pater, “Plato and the Doctrine of Number,” in *Plato and Platonism*, 64.

¹⁵⁸ Pater, “Plato and the Doctrine of Number,” 64; “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci,” 507.

¹⁵⁹ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, 95.

stepfather, exiled activist Karl Blind.¹⁶⁰ In the Blind home, revolutionaries such as Joseph Mazzini and Karl Marx mingled with writers such as John Stuart Mill, Huxley, Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne, with whom Blind developed an intimate correspondence.¹⁶¹ Generally speaking, Blind's deeply ingrained republicanism meshed with the principles of aestheticism, which Pater was concurrently defining in terms of its resistance to moral and artistic orthodoxy. Blind was also a close friend of the Cliffords: she admiringly quotes Clifford in several of her writings, and she composed the short poem "Perfect Union" (dedicated to "W. K. C.") on the occasion of his death in 1879.¹⁶² The poem imagines Clifford's final moments, in which he faces his death "with unintimidated eyes," as the triumphant culmination of his evolutionary optimism.¹⁶³ Secure in his "invincible belief / Of Man's august supremacy," Blind's Clifford experiences an ecstatic religious vision of "paradise" before dying peacefully, and he uses his last ounce of energy to describe the apparition: "Perfect!," he cries in typically rousing fashion, "No one knows / How perfect!"¹⁶⁴

As "Perfect Union" suggests, Blind's friendship with Clifford guided her strikingly passionate reception of evolutionary theory. Arthur Symons, in his retrospective on Blind's career, observes that her "instinct for what was religious" found an outlet in "the scientific teaching of Darwin, . . . which inflamed her with the ardour of a worshipper."¹⁶⁵ "Her expressions

¹⁶⁰ James Diedrick, "A Pioneering Female Aesthete: Mathilde Blind in 'The Dark Blue,'" *Victorian Periodicals Review* 36 (2003): 211.

¹⁶¹ Diedrick, "A Pioneering Female Aesthete," 212-14.

¹⁶² Blind, "Perfect Union," 125; "Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin's" (London: privately printed by the Shelley Society, 1886), 20.

¹⁶³ Blind, "Perfect Union," 126.

¹⁶⁴ Blind, "Perfect Union," 125-26.

¹⁶⁵ Arthur Symons, introduction to *A Selection from the Poems of Mathilde Blind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897), v.

of strenuous and reverent unbelief,” continues Symons, “rise at times to almost the very highest rapture of Pantheism.”¹⁶⁶ “Reverent unbelief” and rationalist “ardour” are some of the hallmarks of Clifford’s philosophy, and the quasi-pantheism that Symons describes savors of Pater’s neo-Hellenistic interpretations of modern materialism. In her lecture “Shelley’s View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin’s” and her evolutionary epic *The Ascent of Man*, Blind relies on both Clifford’s secular zealotry and Pater’s aesthetic sensibility as she searches for rational methods of progress consistent with her commitments to poetry, social justice, and self-determination both in politics and in art. That Blind so readily fused Clifford’s and Pater’s respective philosophies into an affirmative projection of human evolution—a vision of futurity that surfaces in Wilde’s and Lee’s work as well—shows us that Clifford was, to many Victorian aesthetes, an important interlocutor for Pater and a founding figure in the Aesthetic Movement.

Blind’s interest in humanistic evolutionism emerges clearly in her lecture on Percy Bysshe Shelley, in which she attempts to concretize his utopian imagination by reconciling (rather than contrasting, as the title promises) Shelley’s and Darwin’s respective cosmologies. Blind initially aligns Shelley’s “rose-coloured” view of nature with Enlightenment conceptions of the earth as “an abode of love and harmony,” which she juxtaposes with “the reckless competition, the selfishness, the cruelty” of Darwinian natural law.¹⁶⁷ Yet Blind soon claims that Shelley, had he lived to read Darwin, would have easily absorbed evolutionary theory’s most uplifting implications: *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) “would have shown the human race...not as physically and morally depraved, owing to its gradual alienation from Nature, but, on the contrary, as emerging from a semi-brutal, barbarous condition, and continually progressing to

¹⁶⁶ Symons, introduction to *The Poems of Mathilde Blind*, v.

¹⁶⁷ Blind, “Shelley’s View of Nature,” 11-15.

higher stages of moral and mental development.”¹⁶⁸ Blind considers this emphasis on human self-making—that is, humankind's “continually growing power” to overcome the “irresponsible forces of Nature”—“more in harmony with the Darwinian conception of the universe, and more consoling on the whole.”¹⁶⁹ What Blind means by “the Darwinian conception of the universe,” however, more closely resembles Clifford’s and Pater’s evolutionary humanism—an eclectic amalgamation of Darwinian and Spencerian evolution, classical and Renaissance materialism, and religious rhetoric—which insisted on seeing the species, in Clifford’s words, as “a risen race and not a fallen one.”¹⁷⁰

Blind thus integrates Shelley’s radical utopianism into Darwin’s theory on the basis of their similarly progressive understanding of the material universe. Shelley’s rapturous depictions of nature, Blind claims, intuited a beautiful cosmic *telos* that Darwin later proved scientifically.

Blind concludes her lecture by discerning the “final junction” of both writers’ views in

the glorious vistas they disclose of ever higher types of life replacing those that had gone before. For, judging by analogy, better, wiser, and more beautiful things will inhabit this planet in the ages to come, according to the law of evolution, than we can now have any conception of. And I hope that we are all agreed that in Shelley himself we have already a certain foreshadowing of something better—for with his exquisitely sensitive organisation, . . . with his scorn for vulgar aims ending in self-aggrandisement, with his impatience of the conventional, continually hampering standards of morality, and with his passion for reforming the world, he seems lifted, not only above the needs and greeds of sensual desires, but also above the fierce competition, the corroding jealousy, and malignant rivalries from which intellectual workers are so rarely exempt.¹⁷¹

Blind’s account of Shelley’s poetic imagination here draws on both Pater’s transgressive aestheticism—with its elevation of the “sensitive,” disinterested, unorthodox personality—and

¹⁶⁸ Blind, “Shelley’s View of Nature,” 18-19.

¹⁶⁹ Blind, “Shelley’s View of Nature,” 19.

¹⁷⁰ Clifford, “Virchow on the Teaching of Science,” 725.

¹⁷¹ Blind, “Shelley’s View of Nature,” 20-21.

Clifford's devout faith in the god-like power of "Man." Convinced, like Clifford and Pater, of the evolutionary value of intellectual and personal freedom, Blind celebrates Shelley's disregard for moral convention, his disdain for "vulgar" economic gain, and his heroic rejection of the "dread law" of natural selection.¹⁷² Shelley's life and work, in Blind's understanding, thus presage the evolution of "better, wiser, and more beautiful *things*": not just creatures, but also artworks, personalities, institutions, and philosophies.

By applying, as Clifford and Pater did, the language of evolutionary selection to the realms of art, morality, and belief, Blind asserts the importance of individual choice in evolutionary processes outside the natural selective paradigm of "fierce competition." This arrogation of selective power to humankind also allows Blind to situate Shelley's poetics within a sustained project of racial self-improvement that will end in what she deems "the final triumph of the human mind over the brute forces of nature."¹⁷³ Shelley's chief contribution to this project lies, for Blind, in the proto-aesthetic character of his poetry, specifically his preference for "beautiful idealisms" over naturalistic depictions of "mundane subjects" and "tragic themes."¹⁷⁴ Since Shelley, in his "glowing anticipation of a better future in store for humanity," consciously ignores the quotidian cruelties of everyday life, Blind predicts that his poetry "will become a factor in helping to bring [a better future] about."¹⁷⁵ That is, Shelley performs his evolutionary role by proposing moral alternatives to the "dread law" of nature, while refined readers (such as Blind's listeners at the Shelley Society, where she delivered the talk) exert selective pressure by choosing to read and internalize his poetry. Pater's and Clifford's influences are especially

¹⁷² Blind, "Shelley's View of Nature," 16.

¹⁷³ Blind, "Shelley's View of Nature," 22.

¹⁷⁴ Blind, "Shelley's View of Nature," 20-21.

¹⁷⁵ Blind, "Shelley's View of Nature," 22.

palpable in Blind's assumption (one adopted also by Wilde, Allen, and Lee) that self-culture can bring about widespread, long-term change.

In her epic retelling of the evolution of humankind, *The Ascent of Man*, Blind again attempts to harmonize the Darwinian reality of "immemorial strife" with the "invincible belief" in human progress that her poem "Perfect Union" identifies with Clifford.¹⁷⁶ *Ascent*, more forthrightly than "Shelley's View of Nature," presents art and culture as alternatives to the violence of natural selection. Blind's noticeable inversion of the title of Darwin's *Descent*—which implied a decline that misrepresented the true nature of human evolution, according to Clifford—directly challenges a pessimistic strain that runs through certain Victorian poetic responses to contemporary science. Alfred Tennyson's elegiac poem *In Memoriam* (1850), with its iconic lament for "Nature, red in tooth and claw," is only the most prominent illustration of a larger crisis of faith that looms over countless other poems, including Robert Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos" (1864) and Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867).¹⁷⁷ As Stevenson observes, and as we have already seen, the later poetry of Swinburne and Meredith posited "vision[s] of future progress" that explicitly rejected these earlier poets' melancholy.¹⁷⁸ Blind's *Ascent* undoubtedly belongs to this pro-scientific tradition. More recently, John Holmes has called Blind's "teleological drive towards an ideal humanity favoured by nature and equated with the divine" a poetic "act of bad faith"—Blind, he claims, knew that this optimism ran afoul of

¹⁷⁶ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 48; "Perfect Union," 125.

¹⁷⁷ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Erik Gray (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 41.

¹⁷⁸ Stevenson, *Darwin Among the Poets*, 209.

Darwin's non-teleological model of evolution.¹⁷⁹ However, several literary and scientific authorities, including Clifford, Pater, and Swinburne, underwrote Blind's idealism.

Blind also found a key intellectual ally in Constance Naden, the contemporary poet and philosopher who sought to supplant a declining religiosity with a rational humanist philosophy that she termed "Hylo-Idealism." Hylo-Idealism, as Naden theorizes it, extrapolates the subjective psychology of Bain and others into the ambitious contention that "man is the maker of his own Cosmos."¹⁸⁰ Given the shaping power of our perception, Naden finds "our only hope for salvation...in the conscientious endeavor to draw new life from nature, and to make science itself a well-spring of ideal truth."¹⁸¹ Many of Naden's poems enact this idealistic materialism by rendering the physical universe in simultaneously scientific and mythic terms: her sonnet "The Nebular Theory" (1887), for instance, reimagines the birth of the universe as the sexual consummation of "atoms...Clinging and clustering, with fierce throbs of birth, / And raptures of keen torment, such as stings / Demons who wed in Tophet."¹⁸² As such, Naden's reverent pantheism both echoes Clifford's devout expressions of nonbelief and anticipates the triumphant evolutionism of Blind's *Ascent*.

Like "Shelley's View of Nature," Blind's *Ascent* sustains its sense of hope by shifting the epicenter of evolutionary progress away from the natural world and toward the domain of culture. Importantly, this shift operates in the poem's kaleidoscopic prosody as well as its

¹⁷⁹ John Holmes, *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 53, 49.

¹⁸⁰ Constance Naden, "The Brain Theory of Mind & Matter; or Hylo-Idealism," in *Induction and Deduction: A Historical & Critical Sketch of Successive Philosophical Conceptions Respecting the Relations between Inductive and Deductive Thought, and Other Essays*, ed. R. Lewins (London: Bickers & Son, 1890), 157.

¹⁸¹ Naden, "What is Religion? A Vindication of Neo-Materialism," in *Further Reliques of Constance Naden: Being Essays and Tracts for Our Times*, ed. George M. McCrie (London: Bickers & Son, 1891), 133.

¹⁸² Naden, "The Nebular Theory," in *A Modern Apostle; The Elixir of Life; The Story of Clarice; And Other Poems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1887), 156.

content. In the first section of *Ascent*, “The Chaunts of Life,” Blind employs dactylic hexameter, iambic tetrameter, and a number of complicated variations on ballad meter. Her virtuosic array of verse forms evinces a variety and excess that seem to recreate the conditions of Darwinian evolution on the level of form itself. As Jason Rudy argues, Blind believed that evolutionary progress consisted in the subjection of “unruly instinct, or natural disorder, to disciplined control”; this view of evolution convinced her that poetry, through its “imposition...of formal structure,” could push the species “toward ever higher levels of moral and intellectual sophistication.”¹⁸³ The poem accordingly begins with a stark representation of primordial fecundity: humankind emerges from a “hell of hunger, hatred [and] lust” where life “mounts higher” only “step by panting step,” through cycles of explosive procreation and mass death.¹⁸⁴ But just as her prosody lends order and beauty to the chaos of “teeming earth,” Blind’s narrative carefully sets humankind, the “strange new creature,” apart from the “reeking swarms” of lower animals.¹⁸⁵ Freed from want and “pressing hunger,” Blind’s primitive man begins to extricate himself from “Nature’s thrall” after he learns to recognize within nature “all shows of things in colour, sound, or form,” whether in the “symphonious” sounds of the sea or the magnificent colors of a misty valley.¹⁸⁶ In *Ascent*, the birth of sensuality represents a pivotal change in humankind’s relationship to nature, which becomes an object of serene, pleasurable contemplation instead of the fraught locus of life-or-death struggle. Blind directly links the species’ success to its singular ability—an imperfect one, as her lengthy meditation on war and poverty suggests—to suspend the brutal laws of nature, if only in the imagination. In her

¹⁸³ Jason R. Rudy, “Rapturous Forms: Mathilde Blind’s Darwinian Poetics,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (2006): 447.

¹⁸⁴ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 13-14.

¹⁸⁵ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 12, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 25-27.

evolutionary history, the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure for its own sake is not a vestige of our animality but a marker of our humanity. For Blind, the aesthetic sensibility of a Shelley or a Pater (or a Clifford, for that matter) thus represents a milestone on the way toward the future “triumph” she predicts at the end of “Shelley’s View of Nature.”

Consequently, Blind presents the creation and consumption of art as countermeasures against the “grey legacies of hate and hoar misdeeds” that humans have inherited from their ancestors.¹⁸⁷ Blind’s prototypical artist, “pursued and stung and driven” by a battery of uncontrollable natural forces, finds “delivery in the realm of art” and in the “divine control” he exerts over “forms and hues and sounds that make / Life grow lovelier for their sake.”¹⁸⁸ Underlying Blind’s evolutionary account is the specifically Paterian, and more broadly aesthetic, claim that good art refines and elevates rather than represents everyday life: the early sculptor strenuously imbues his marble with “such beauty as ne’er bloomed in mortal mould,” and his successor, the painter, transfigures “common things” by “the magic of the brush.”¹⁸⁹ But it is the poet, the most advanced of artists, whom Blind crowns “Lord of life’s changeful shows”: a god “in whose shaping brain / Life is created o’er again,” and “whose mighty potencies of verse / ... / fashion to their strenuous will / The world that is creating still.”¹⁹⁰ In this context, her complex and eclectic prosody—she pays her tribute to poetry in carefully wrought variations on the couplet—puts into practice the poet’s demiurgic power to “fashion” the world to her “strenuous will.”

¹⁸⁷ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 48.

¹⁸⁸ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 49, 51.

¹⁸⁹ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 53.

¹⁹⁰ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 54.

As her evolutionary history comes to a close, Blind further exploits her prerogative as poet by staging a euphoric religious vision reminiscent of Clifford, which she invokes in a versatile and varied trochaic tetrameter:

Do you hear it, do you hear it
Soaring up to heaven, or somewhere near it?
From the depths of life upheaving,
Clouds of earth and sorrow cleaving,
From despair and death retrieving,
All triumphant blasts of sound
Lift you at one rhythmic bound
From the thraldom of the ground.

[.....]

Till no longer cramped and bound
By the narrow human round,
All the body's barriers slide,
Which with cold obstruction hide
The supreme, undying, sole
Spirit struggling though the whole...¹⁹¹

Here, the speaker confidently proclaims her ability to free her readers, through the transcendent pleasures of metrical rhythm, from “thraldom” to the earth and their animal origins. The poem’s slide into catalexis (which begins with the line, “All triumphant blasts of sound”) signals a metrical as well as tonal shift that accompanies the ascent out of “earth and sorrow” and “despair and death”; the stressed endings of subsequent lines mirror the exultant upward trajectory that Blind intends for her reader. More dramatically, Blind positions this personal emancipation as the prelude to an even vaster operation at work in the universe as a whole—a semi-mystical striving toward perfection in which the discrete individual ultimately dissolves into the “supreme...Spirit” of humankind. Blind’s application of the Darwinian term “struggle” to this process is telling: the most savage of activities, once the driving force behind a “chaos and

¹⁹¹ Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 54-55.

welter...of pain,” becomes sacred and ethereal when imagined on a large enough scale.¹⁹² For all her attention to the ugly realities of nature, Blind’s ambition in *Ascent* is to redeem our perception of nature by granting us (as Clifford and Pater so often attempted) epiphanic insight into the true beauty of the latent universal order, to which each human life makes its contribution in turn.

Blind thus joins a tradition of evolutionary aestheticism that began with Darwin’s recognition, thirty years earlier, of the “grandeur” inherent in the evolutionary “view of life.”¹⁹³ For Clifford and Pater, as for Darwin, the aesthetic occupied a special place within an otherwise uncaring cosmos. With her invocation of a racial “Spirit”—one that ascends higher in the evolutionary scale through enculturation rather than predation—Blind expands the spiritual overtones of Clifford’s and Pater’s humanisms into a full-blown religion that weds scientific rationalism to the principles of aestheticism. Clifford, Pater, and Blind, in keeping with Darwin’s aesthetic insights, not only espoused the “intellectual and spiritual passion” for beauty that Arnold had praised in John Keats, but also looked upon Arnold’s “religion of culture” as an evolutionary imperative.¹⁹⁴ More important, the tenets of their evolutionary aestheticism motivated some of the most memorable expressions of fin-de-siècle aestheticism. In Lee’s call for a “new spirituality” directed toward the evolution of “more sensitive” individuals—as well as in Wilde’s confidence in our eventual “Evolution...towards Individualism” and thence towards

¹⁹² Blind, *The Ascent of Man*, 4.

¹⁹³ Darwin, *Origin*, 427.

¹⁹⁴ In its broad goals, though not in its attitude toward science, Arnold’s humanism harmonized with Clifford’s, Pater’s, and Blind’s respective evolutionary programs: for Arnold, culture “places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality.” Arnold, “John Keats,” in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, vol. 9 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 213; *Culture and Anarchy*, in *Culture and Anarchy with Friendship’s Garland and Some Literary Essays*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 115.

“perfection”—we hear echoes of Clifford’s, Pater’s and Blind’s respective forms of faith in the evolutionary potency of liberated aesthetic experience.¹⁹⁵ As Clifford’s legacy in particular demonstrates, both evolutionism and aestheticism in this period developed within an intellectual network that spanned disciplines, genres, and milieus. What united these three writers, finally, was their sincere conviction that aesthetic pleasure was at once a religious practice, a biological necessity, and an act of heroic resistance. Only by savoring the beauty of the world, they believed, could one escape from the brutalizing struggle for survival and, in doing so, lay the groundwork for a more perfect future. In subsequent years, as we will see, Allen and Wilde moved away from their predecessors’ emphasis on piety and developed a more overtly utopian, and therefore more polemical, evolutionary aestheticism: one that helped launch aestheticism into both fame and notoriety in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

¹⁹⁵ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 263, 268; Lee, “The Use of the Soul,” in *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1894), 289.

Chapter 3
Sexual Selection and Social Progress:
The Utopian Evolutionism of Grant Allen and Oscar Wilde

What measures our distance above the beasts that perish consists in these three things—ethics, intellect, the sense of beauty.... On the third [our existing morality] lays no stress at all; and herein the new hedonism has its *raison d'être*. It is part of its mission to point out to humanity that literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, the beautifying of life by sound, and form, and word, and colour, are among the most important tasks of civilisation.

—Grant Allen, “The New Hedonism” (1894)

In his provocative polemic “The New Hedonism,” Grant Allen mounts a passionate defense of fin-de-siècle aestheticism by proposing a modern ethic—the titular “new hedonism,” which Allen borrows from Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891)—that fully synthesizes aestheticism’s insights with up-to-date scientific knowledge.¹ At first glance, Allen seems an unexpected ally for Wilde, in part because few literary historians have explored the link between the two contemporaries. Many modern-day scholars of Allen’s work (including Peter Morton, Bernard Lightman, William Greenslade, and Terence Rodgers) have tended to focus on his popular science writing, his elaborations on Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary theories, and his controversial “New Woman” novels *The Woman Who Did* (1895) and *The Type-Writer Girl* (1897).² Those who do connect Allen and Wilde, such as Nick Freeman, often focus on the two writers’ shared commitments to libertarian socialism rather than

¹ Grant Allen, “The New Hedonism,” *Fortnightly Review* 55 (1894): 382.

² See Peter Morton, “*The Busiest Man in England*”: *Grant Allen and the Writing Trade, 1875-1900* (2005), Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (2007), and William Greenslade and Terence Rodgers’s collection of essays on Allen, *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (2005).

their overlapping philosophical and aesthetic concerns.³ As we can begin to see in the epigraph, however, Allen’s association of evolutionary progress with aesthetic cultivation echoes Wilde’s aphoristic assertion, in “The Decay of Lying” (1889, revised 1891), that a “proper sense of human dignity...is entirely the result of indoor life”: that is, a domesticated, ornamented, beautified existence.⁴ For Allen, too, a survey of human evolutionary history reminds us that our cultural achievements are all that lift us “above the beasts that perish.” In this context, aestheticism’s commitment to the “beautifying of life” entails for him potentially sweeping consequences for the future evolution of humankind. Allen’s vocal support for Wilde—which Allen expressed both privately in letters as well as publicly in his 1891 article “The Celt in English Art”—was not simply an alliance of political convenience, but also an integral part of Allen’s serious program for widespread social improvement.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Allen’s understanding of evolutionary process reinforced the increasingly ambitious and outspoken form of aestheticism that emerged in the late 1880s—a politicized Aesthetic Movement, best encapsulated in Wilde’s work, which departed from Walter Pater’s more restrained articulations of a disciplined, even religious, aesthetic philosophy. First, I chronicle the genesis of Allen’s aesthetics in the 1870s, the early period in his career in which he still aspired to conduct serious scientific research on psychology, botany, and physics. Although he soon abandoned scientific practice for scientific journalism,

³ One exception is Michael S. Helfand and Philip E. Smith’s brief but suggestive article “Anarchy and Culture: The Evolutionary Turn of Cultural Criticism in the Work of Oscar Wilde” (1978). Helfand and Smith argue that Wilde sought to eliminate Darwinian competition and “substitute sexual selection (eugenics) as the means of racial, and so cultural, improvement”; they add that Wilde’s theories were thus “representative of a group of radical social scientists...such as A. R. [Alfred Russel] Wallace and Grant Allen.” Michael S. Helfand and Philip E. Smith II, “Anarchy and Culture: The Evolutionary Turn of Cultural Criticism in the Work of Oscar Wilde,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20 (1978): 199-200; Nick Freeman, “‘Intentional Rudeness’?: *The British Barbarians* and the Cultural Politics of 1895,” in *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. William Greenslade and Terence Rodgers (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 111-28.

⁴ Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74.

Allen had nevertheless initiated certain trends that continued to surface in aesthetics throughout the century, especially in Vernon Lee's work.⁵ As Regenia Gagnier has demonstrated, Allen's "physiological aesthetics"—his term for the study of aesthetic feeling as a corporeal phenomenon—presided over a major late century shift toward an aesthetics of pleasurable consumption: I further argue that Allen's early works formulated and popularized a science of aesthetics that valued beauty for its civilizing effects on the body and mind.⁶ These ideas in turn formed the basis of his mature nonfiction and fiction writings, in which he proclaimed ever more vigorously the evolutionary importance of the beautiful. I then consider the impact that Wilde's familiarity with the work of Allen, Spencer, Charles Darwin, W. K. Clifford, and others had on his aesthetics. For Wilde, as for Allen, advances in biology, physiology, and psychology hinted at potential avenues for radical social change, without the need for the toxic "mixture of sympathy and coercion" that, as Lawrence Goldman observes, characterized earlier Victorian reform movements.⁷ In the mid 1890s, both writers thus expanded the reverent vision and disciplined libertarianism of Clifford and Pater into a more polemical mission: to convince their readership that the free cultivation and expression of one's taste (whether in art, political movements, or sexual partners) could produce what Wilde called a "saner, healthier, more civilized" species.⁸ By serving as the cultural cornerstone for a systemic, multi-generational

⁵ Morton, *"The Busiest Man in England": Grant Allen and the Writing Trade, 1875-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

⁶ Regenia Gagnier, "Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 136.

⁷ Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857-1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 146.

⁸ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, 267.

reorganization of all aspects of society, from marriage to the economy, aestheticism represented to Allen and Wilde the first step in the “realization of utopia” that Wilde equated with progress.⁹

I. Aesthetic Pleasure and Evolutionary Progress in Allen’s Early Work

Though relatively obscure today, Allen was ubiquitous in the British press in the 1880s and 1890s. Born in 1848 to a prosperous Irish-Canadian family, Allen’s early successes at Yale and Oxford evaporated after his disastrous first marriage, which he contracted out of principle rather than affection.¹⁰ Newly remarried and desperate for work, Allen accepted a professorship at a government college in Spanish Town, Jamaica in 1873. By all accounts, Allen struggled to adjust to life in Jamaica, but his light teaching responsibilities left him abundant time for his own pursuits: his studies in political economy, biology, and philosophy further cemented his youthful radicalism, while his undergraduate interest in Spencer’s liberalism grew into an intense admiration for the philosopher’s entire evolutionary doctrine (in Morton’s words, evolutionism became in this time Allen’s “rational religion, and Herbert Spencer was its messiah”).¹¹ In 1876, Allen returned to London to make his living through writing. His first publications, which

⁹ Matthew Beaumont provides an edifying reading of Wilde’s use of “utopia,” which (according to Beaumont) both agrees with and disputes the linear, “bourgeois narrative of history.” Wilde’s image of utopia is thus “too ambiguous simply to be interpreted as a celebration of progress.” As I will argue, Wilde does celebrate a kind of progress: not social progress as conceived by the Victorian philanthropists with whom Wilde disagreed, but an evolutionary progress that would be brought about by individuals. Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 247; Matthew Beaumont, “Reinterpreting Oscar Wilde’s Concept of Utopia: ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism,’” *Utopian Studies* 15 (2004): 20-21.

¹⁰ In his second year at Oxford, Allen married Caroline Boothway—a working-class woman and possible former prostitute—because he considered it his chivalric duty to help her. Boothway’s illness and their poverty distracted him from his studies, and he graduated with an average degree that belied his early promise. Boothway died soon afterward, in 1871. These experiences undoubtedly influenced Allen’s later support for women’s sexual liberation, which he considered an antidote to prostitution. Morton, “Biographical Essay,” in *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics*, 24; Edward Clodd, *Grant Allen: A Memoir* (London: Grant Richards, 1900), 35.

¹¹ Clodd, *Grant Allen*, 44-51; Morton, “Biographical Essay,” 25.

included specialized monographs on botany, physics, and psychology, proved unprofitable, and he soon entered the more lucrative world of periodical journalism.

Despite Allen's vexed relationship with the industry—perhaps best illustrated in his first novel, *Philistia* (1884), in which a newspaper editor repeatedly bowdlerizes the work of an idealistic young writer in order “to suit the taste of our public”—he thrived in this milieu.¹² Before his death in 1899, Allen published over thirty fiction and nonfiction books, dozens of short stories, several volumes of poetry, and hundreds of articles on topics as varied as biology, history, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and art criticism.¹³ Over the course of his prolific career, he contributed to almost every major British periodical of the day, at every level of literary respectability and scientific legitimacy—from the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Cornhill Magazine* to the *Fortnightly Review* and *Mind*.¹⁴ One of his many protégés, the bohemian writer Richard Le Gallienne, called him “the most variously gifted man of letters of his time,” and a particularly “brilliant generaliser.”¹⁵ While he possessed neither Clifford's academic credentials nor Wilde's literary reputation, Allen was a similarly divisive figure to the Victorian public, especially once he began making the case against marriage in the 1890s. Feminist historian Lucy Bland counts Allen, along with male “New Woman” novelists such as George Gissing and George Moore, among the most prominent proponents of “free unions” (or what Le Gallienne, in

¹² Grant Allen, *Philistia* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1884), 1:73.

¹³ Morton, “Biographical Essay,” 23-28.

¹⁴ The *Pall Mall Gazette* was a reform-minded and sometimes evangelical daily that reached its peak circulation under the editorship of W. T. Stead, a pioneer of investigative journalism. The monthly *Cornhill Magazine* specialized in high-quality serial fiction and catered to a liberal, but not radical, middle-class audience. The slightly pricier *Fortnightly Review* printed a mixture of serial fiction, poetry, criticism, and science. Unlike the more cautious *Cornhill Magazine*, the *Fortnightly Review* (as we have seen) included pieces by controversial figures including Clifford and Algernon Charles Swinburne. The psychologist Alexander Bain founded *Mind* in 1876 as an elite specialist quarterly, but literary writers such as Allen and Lee occasionally contributed to the journal. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Gent: Academia Press; London: British Library, 2009), 478, 145, 227, 34.

¹⁵ Richard Le Gallienne, “Grant Allen,” *Fortnightly Review* 66 (1899): 1022, 1025.

his retrospective on Allen, called “free love”).¹⁶ Allen’s fame and versatility brought him into contact with many of the enduring scientific and literary figures of his day, including Spencer, Darwin, Clifford, T. H. Huxley, George Meredith, and H. G. Wells.¹⁷

Significantly, Allen’s earliest publications were inquiries into the biological origins of the aesthetic faculties. His first two books, *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877) and *The Colour-Sense* (1879), attempt to trace the development of aesthetic feelings from “the simple pleasures in bright colour, sweet sound, or rude pictorial imitation, such as delight the child and the savage...to the more and more complex gratifications of natural scenery, music, painting, and poetry.”¹⁸ First and foremost, Allen argues that beautiful objects act upon the nerves so as to generate the “Maximum of Stimulation with the Minimum of Fatigue or Waste, in processes not directly connected with vital functions.”¹⁹ “Beauty,” from this essentially classical as well as Spencerian perspective, is a superfluous and pleasurable physiological response stimulated by objects, not a quality inherent in objects.²⁰ Allen explicitly rests his definition of beauty—which also recalls Immanuel Kant’s ideas about the subjectivity of aesthetic taste in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)—on the scientific findings of Darwin, Spencer (to whom Allen dedicates *Physiological Aesthetics*), Alexander Bain, and Hermann von Helmholtz, the renowned German

¹⁶ Unlike Allen and Gissing, Bland argues, women “New Woman” novelists were often overtly skeptical of free unions. Most women feminists, Bland adds, were more interested in curbing male sexuality than liberating female sexuality. Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality*, rev. ed. (London: Tauris Parke, 2001), 145, 150-51; Le Gallienne, “Grant Allen,” 1014.

¹⁷ Morton, *The Busiest Man in England*, 110

¹⁸ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (New York: D. Appleton, 1877), ix.

¹⁹ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 39.

²⁰ Bernard Bosanquet, in his *History of Aesthetic* (1892), associates the rise of Epicureanism and Stoicism with wider cultural trends toward “subjectivity and individualism,” which in turn resonated through classical art and aesthetic theory. For Bosanquet, this turn toward subjective experience resulted in an “aesthetic of mere feeling”—essentially, an aesthetics of individual pleasure—that is characteristic of the Greco-Roman age. Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Aesthetic*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 85, 101.

physicist who conducted experiments on sensory perception in the 1850s and 1860s. More subtly, Allen's interpretation of his philosophical and scientific precedents also promotes Pater's ongoing critical work. As Gagnier argues, Allen's unique application of Bain's principles furthered an aesthetic paradigm "in which the cultivation of a distinctive 'taste' in the consumption of art replaced concern for its producers."²¹ Like Darwin and Spencer, Gagnier adds, Allen's emphasis on the subjective experience of art shifted critical focus away from the "productive body" of the artist (the figure of primary interest to the earlier critics William Morris and John Ruskin) and toward the "pleasured body" of the spectator.²² Along these lines, Ian Small credits *Physiological Aesthetics* for clarifying a wide range of psychological research into a single account of aesthetic feeling that "was shared by an entire school of 'impressionist' critics" including Pater, Wilde, and Lee.²³

In *Physiological Aesthetics* and *The Colour-Sense*, Allen begins to locate utopian potential in the aesthetic by exploring the connection between the perception of beauty and the process of sexual selection, for him a more peaceable alternative to the distasteful brutality of natural selection. Of course, as Gagnier points out, Allen's aesthetics of the "pleasured body" in some ways abetted the broad shifts toward consumerism and commodity culture that marked the rise of modern neoliberal economics.²⁴ Yet, Allen's theory of aesthetic consumption also resisted these trends by consciously subverting the systems of competition that drove the Darwinian "struggle for existence" in both nature and the laissez-faire marketplace. His own

²¹ Gagnier, "Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure," 136.

²² Gagnier, "Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure," 139.

²³ Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 75.

²⁴ Gagnier, "Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure," 127, 136.

tortured subservience to the public taste—dependent on the periodical trade for survival, Allen later lamented that he had compromised his “original thinking” to appease “two or three bigots among...thousands of subscribers”—informed his generally disdainful attitude toward the constraining influence of market forces on individuals.²⁵ For Allen, aesthetic experience represented a rare exception to the natural laws of competition, because the nervous response to beautiful objects was one of the few organic processes that did not exacerbate the problem of resource scarcity that Darwin had so memorably articulated in the preceding decades. Since we create artworks “expressly for the pleasure which their perception will give us,” Allen writes in *Physiological Aesthetics*, aesthetic pleasure is distinguished by its “disinterestedness and freedom from monopoly”; “as [the aesthetic feelings] are only remotely connected with life-serving functions,” Allen continues, “it follows that they can give pleasure to thousands without detracting from the enjoyment of each.”²⁶ In other words, aesthetic pleasure is an essentially infinite resource, exempt from the laws of competition that otherwise govern nature and the economy. *The Colour-Sense*, echoing Spencer as well as Kant, likewise asserts that the human response to pleasing colors has gradually become “more and more divorced from life-serving functions with every onward step, until at last the aesthetic sentiment claims to rank with the moral feelings among the most disinterested elements of our nature.”²⁷

²⁵ Allen, *The British Barbarians: A Hill-Top Novel* (London: John Lane, 1895), xiii, ix.

²⁶ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 37, 41.

²⁷ In *The Critique of Judgment*, as we have seen, Kant distinguishes the beautiful from the good on the basis of their appeals to our self-interest: objects are good because they promise some future benefit, while beautiful objects are immediately pleasurable in and of themselves. However, Kant suggests that continuous exposure to certain forms of beauty might gradually cultivate more moral individuals. “To take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature,” he writes, “is always a mark of a good soul, and...if this interest is habitual, it at least indicates a disposition of mind that is favorable to the moral feeling.” By using sexual selection to explain the causal connection between aesthetic refinement and ethical (and evolutionary) progress, Allen adapts Kant’s thinking to a post-Darwinian context. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 178; Allen, *The Colour-Sense: Its Origin and Development* (London: Trübner, 1879), 222-23.

Also significant for Allen's utopian conception of the beautiful was his implicit extension of aesthetic consideration to all objects capable of stimulating the right nervous reactions, whether or not these objects were "art" in the common sense of the word. On this point Allen agreed with both Spencer and James Sully, whose psychological approaches, as Small observes, effectively dissolved "any difference between art and non-art."²⁸ Allen's physiological aesthetics opened up apparently limitless opportunities for aesthetic experience: these experiences were not limited to the art gallery or the opera house, but were available everywhere in the perceptible world. It was this possibility of democratic, equitable, and collectivist social relations in the aesthetic realm—not a sense of moral outrage at the plight of the poor—that first drew Allen to socialism, which he would later define as a belief in "free and equal access to the common gifts and energies of Nature."²⁹ As I will discuss in my final chapter, his suggestion that all reasonably perceptive individuals, regardless of background, could reap the salutary benefits of aesthetic pleasure also reemerged in much of Lee's and Bernard Berenson's work from the 1890s.

As a result, Allen proposes aesthetic education as a means for evolutionary progress that will rely neither on social Darwinism nor on utilitarian reform projects (the former approach, he believed, subjected personal autonomy to the crushing vicissitudes of life, while the latter sacrificed the wellbeing of the few to the needs of the many). On the contrary, Allen's scientific interpretation of aesthetic taste simultaneously allows for individual whim—the natural consequence of differences in "nervous organization," environment, and heredity—and provides a "relative and temporary standard" for collective improvement in the form of "the judgment

²⁸ Small, *Conditions for Criticism*, 74.

²⁹ Allen, "Individualism and Socialism," *Contemporary Review* 55 (1889): 731.

of...the purest and most cultivated of our contemporaries.”³⁰ He thus discerns in the concept of taste a procedure for cultural development that does not concede personal autonomy: we can increase the quality and number of our salutary encounters with the beautiful by deferring to the wisdom of “fine[ly]-nurtured” and exceptionally “discriminative” individuals.³¹ Gradually, Allen reasons, the species inches its way upward in the scale of aesthetic development through this friction between the “cultivated” avant-garde and the vulgar “multitude.”³² This progressive notion of artistic unorthodoxy, which he derived from evolutionary conceptions of the genetic “sport” as well as the libertarian rhetoric of Clifford and Pater, informed both Allen’s anti-authoritarian politics and his own radical tastes: as his friend and fellow scientific writer Edward Clodd later recalled, Allen’s “love” for Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866) began in the early 1870s, at the height of the poet’s controversy.³³

Allen’s early monographs supported the nascent Aesthetic Movement on other fronts as well. For instance, the color green occupies a place of honor in Allen’s evolutionary history of decoration, and he spends a considerable portion of *The Colour-Sense* probing its unique appeal to “highly-cultivated eyes.”³⁴ As Sally-Anne Huxtable notes, green also “characterised Aesthetic design” in the years after William Morris’s firm finished decorating what would be known as the “Green Dining Room” at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum).³⁵ Huxtable, in her analysis of the Green Dining Room, argues that its ornately

³⁰ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 48.

³¹ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 48.

³² Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 232.

³³ Clodd, *Grant Allen*, 28.

³⁴ Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 231.

³⁵ Sally-Anne Huxtable, “Re-reading the Green Dining Room,” in *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867-1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, ed. Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 38.

patterned wallpaper presents a “utopian vision” of natural abundance and pastoral ease at the same time that it underscores its own artificiality.³⁶ Ten years after Morris placed the finishing touches on his Green Dining Room, Allen singled out green for its relative urbanity: while red and orange arouse immediate pleasure because of their association with edible fruit, Allen explains, green lacks “any special function” related to survival and is so abundant in foliage that most “primitive” cultures never employ the color as a dye.³⁷ But in “civilised or semi-civilised nations”—especially among “people who live an indoor life” and are therefore less accustomed to seeing green—Allen finds that highly cultivated individuals have gradually propagated a taste for the “gentle and modest” pleasures of green.³⁸ In this context, Allen’s account of the counter-natural and non-functional qualities of the hue constitutes an implicit scientific defense of aesthetic design and its contribution to the evolution of taste.

Given the role that taste plays in human progress, both *Physiological Aesthetics* and *The Colour-Sense* seek to impress on their readers the ethical ramifications of art, which in its “highest” form is “not merely a means for the gratification of the senses,” but also an appeal to the “nobler sentiments of an all-embracing humanitarianism.”³⁹ Allen, we must remember, looks to aesthetic pleasure in order to defend the individual against oppressive external forces: he thus carefully distinguishes the reformist imperative of his aesthetics from a prescriptive moralism, even as he often suggests that the experience of aesthetic beauty is an ethical good. In Allen’s view, art becomes ethical not by presenting concrete lessons for real life (Allen, like Pater, insists

³⁶ Huxtable adds that the room’s green paint—which used the modern compound lead chromate to achieve its depth—has since been discovered to be very toxic. Huxtable, “Re-reading the Green Dining Room,” 33, 35.

³⁷ Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 232.

³⁸ Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 233.

³⁹ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 216.

that the “true aesthetic arts” must always present a world “lovelier than reality”) but by “tuning us unconsciously into harmony with whatever is noblest in nature or in man.”⁴⁰ In an understated evocation of Pater, Allen’s musical metaphor remakes the aesthetic consumer’s body into a passive instrument upon which sense impressions play, producing either sweet or discordant results. This description of attunement presents a version of aesthetic experience that is arguably more spiritualized and more ambitious than Gagnier’s paradigm of the “pleasured body”: beautiful objects affect spectators on a physiological level far below conscious thought, and they do not merely please the senses but also condition the whole person for the forms of disinterested sympathy that an “all-embracing humanitarianism” requires. (Interestingly, Allen’s humanitarian turn also allies him more closely with Ruskin than either writer might have liked: Allen openly disagreed Ruskin on many aesthetic and political issues, but here Allen seems to affirm the philanthropic aspect of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory.⁴¹)

With its unique “freedom from monopoly” and its preternatural beauty, Allen concludes, good art inculcates its viewer into ways of thinking and feeling that draw one away from the animalistic instinct to compete, and toward the humane impulse for harmonious coexistence. The final pages of *The Colour-Sense* thus culminate in a grand proclamation on the future evolution of the species, which he describes with Cliffordian zeal:

What a splendid and noble prospect for humanity in its future evolutions may we not find in this thought, that from the coarse animal pleasure of beholding food mankind has already developed, through delicate gradations, our modern disinterested love for the glories of sunset and the melting shades of ocean, for the...dying beauty of autumn

⁴⁰ Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 87, 216.

⁴¹ In “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” for instance, Allen skewers Ruskin’s aesthetic opposition to the railway and other technological advancements. Whatever its effects on the landscape, Allen counters, the railway democratizes culture by offering the middle class unprecedented access to the countryside, art galleries, and other spaces where travellers can hone their aesthetic sensibilities. Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” *Mind* 5 (1880): 463.

leaves, for the exquisite harmony which reposes on the canvas of Titian, and the golden haze which glimmers over the dreamy visions of Turner!⁴²

While dazzling scientific visions of humankind's transcendence over the state of nature were hardly Allen's invention (Darwin and Clifford, as we have seen, articulated similar hopes), Allen here states the connection between evolutionary progress and the cultivation of "disinterested" aesthetic tastes more explicitly than any other critic to-date. His series of developmental stages—which proceeds from the single-minded fixation on food to the appreciation for landscape and, finally, the taste for art *qua* art—broadly rehashes some of Spencer's earlier arguments about beauty and utility, but Allen invests an evolutionary efficacy in beauty that Spencer had not articulated. In "Use and Beauty" (1852), as we have seen, Spencer argues that objects can only be beautiful once they lose their use value: for him, the capacity to see beauty in nature therefore signals, but does not necessarily facilitate, one's removal from the toils and tribulations of uncivilized life. By contrast, Allen insists that aesthetic self-cultivation drives as well as reflects the wider social, cultural, and physical evolution of the species. Importantly for Wilde, Allen's concluding anticipation of an aesthetically "perfect day" also amplifies Pater's more measured hope for the aesthetic "regeneration of the world" to an extreme pitch.⁴³

Although *Physiological Aesthetics* received mixed reviews (Sully, for instance, commended Allen's ambition but found his argument inconsistent and inept), the book was so widely read that the twentieth-century literary critics I. A. Richards, C. K. Ogden, and James Wood later counted it the sole British contribution to Continental aesthetic thought between

⁴² Allen, *The Colour-Sense*, 282.

⁴³ Pater, "Diaphaneité" (1864), in *Miscellaneous Studies*, ed. Charles Shadwell (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 222.

William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) and Lee's essays from the 1890s.⁴⁴ Undaunted by the equally cool reception of *The Colour-Sense*, Allen continued to touch on aesthetical questions as he turned to journalism in the late 1870s. His bibliography from this period boasts such suggestive titles as "Carving a Coco-nut" (1877), "Aesthetic Analysis of an Obelisk" (1877), "Colour in Painting" (1878), "Butterfly Aesthetics" (1880), and "The Philosophy of Drawing-rooms" (1880).⁴⁵ Throughout these works, Allen's fascination with the evolution of taste and his Paterian conception of aesthetic feeling as a mode of disinterested engagement with the material world remained largely unchanged.

Allen's essay "Aesthetic Evolution in Man" (1880), which appeared in Bain's psychological quarterly *Mind*, concisely illustrates his aesthetic thinking in this period, and its revisions of Pater's thought capture what was so innovative and problematic about Allen's, and subsequently Wilde's, aesthetics. Put briefly, Allen argues that aesthetic development consists in a "gradual decentralisation" or spiraling outward "from the simple and narrow feelings of the savage or the child to the full and expansive aesthetic catholicity of the cultivated adult."⁴⁶ He reiterates the Darwinian idea, which he first articulated in *The Colour-Sense*, that humankind's primitive love for the beauty of color and form began with the single-minded and "practical pursuit of food or mates."⁴⁷ Through the action of sexual selection, he continues, our aesthetic appreciation expanded to "objects in the non-practical environment," including the "ornaments and pigments" with which humans began to adorn themselves: after this breakthrough in

⁴⁴ James Sully, "Critical Notices," review of *Physiological Aesthetics*, by Grant Allen, *Mind* 2 (1877): 387-92; C. K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, and James Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922), 51.

⁴⁵ For an exhaustive bibliography of Allen's many publications, see Greenslade and Rodgers, *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics*.

⁴⁶ Allen, "Aesthetic Evolution in Man," 445.

⁴⁷ Allen, "Aesthetic Evolution in Man," 448.

purposeless self-decoration, the aesthetic impulse led to further innovations in interior decoration, architecture, painting, statuary, and, finally, poetry.⁴⁸ To Allen, this succession suggests a “long process of ever widening sympathies and ever multiplying associations,” which leads away from what he terms an “anthroponistic” fixation on self-preservation.⁴⁹ Moreover, Allen implies, this process of expansion is theoretically available to everyone regardless of race, sex, or class, since the aesthetic feelings are “universal” and “common to all the race” by virtue of their basis in physiology.⁵⁰ Crucially, the concluding lines of Allen’s evolutionary history both recall and rework Pater’s now-prominent creed of art for art’s sake: over the long course of time, Allen remarks, the aesthetic faculty “has progressed in unbroken order from the simple admiration of human beauty for the sake of a deeply-seated organic instinct, to the admiration of abstract beauty for its own sake alone.”⁵¹

Nonetheless, “Aesthetic Evolution” deviates from Pater in important intellectual and rhetorical ways. These differences help explain why the young Wilde—who, in 1880, had already begun promoting his more assertive and flamboyant aestheticism—might have looked to Allen’s exuberant progressivism as a supplement to Pater’s more disciplined aesthetic philosophy.⁵² First, Allen lays out his plans for a better time to come in far less equivocal terms than Pater. While Pater similarly assumed that culture, religion, and art developed in “successive stages,” Kate Hext reminds us that he tended to view history as a “cyclical process...without

⁴⁸ Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man” 453.

⁴⁹ Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” 450-51.

⁵⁰ Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” 446.

⁵¹ Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” 464.

⁵² Ellmann’s biography of Wilde is illuminating, but it does make frequent factual errors. All references to Ellmann’s text in this chapter have been cross-referenced with Horst Schroeder’s exhaustive list of errata, *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann’s Oscar Wilde* (2002). Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 134-35.

hope of ultimate resolution.”⁵³ Allen, as we can see in “Aesthetic Evolution,” considers history as intrinsically progressive—unsurprising, given his admiration for Spencer—and his other work rarely shies away from ordinal rankings of organisms, societies, or cultural products.⁵⁴ Helpfully for Wilde, Allen in “Aesthetic Evolution” also upholds aestheticism’s social efficacy with a consistency and confidence that Pater’s writing rarely demonstrates. As Linda Dowling observes, Wilde in his early career sought to balance the individuality of aesthetic experience with what he believed to be “the democratic scope and generous utopian dimension of art”: in his lecture “The English Renaissance of Art” (1882), for instance, Wilde speculates that the critic can bring the people “more in harmony with modern progress and civilisation” by teaching them “the spirit in which they are to approach all artistic work.”⁵⁵ As I explain at length later in this chapter, Allen’s assertion of the democratic and socialistic implications of evolutionary aesthetics helped to stabilize Wilde’s fraught social consciousness.

But the “irreducible dilemma” that Dowling pinpoints in Wilde’s later work—that is, the problem of reconciling the “Whig premise of a universal aesthetic capacity” with the patent vulgarity of much of Victorian popular culture—was already beginning to emerge in Allen’s early writing.⁵⁶ In *The Colour-Sense*, “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” and most of his other work on aesthetics, Allen maintained that aesthetic progress was inevitable, since the taste for beauty obeyed the same Spencerian laws of development that he believed played out everywhere else in

⁵³ Pater, “Pico Della Mirandula,” *Fortnightly Review* 10 (1871): 379; Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 89.

⁵⁴ Allen begins his series “Evolution in Early Italian Art” (1895-96), for instance, by asserting that certain artistic traditions, like all “favourably situated” organisms, “pass successively from the lowest rank in the organic hierarchy to the highest.” Allen, “Evolution in Early Italian Art,” *Pall Mall Magazine* 6 (May 1895): 83.

⁵⁵ Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 90; Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” in *Miscellanies*, vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (Boston: Wyman-Fogg, 1921), 263.

⁵⁶ Dowling, *Vulgarization of Art*, 92, 90.

the universe. Allen's experiences in journalism, however, seemed to belie the cultural apotheosis he continuously promised, and he sometimes explicitly doubted whether his writing—even if it was an authentic “expression of [his] own individuality”—made any contribution at all to “the enlightenment and bettering of humanity.”⁵⁷ In his first novel, *Philistia*, he explores the inherent tensions between his political allegiance to the will of the people and his evolutionary investment in artistic and intellectual self-determination. Ultimately, the novel attempts to resolve this issue by formulating a model of socially conscious aestheticism: one that could refine culture and, over the course of generations, uplift the species through the process of sexual selection.

In keeping with Allen's personal experience, *Philistia* documents the struggles of a young, upper middle-class man as he searches for a profession that will accord with his high-minded principles. As his name suggests, Ernest Le Breton holds sincere socialist beliefs that at times conflict with both the “aesthetic side to [his] nature” and his social and economic circumstances.⁵⁸ Ernest first takes a post as tutor to the aristocratic Exmoors, though he chafes at the irresponsible lifestyle of his employers and the brazen romantic overtures of Lady Hilda, the freethinking daughter of the house. Ernest then leaves to marry Edie, the working-class sister of his protégé, the brilliant mathematician (and likely Clifford analogue) Harry Oswald. After a disastrous stint as a schoolmaster, Ernest takes up journalism to support his young family, but he descends into illness and poverty when he finds that he cannot soften his opinions to please a philistine readership. (This theme of intersecting social and financial pressure reflects the novel's complicated publication history: Allen planned to publish the novel serially in the *Cornhill Magazine*, but the editor objected, as Allen later reported, “that it was far too socialistic

⁵⁷ Allen, *The British Barbarians*, xii.

⁵⁸ Allen, *Philistia*, 1:82.

for the tastes of his public.”⁵⁹ Andrew Chatto, who had published *Physiological Aesthetics* and *The Colour-Sense*, offered to publish *Philistia* in three volumes, but only on the condition that Allen substitute a more upbeat ending.⁶⁰ Before Ernest can die of consumption, however, his friends conspire to publish one of his socialist pamphlets, an act that catapults him into the public eye and consequently saves his life.

Regardless of his position as the novel’s nominal protagonist, Ernest remains an ambivalent figure at the conclusion of *Philistia*. On the one hand, Ernest’s constant war with the systems of economic and social injustice in which he finds himself tends to produce only more misery. His refusal to moderate his sense of “duty to the world,” for instance, draws him into a kind of “economical puritanism” (hence Ernest’s naïve idealization of physical labor), and his perverse obsession with martyrdom starves his family and nearly kills him.⁶¹ On the other hand, Ernest’s selflessness appears downright honorable next to the callous Epicureanism of his brother and foil, Herbert, who justifies his “selfishly prudent” decision to marry an heiress by capitulating entirely to the power of “environment”: a force that he warns will “crush [Ernest] between the upper and nether millstone” if he continues to “reform the world” rather than “live in it.”⁶² Allen, I suggest, provides a happy medium in the secondary character of Arthur Berkeley, a parson-turned-composer who rejects both Herbert’s self-indulgence and Ernest’s

⁵⁹ Allen, “*Physiological Aesthetics* and *Philistia*,” in *My First Book*, ed. Jerome K. Jerome, rev. ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1897), 51.

⁶⁰ Chatto was also an important supporter of aesthetic writing. He began as junior partner at the firm of John Camden Hotten, who bought the rights to Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* after its original publisher, Moxon & Co., withdrew the book in response to heated criticism. After Hotten died, Chatto bought the house, renamed it Chatto & Windus, and continued publishing Swinburne’s later works. Allen, “*Physiological Aesthetics* and *Philistia*,” 52; Kenneth Haynes, introduction to *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, by Algernon Charles Swinburne (London: Penguin, 2000), xxi-xxii.

⁶¹ Allen, *Philistia*, 1:154, 2:291.

⁶² Allen, *Philistia*, 3:261, 3:27.

asceticism in favor of a socially responsible aestheticism. Early in the novel, Arthur eloquently defends his “aesthetic tendencies” to Ernest—who feels guilty about admiring what he calls “gewgaws”—with an allusion to John Keats’s “Endymion” (1818): “now,” Arthur asks, “why shouldn’t I spend [money] on the things that please me best and are joys forever?”⁶³ At the same time, Allen stresses that Arthur’s luxuries are never extravagant: elsewhere, Arthur tells Herbert that he would sooner buy “a flute, or a book of poems, or a little picture, or a Palissy platter” than a bottle of champagne.⁶⁴ Instead, Arthur manages to collect beautiful objects upon which he can “feast [his] eyes and ears” while still supporting his beloved father, all on a parson’s salary.⁶⁵

Similar to Ernest, Arthur’s personality initially conflicts with the pressures of his profession, which compel him to “keep up the dignity of the cloth by fighting shy of any aesthetic heterodoxies.”⁶⁶ Unlike Ernest, however, Arthur frankly acknowledges that his current mode of life is unsuited to his inclinations. More important, Arthur asserts his desires in language that also recognizes the social benefit that might result if he were in a more suitable position: “I can do more good by writing comic operas,” he confesses to his father, “than by talking dogmatically about things I hardly understand to people who hardly understand me.”⁶⁷

Later in the novel, Arthur achieves success as a composer in London and meets the perceptive Lady Hilda, who seconds Arthur’s socially oriented individualism. “I believe there’s a corner

⁶³ Allen, *Philistia*, 1:81.

⁶⁴ Palissy ware, which was extremely popular in this period, imitated the style of sixteenth-century French potter Bernard Palissy. Palissy’s pieces usually featured ornate naturalistic designs in bas-relief; Robin Hildyard, in his survey of European ceramics, describes Palissy’s work as “unashamedly decorative.” Allen, *Philistia*, 1:75; Robin Hildyard, *European Ceramics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 7.

⁶⁵ Allen, *Philistia*, 1:74.

⁶⁶ Allen, *Philistia*, 1:105.

⁶⁷ Allen, *Philistia*, 2:148.

somewhere for every man,” Hilda declares, “if only he can jog down properly into his own corner instead of being squeezed forcibly into somebody else’s.”⁶⁸ In Hilda’s understanding, which recalls Spencer’s theory of moving equilibrium, every individual must find his or her niche in a shared ecology of unique but interconnected niches. By finding our “corner”—or matching “square m[e]n” to “square holes,” in Hilda’s colorful analogy—we both increase our own happiness and facilitate the harmonious functioning of society.⁶⁹ In the case of Arthur, who ends up happily married to Hilda, aesthetic self-cultivation and social progress are compatible impulses: his love of beauty, his pursuit of music, and his attraction to Hilda enable him to rescue Ernest from an early death. Arthur’s subplot thus exemplifies a socially constructive aestheticism founded not on the promise of practical reform—associated with a contemporary movement that Diana Maltz calls “missionary aestheticism”—but on biological and sociological notions of health and wellbeing.⁷⁰ As Seth Koven likewise points out, aesthetes such as Ruskin participated in a “much larger project to reshape the interior and exterior landscapes of the urban poor” through art exhibitions, the construction of free libraries and museums, and public lecture series.⁷¹ In *Philistia*, Allen imagines a less paternalistic approach to social and cultural improvement, which comes about in the novel through the unforced proliferation of superior aesthetic and ethical values.

Consequently, the ending of *Philistia* underscores the capacity for sexual attraction and aesthetic taste to regenerate society. Allen presents Arthur and Hilda’s love match, for instance,

⁶⁸ Allen, *Philistia*, 3:187.

⁶⁹ Allen, *Philistia*, 3:187-88.

⁷⁰ Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

⁷¹ Seth Koven, “The Whitechapel Picture Exhibitions and the Politics of Seeing,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 23.

as the natural continuation of their “joint schemes” for the welfare of their friends.⁷² Allen also concludes the novel with Edie playfully reminding Ernest of their daughter’s birthday, a tacit rebuff to Ernest’s lingering yearnings for martyrdom (he wonders whether “it wouldn’t have been the most right thing in the end...if [his family] had all starved eighteen months ago together”).⁷³ Certainly, Allen’s deployment of the marriage plot was partly a concession to Chatto’s demands for a more conventional denouement. But we can also read the novel’s “good” marriages—which go forward in spite of parental objections, class barriers, and financial considerations—as examples of successful Darwinian sexual selection. In accordance with the non-functionalist logic of sexual selection, Allen’s characters only fulfill their selective role when they choose their mates based on impulse, without heed to propriety or financial need. Given free reign, sexual selection establishes a renewed social equilibrium in the novel by connecting characters to their temperamental contraries: morbid Ernest marries chipper Edie, while impractical Arthur settles down with the enterprising Hilda. (Ernest’s mercenary brother Herbert, by comparison, ends up in a loveless marriage with a rich but “selfishly prudent and cold-hearted wife, exactly after his own pattern.”⁷⁴) In Allen’s earliest novel, sexual selection transforms the characters’ individual aesthetic preferences into affective bonds that ultimately restructure and strengthen society.

II. Sexual Selection and Allen’s Utopian Hedonism

While Allen never repudiated his physiological aesthetics, the notion that sexual selection could provoke peaceful social upheaval eventually came to dominate his evolutionary thinking in

⁷² Allen, *Philistia*, 3:274.

⁷³ Allen, *Philistia*, 3:288.

⁷⁴ Allen, *Philistia*, 3:261.

the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In his essay “Falling in Love” (1886), he begins to theorize the ways in which sexual selection might translate individual experiences of aesthetic pleasure into wide-scale evolutionary gain. Allen was noteworthy in this regard: as we have already seen, many scientific writers hesitated to vocalize their support for Darwinian sexual selection, in part because the theory appeared to elevate sexuality and the body in a shockingly irreligious way.⁷⁵ In contrast to Darwin’s warier allies, Allen extols romantic love as “nature’s guiding voice within us,” which leads individuals to their “moral, mental, and physical complement[s]” and thus “speak[s] for the good of the human race in all future generations.”⁷⁶ Like “the butterfly that circles and eddies in his aerial dance” or the “peacock that struts about in imperial pride,” Allen argues, humans also “contribute to the future beauty and strength of [the] race” by making and responding to sexual displays (or “falling in love,” in everyday parlance).⁷⁷ As with all other species, sexual selection in humans amounts to what he calls a “lateral form of natural selection,” in which individuals themselves select the mates that will best suit their idiosyncrasies and, as a result, produce the healthiest offspring.⁷⁸ Insofar as Allen here seeks to increase the rate of genetically “desirable” marriages, he does advocate for a kind of positive eugenics. As Angelique Richardson observes, Allen’s rather facile ideas about personal beauty and bodily health (“the beautiful,” he writes in “Aesthetic Evolution in Man,” generally accords with “the healthy, the normal, the strong, the perfect, and the parentally sound”) appealed to

⁷⁵ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45.

⁷⁶ Allen, “Falling in Love,” *Fortnightly Review* 46 (1886): 456-57.

⁷⁷ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 453.

⁷⁸ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 453.

contemporary eugenicists such as Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, who considered racial competition indispensable to evolutionary progress.⁷⁹

These eugenic undertones notwithstanding, Allen chafed at all forms of social and political pressure, especially by the state: “Falling in Love,” then, not only stops short of the institutionalized eugenic strategies of Pearson and his ilk, but also categorically rejects any attempt to subject the “inner physiological promptings” of sexual inclination to “abstract biological and ‘eugenic’ principles.”⁸⁰ Allen’s piece in fact castigates Sir George Campbell, the Liberal politician and critic of Darwin, for publicly recommending that marriages be arranged according to “physiological knowledge” rather than “foolish ideas about love and the tastes of young people.”⁸¹ The sexual instinct, Allen retorts, is “so conditioned, so curious, so vague, [and] so unfathomable” that it defies codification altogether.⁸² Allen thus denies that a bureaucracy, run like “a department of the India Office,” could possibly regulate procreation more effectively than our inborn aesthetic instincts: to decide marriages by “committee,” he warns Campbell, is to “crush out all initiative, all spontaneity, all diversity, all originality; you would get an animated moral code instead of living men and women.”⁸³ Allen, in the face of this danger, demonizes “parents and moralists” and lionizes the “romance-writer” for “exalt[ing]...the mysterious native yearning of heart for heart” over the dictates of “calculating

⁷⁹ Allen, “Aesthetic Evolution,” 449; Angeliue Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 81.

⁸⁰ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 453, 458.

⁸¹ George Campbell, “Opening Address by Sir George Campbell, K.C.S.I., M.P., D.C.L., F.R.G.S., President of the Section,” *Nature* 34, no. 880 (Sept. 1886): 457.

⁸² Allen, “Falling in Love,” 457.

⁸³ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 457.

expediency.”⁸⁴ With a sharp irreverence characteristic of Clifford and Wilde, Allen declares that “it is the sentimentalists and the rebels who are always in the right on this matter”: it is only due to their persistent influence that “we still preserve some vitality and some individual features, in spite of our grinding and crushing civilisation.”⁸⁵

As we can begin to see, the mechanics of sexual selection as Allen understood them demanded the absolute freedom of both women and men to choose their partners on the basis of their aesthetic attractiveness. Allen therefore suggests that individuals, when choosing mates, should prioritize expressive—that is, aesthetic—features such as “eyes or . . . moustaches” over the more nebulous and indeterminate qualities of “mind and character.”⁸⁶ The same utopian logic behind Allen’s earlier theories of physiological aesthetics is also at work in his rebuttal of Campbell: since every individual could “easily find dozens” of fitting partners, courtship (like aesthetic sensation) constitutes a non-competitive process within which desire has free play and advantageous evolutionary modifications can accordingly accumulate without limit.⁸⁷ The pleasure and happiness of individuals, then, turns out to be the very means by which the progress of the species comes about—a fact that Allen, in conclusion, posits as “one great proof of the real value and importance of the [sexual] instinct.”⁸⁸ Sexual selection, as he hints in *Philistia* and explicitly claims in “Falling in Love,” poses a potential resolution to the apparent conflict between the desires of the individual and the good of society. His glorification of romantic love

⁸⁴ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 460.

⁸⁵ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 459-60.

⁸⁶ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 461.

⁸⁷ Tellingly, Allen ignores the part that male in-fighting plays in Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. The possibility of coercive violence weakens Allen’s interpretation of sexual selection as an operation driven purely by aesthetic choice. Allen, “Falling in Love,” 456.

⁸⁸ Allen, “Falling in Love,” 461.

also offers a Darwinian revision of the sexual radicalism of James Hinton, the older doctor and reformer who proclaimed the virtues of humankind's natural "pleasures, instincts, [and] impulses."⁸⁹ Hinton's belief in the essential goodness of human desire arose from religious convictions that Allen did not share; but Hinton's attempts to devise a morality based on the cultivation of a right "attitude or feeling of the soul" (rather than "arbitrary restraints" on conduct) presaged many of Allen's and Wilde's ethical claims.⁹⁰

While not widely read or cited, Allen's "What is the Object of Life?" (1887), a sequel to "Falling in Love," is significant for its attempt to derive ethical principles from these ideas about sexual selection and aesthetic pleasure. Allen begins by answering his titular question from a cosmic perspective: as the universe lacks a "quasi-human artificer and designer," he admits, "life as a whole...has no object."⁹¹ From an evolutionary point of view, he continues, the object of all organic life is merely to survive and reproduce. From the perspective of individuals, however, the object of life varies according to temperament and education: the "vast majority" of people continue to live out of an instinctual fear of death, he explains, but a "cultivated and educated minority"—a group of "more or less optimistic" individuals—try to "make the best" of life while still admitting its difficulties.⁹² "If human life has in this very restricted sense any general object at all," Allen speculates, "that object is undoubtedly happiness, and happiness may be

⁸⁹ James Hinton, *Life and Letters of James Hinton*, ed. Ellice Hopkins, 2nd ed. (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878), 276, 277.

⁹⁰ Hinton's essay responds to Clifford's "On the Scientific Basis of Morals," which appeared in *Contemporary Review* two months earlier. Hinton mostly agrees with Clifford's primary argument that morality is a natural outgrowth of human development (in Clifford's understanding, morality is an emanation of the "tribal self"). Hinton's suggestion, however, that the "desire for the feeling of being 'good'" was the same as the desire for sensuous pleasure—and that pleasure could thus serve as a moral guide—was more patently hedonistic than Clifford's ethics. Hinton, "On the Bases of Morals," *Contemporary Review* 27 (1875): 784-85, 790.

⁹¹ Allen, "What is the Object of Life?" (1887), in *The Hand of God and Other Posthumous Essays Together with Some Reprinted Papers* (London: Watts, 1909), 78.

⁹² Allen, "What is the Object of Life?", 80.

approximately defined as a decided surplus of personal pleasure over personal pain.”⁹³ By drawing on sexual selection as well as Spencer’s theory of play, Allen deduces from these premises an ethical and evolutionarily progressive hedonism: since the feeling of pleasure “roughly coincides with race-preservative activities,” he writes, “it follows that these two apparently distinct objects, the unconscious generic aim [of perpetuating the species], and the conscious individual aim [of being happy], are at bottom practically almost identical.”⁹⁴ As in “Falling in Love,” the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure—tempered by a due concern for the equal happiness of others—meshes seamlessly with the long-term wellbeing of the species. As a result, Allen finds the key to evolutionary progress not in the charity of “well-meaning and philanthropic” busybodies, but in the reparation of “bad social arrangements” that prevent individuals from doing whatever makes them happy.⁹⁵

Convinced of this connection between personal liberty, aesthetic taste, and evolutionary progress, Allen’s writing from the 1890s became more self-consciously polemical, extending in scope well beyond the scientific aesthetics with which he launched his career. The most outspoken and confrontational of these pieces was “The New Hedonism,” in which Allen synthesized many of his longstanding beliefs about evolutionary aesthetics into an entire philosophy of life. “The New Hedonism” owed much of its rhetorical daring, as well as its provocative title, to Allen’s long-standing admiration for Wilde, who encouraged the popular science writer’s forays into art criticism. Like Allen, Wilde was a reluctant journalist, and the two writers crossed paths at least once during their tenure at the *Pall Mall Gazette*, when both of them participated in an intimate demonstration of “muscle-reading” at the newspaper’s offices in

⁹³ Allen, “What is the Object of Life?”, 81.

⁹⁴ Allen, “What is the Object of Life?”, 81.

⁹⁵ Allen, “What is the Object of Life?”, 81.

May 1884.⁹⁶ According to a newspaper account of the meeting, the “poet and apostle” of aestheticism apparently delivered an impromptu critique of the office’s soulless decoration: Wilde’s vivacious defense of the ornamental, coupled with his implicit denunciation of the philistine periodical press, undoubtedly impressed Allen.⁹⁷ In his 1891 essay “The Celt in English Art,” Allen hails the “great and victorious aesthetic movement” for its much-needed revolt against “Teutonic dominance” in British art and politics; among the numerous Celtic writers who united radicalism with a decorative aesthetic, Allen reserves special praise for “Mr. Oscar Wilde, . . . whom wise men know for a man of rare insight and strong common sense.”⁹⁸ Wilde’s article “The Soul of Man under Socialism”—which drew, as we will see, on Allen’s “Individualism and Socialism” (1889)—appeared in the same issue of the *Fortnightly Review*, and letters of mutual appreciation soon crossed each other in the mail. “I beg you will allow me to express my delight in your article,” wrote Wilde, “with its superb assertion of the Celtic spirit in Art.”⁹⁹ An equally effusive Allen called Wilde’s “Soul of Man” a “beautiful and noble essay,”

⁹⁶ “Muscle-reading” was a pseudo-scientific version of mind reading, in which the practitioner attempted to use subtle physiological cues in order to read the thoughts of his subjects. Other attendees included the professor and degeneration theorist E. Ray Lankester, the poet Edmund Gosse, Wilde’s older brother Willie, and, rather inexplicably, the businessman Andrew Carnegie. “Muscle-Reading by Mr. Stuart Cumberland,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 24 May 1884.

⁹⁷ “Muscle-Reading by Mr. Stuart Cumberland.”

⁹⁸ Allen’s essay responds to Matthew Arnold’s series of lectures “On the Study of Celtic Literature” (1865-66), which he later published in *Cornhill Magazine*. In his lecture, Arnold calls for a “disinterested” and “scientific” approach to Celtic history, but he refrains from providing this scientific analysis himself. His genuine appreciation for Celtic contributions to English culture is also somewhat undercut by his dismissive description of the Celtic genius as “airy,” “unsubstantial,” and “perceptive” without the “steadiness” of the Greek temperament. Allen, “The Celt in English Art,” *Fortnightly Review* 49 (1891): 271-73; Matthew Arnold, “On the Study of Celtic Literature,” in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, vol. 3 of *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 328, 344.

⁹⁹ In his letter to Allen, Wilde thanks him for his “scientific” reply to Arnold. To Wilde, Allen’s discussion of the spiritual and social ramifications of the decorative aesthetic revealed a power in the Celtic temperament that Arnold had overlooked. Wilde to Allen, 7 February 1891, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 469-70.

and added that he “would have written every line [him]self—if only [he] had known how.”¹⁰⁰ Several years after this exchange, when Allen needed a name for his new philosophy, he settled on one of Wilde’s coinages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In Wilde’s novel, the aristocratic libertine Lord Henry prophesies a “new Hedonism” that both recalls and intensifies Pater’s insistence on receptivity: “a new Hedonism,” Lord Henry explains to Dorian, will “never accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience,” but will “teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment.”¹⁰¹

Like Lord Henry, Allen defines “new hedonism” as a revolutionary ethic of liberated “self-development” that he believes will remedy the conventional Victorian idealization of deprivation and “self-sacrifice.”¹⁰² With a daring chiasmus that channels Wilde’s aphoristic wit, Allen begins his essay by upending commonsense moralism: “the old asceticism said, ‘Be virtuous and you will be happy.’ The new hedonism says, ‘Be happy, and you will be virtuous.’”¹⁰³ In a continuation of his early work on aesthetics, he upholds sex as the wellspring of “everything high and ennobling in our nature,” from “our love of bright colours [and] graceful form” to our feelings of sympathy and filial affection.¹⁰⁴ Ever the iconoclast, Allen points to such risqué figures as Swinburne and the feminist writers Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley as evidence of Darwin’s scientific ennoblement of sexuality. For Allen, the lives and works of these men and women confirm that the “most imaginative, the most beautiful-minded, [and] the most dainty-souled” individuals always pursue their desires, even (and especially) in the face of

¹⁰⁰ Allen to Wilde, 6 February 1891, qtd. in Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 470.

¹⁰¹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow, vol. 3 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26, 109.

¹⁰² Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 377-78.

¹⁰³ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 377.

¹⁰⁴ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 384, 387.

social opprobrium.¹⁰⁵ Their disregard for sexual propriety, Allen suggests, was part and parcel of a hedonistic individualism that allowed each of these thinkers to break new ground in their respective fields. In the medium term, their sexual choices—Wollstonecraft’s decision to live out of wedlock with the philosopher William Godwin, thus leading to the birth of their daughter Mary, and Mary’s subsequent determination to elope with Percy Shelley, thus leading to her brilliant literary career—proved to be boons for British culture. In the long term, Allen further argues, the aggregation of such liberated actions could promise what he elsewhere calls a “great age of humanity,” on par with Renaissance Florence and Elizabethan England.¹⁰⁶

Allen therefore couches his ethic of hedonism as a serious social “duty”: one that compels every person “to develop himself and herself to the highest possible point, freely, in every direction.”¹⁰⁷ He further charges his reader “to think as far as [she or he] can think,” “to get rid of all dogmas, preconceptions, and prejudices,” “to be healthy of body and mind,” and “to be educated, to be emancipated, to be free, to be beautiful.”¹⁰⁸ With an almost priestly esteem for sexuality—the new hedonist, Allen remarks, will “recognize in the sex-instinct the origin and basis of all that is best and highest within us”—the hedonist’s “object will always be so to use [the sexual instincts] as not to abuse them, either by enforced abstinence or by acquiescence in a hateful *régime*” of inequitable marriage.¹⁰⁹ At the essay’s conclusion, Allen finally envisions a future society in which the internalization of hedonistic values has rendered love and childbearing matters of aesthetic choice rather than social pressure or financial convenience: in

¹⁰⁵ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 389.

¹⁰⁶ Allen, “The Romance of the Clash of the Races,” in *Post-Prandial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), 78

¹⁰⁷ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 381.

¹⁰⁸ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 380-81.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 391.

this hypothetical utopia, not only will the “noblest, the purest, the sanest, [and] the healthiest” people be free to fulfill their “moral obligation” to reproduce, but they will also take pleasure in the task.¹¹⁰ However dissident, Allen’s new hedonism does not absolve individuals of moral culpability so much as reevaluate the ways in which the enlightened gratification of one’s desires can yield positive social outcomes. Evolutionary aesthetics thus allowed Allen, like Pater and Clifford before him, to uncover an indirect moral payoff in the amoral experience of aesthetic pleasure. At the same time, Allen seeks to rescue his eugenics from its reliance on coercive, even somewhat utilitarian discourses of fitness and obligation that otherwise clash with his libertarianism: his initial emphasis on the inherent value of happiness, his appropriation of the classical language of “hedonism,” his condemnation of marriage as an institutionalized form of sexual control, and his self-proclaimed alliance with the Aesthetic Movement were perhaps attempts to downplay his own domineering dogmatism.

With its deliberately shocking attacks on bourgeois virtues and institutions, “The New Hedonism” set the tone for the remaining years of Allen’s controversial career. One conservative critic, for instance, declared Allen’s essay nothing less than a scientific apology for a rampant culture of vice, from the “lawless sexual passion” of working-class murderers to the neo-Hellenic homosexuality of the “higher ranks of society” (much to the disappointment of Wilde’s friend, George Ives, Allen later denied that the new hedonism condoned homosexuality).¹¹¹ Allen’s most widely discussed work, *The Woman Who Did*—a kind of novelistic experiment in the real-world application of new hedonism—did little to assuage these

¹¹⁰ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 392.

¹¹¹ “The ‘New Hedonism,’” review of a Playgoer’s Club lecture, by Richard Le Gallienne, and “The New Hedonism” by Grant Allen, *Speaker: The Liberal Review* (Dec. 1894): 654; Greenslade and Rodgers, “Resituating Grant Allen: Writing, Radicalism and Modernity,” in *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics*, 10.

allegations of licentiousness. The novel's provenance alone, quite apart from its content, ensured its notoriety among contemporary readers: *The Woman Who Did* appeared in John Lane's controversial *Keynotes* series, which took its title from a collection of short stories by the feminist writer George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright) and featured designs by the decadent artist Aubrey Beardsley. Moreover, Allen's polemical epigraph to the novel, which insisted that this was the first piece of writing he had composed "wholly and solely to satisfy [his] own taste and [his] own conscience," conspicuously put into practice his radical doctrine of self-determination.¹¹² As Nicholas Ruddick observes, even otherwise liberal reviewers found the novel's sincere defense of its titular heroine—a "martyr to the cause of truth and righteousness" who refuses to marry her lover on principle and eventually commits suicide—to be unpalatably extreme.¹¹³

Most significantly, both "The New Hedonism" and *The Woman Who Did* gave Allen a prominent voice in fin-de-siècle debates about aestheticism and cultural evolution, in which Allen found himself defending the Spencerian promise of progress against what he called the "Jeremiads of Toryism."¹¹⁴ Many of these debates centered on theories of "degeneration" that, in stark contradiction of Allen's optimistic evolutionism, interpreted the rise of aestheticism as evidence of the impending decline of civilization. Throughout the 1890s, reactionary evolutionists such as Cesare Lombroso, E. Ray Lankester, and Max Nordau issued dire warnings about the devolution of humankind: Nordau's *Degeneration*, the most important of these works, appeared in English translation in 1895, the same year that Allen published *The Woman Who Did*

¹¹² Allen, *The Woman Who Did*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Toronto: Broadview, 2004), 53.

¹¹³ Allen, *The Woman Who Did*, 164; Nicholas Ruddick, introduction to *The Woman Who Did*, by Grant Allen, 37-38.

¹¹⁴ Allen, "Is England Played Out?" (1893), in *Post-Prandial Philosophy*, 45.

and Wilde was tried on charges of “gross indecency.”¹¹⁵ Unlike Wilde, Allen was not prominent enough in Europe to secure Nordau’s histrionic censure by name, but certain passages of *Degeneration* could have easily applied to Allen’s work. For instance, Nordau might be addressing Allen’s aesthetic individualism when he ridicules the Wildean notion “that it is proof of honourable independence to follow one’s own taste without being bound down to the regulation...of the Philistine cattle.”¹¹⁶ In addition, Nordau’s partisans in England—especially around the time of Wilde’s trial—soon directed his critiques toward other writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement, including Allen. In the essay “Tommyrotics” (1895), for example, the travel writer and barrister Hugh E. M. Stutfield rails against the “modern spirit of revolt” that he sees everywhere in the British cultural landscape.¹¹⁷ Over the course of his tirade, Stutfield takes aim at a range of offenders, including New Woman novelists, “ego-maniac” aesthetes, adherents of “aesthetic Hellenism,” political “revolutionaries, founders of Utopias, and builders of socialistic castles in the air.”¹¹⁸ But the real masterminds of this assault on tradition, Stutfield concludes, are intellectuals such as Allen and Wilde, who merge scientific views of sex and pleasure with progressive politics and a taste for the avant-garde.¹¹⁹ (In all likelihood, the condemnation of Stutfield and others only helped *The Woman Who Did* become a bestseller;

¹¹⁵ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 459; Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel: 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120-26.

¹¹⁶ Nordau terms Wilde a “deranged ego-maniac,” among other pseudo-psychiatric monikers. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 317-18.

¹¹⁷ Hugh E. M. Stutfield, “Tommyrotics,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 157 (1895): 844

¹¹⁸ Stutfield, “Tommyrotics,” 836.

¹¹⁹ Stutfield, “Tommyrotics,” 838.

Ruddick points out that sales remained robust in the aftermath of Wilde's conviction in May 1895.¹²⁰)

For Allen, who had spent decades devising evolutionary methods of attaining just such utopias, Stutfield's broadside was an onslaught on the optimistic heart of evolutionary aestheticism. As Morton observes, Allen stopped courting sexual controversy around this time—a shift that Morton attributes to Allen's fatigue at “being, in his own eyes, so hopelessly misunderstood.”¹²¹ Nevertheless, Allen's continued application of evolutionary paradigms to culture—for instance, in the series “Evolution in Early Italian Art,” which ran in *Pall Mall Magazine* and the *English Illustrated Magazine* through early 1896—suggests the degree to which he preserved his progressive beliefs, however embattled. His history of Italian painting, written at the height of the degeneration panic, is still one of predominantly “upward evolution towards more modern types”: whenever artistic movements “grow necessarily in time a trifle monotonous” and begin to decline into decadence, Allen argues, a longing for “variety” soon leads to “new theme[s]” and “more advanced composition[s].”¹²² In this continuous flowering of creative activity, Allen rediscovered a sense of breathless possibility that the vogue for Nordau could not diminish. “We move in the midst of one of the mightiest epochs the earth has ever seen,” Allen wrote in 1893, and this assertion remained as relevant as ever to his vision of history: “be a conscious partaker in one of the great ages of humanity,” he implores his reader, for “yours, yours is this glory!”¹²³

¹²⁰ Ruddick, introduction to *The Woman Who Did*, 21.

¹²¹ Morton, *The Busiest Man in England*, 176.

¹²² Allen, “Evolution in Early Italian Art VII,” *Pall Mall Magazine* 7 (Nov. 1895): 351; “Evolution in Early Italian Art VI,” *Pall Mall Magazine* 6 (Aug. 1895): 623, 625.

¹²³ Allen, “The Romance of the Clash of the Races,” 77-78.

III. Science, Liberalism, and Evolutionary Utopia in Wilde's Critical Prose

From the very start of his career, Wilde was a voracious and careful reader of science. Many scholars have noted the palpable impact that other evolutionary, psychological, and anthropological thinkers had on Wilde's aesthetic philosophy. Heather Seagroatt, for instance, reads *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the context of Wilde's patent interest in psychology, which for him "challenged hard and fast distinctions between sciences and the arts."¹²⁴ Furthermore, several scholars have highlighted the optimistic, or at least affirmative, aspects of Wilde's understanding of science. Elisha Cohn argues that Wilde, by focalizing psychology through the "image of the beautiful [brain] cell," formulated a "politics of aesthetics" that looked to "evolutionary process" rather than futile individual action for social amelioration.¹²⁵ Wilde's "neurological aestheticism," in Cohn's view, "integrated the dandy's pleasures with the socialist's critique of exploitation" and thus redirected his "focus toward the ongoing life of the species."¹²⁶ Along similar lines, John Wilson Foster asserts that Wilde "associated science not with pessimism or glum materialism but with optimism and progress."¹²⁷ "For Wilde," David Clifford adds, "ideas about evolution slipped seamlessly into ideas of progress, individualism, and *telos*"—ideas that Wilde, I suggest, gleaned from Spencer, Allen, and Clifford as well as Darwin, who the aesthete greatly admired.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Heather Seagroatt, "Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38 (1998): 745.

¹²⁵ Elisha Cohn, "'One single ivory cell': Oscar Wilde and the Brain," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17 (2012): 184, 186.

¹²⁶ Cohn, "'One single ivory cell,'" 187.

¹²⁷ John Wilson Foster, "Against Nature? Science and Oscar Wilde," in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 119.

¹²⁸ David Clifford, "Wilde and Evolution," in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 213.

In many ways, Wilde's convergence with Allen began with his undergraduate studies in science and philosophy, long before either writer published a single article. Wilde's Oxford and Commonplace notebooks, which he kept from approximately 1874 to 1879, chronicle his formative engagements with many of the same scientific and philosophical thinkers that inspired Allen, from Darwin and Huxley to Kant and E. B. Tylor.¹²⁹ Like Allen, Wilde had an omnivorous curiosity, a penchant for synthesizing knowledge across fields, and a facility for finding the greater stakes of technical details: in a typical entry from his Oxford notebook, Wilde fuses Spencerian biology with ethics as he wonders, "What is morality but the perfect adjustment of the human organism to the actual conditions of Life[?]"¹³⁰ Wilde's notebooks demonstrate a similarly keen interest in Clifford's work on geometry and ethics.¹³¹ Wilde was particularly intrigued by the mathematician's theory of the "tribal self," which posited that the primitive sense of self extended to one's entire social group.¹³² In his notes on the subject, Wilde pinpoints the anti-utilitarian and paradoxically individualistic repercussions of Clifford's theory: if the "preservation of self," Wilde reasons, "is not the individual self but what Clifford calls the 'Tribal self,'" then ethical good consists not in "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" but instead in "service done to a community by an individual who is part of that community."¹³³ By positing a conception of social good that did not quash individual autonomy, Clifford

¹²⁹ Wilde did not consistently date his commonplace books. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, in their authoritative edition of the notebooks, have settled on these dates by cross-referencing Wilde's notes with the publication dates of his primary sources.

¹³⁰ Wilde, "Notebook Kept at Oxford," in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 156.

¹³¹ The Commonplace book includes a very technical note on Clifford's account of Euclidean space. Wilde, "Commonplace Book," in *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*, 145.

¹³² W. K. Clifford, "On the Scientific Basis of Morals," *Contemporary Review* 26 (1875): 652.

¹³³ Wilde, "Commonplace Book," 130.

provided Wilde with an anthropological foundation for the anarchic socialism that he later expounded in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891).

The young Wilde also looked to Spencer for ways of reinterpreting natural law so as to reaffirm a sense of cosmic harmony. Wilde dedicates the first few pages of the *Commonplace* book to summarizing the philosopher’s thoughts on the essential unity of sociological, biological, and psychological science. Wilde’s later gloss of progress accordingly adapts Spencer’s ideas: “Progress,” Wilde notes, “is simply the instinct of self-preservation in humanity, the desire to affirm one’s own essence...Mankind has been continually...turning the key on its own spirit: but after a time there is an enormous desire for higher freedom—for self-preservation.”¹³⁴ To Wilde, Spencer’s conception of progress as a universal process of differentiation and integration suggested that individual acts of deviation from the norm—whether that norm was political, sexual, or artistic—were utterly necessary for the health of the organism and the consequent growth of civilization. Wilde’s exploration of these ideas culminates in one of the most striking entries in the *Commonplace* book, in which hard-nosed discussions of embryology give way to a poetic meditation on the philosophical ramifications of his research:

The splendor and grace of swift limbs, the grave beauty of girlish foreheads, the physical ecstasy of sensuous life—do we love these things less because the germ of man is to be found in the formless protoplasm of the deep seas, or in the hideous sluggishness of the Lower Amoebae—

as in the physical so it is in the moral life—we turn our eyes not to the deeper depths from which we may have sprung, but to the higher heights to which we can rise[.]

While Wilde’s sumptuous language and elaborate syntax draw on Pater’s trademark style, Wilde’s resolution to see only the potential for upward development hews more closely to Clifford’s optimistic interpretation of Spencerian evolution. Like Clifford, Wilde’s prophetic tone radiates an almost religious faith in humankind’s ability to ascend to “higher heights.”

¹³⁴ Wilde, “*Commonplace Book*,” 110.

Significantly, Wilde characterizes evolutionary advancement in terms of an aesthetic, and specifically formal, sophistication: “formless” and “hideous” single-celled organisms differentiate, in Spencerian fashion, into the beautifully diverse and yet coordinated parts of the human body. As we will see, the idea that evolutionary progress parallels the civilizing process of aesthetic self-refinement is central to Wilde’s later articulations of utopian aestheticism.

Spencer’s and Clifford’s visions of evolutionary progress propelled Wilde through his early-career lectures in North America, which Dowling notes were strewn throughout with “ambitious” and “guileless” expressions of “moral optimism.”¹³⁵ In particular, Wilde’s address “The English Renaissance of Art” sustains the confidence of the Oxford notebooks in part by grounding its definition of “Renaissance” in Spencerian notions of progress that Wilde considered scientifically authoritative. For Wilde, the Renaissance was really an accelerated period of evolutionary growth, in which a happy confluence of material circumstances—including developments in science, “technical improvements” in artistic execution, and a tendency toward “democratic and pantheistic” thinking—facilitated individual liberation and social cohesion simultaneously. Wilde sees this same movement at work in contemporary English aesthetics: as individuals seek “new subjects for poetry, new forms of art, [and] new imaginative and intellectual enjoyments,” he explains, the culture at large is beginning to unite the “breadth” and “sanity” of Hellenism with the “intensified individualism...of the romantic spirit.”¹³⁶ (Pater, we will recall, also applied evolutionary paradigms to the history of the Renaissance, but where Pater saw this history as cyclical, Wilde—with a hint of Spencer’s and Clifford’s teleological thinking—suggests that the English Renaissance is a decided

¹³⁵ Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art*, 89.

¹³⁶ Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” 252, 259, 243-44.

improvement on past iterations.) Wilde's early reference to "individualism" here—which I discuss in greater detail in conjunction with his socialism—also shows us the degree to which his politics were enmeshed in his understanding of both evolution and aesthetics.

As Allen did several years earlier in *Physiological Aesthetics* and *The Colour-Sense*, Wilde's "English Renaissance of Art" also seeks to reconcile the purely self-gratifying nature of aesthetic beauty with what he sees as the "lofty, spiritual mission" of art.¹³⁷ Following Allen and Darwin as well as Swinburne and Pater, Wilde takes for granted that the "real influence of the arts" lies in their "sensuous element," whether in the "splendid curves" of a statue, the "pictorial charm" of a painting, or a poem's "inventive handling of rhythmical language."¹³⁸ Yet, it is by "satisfying" the sensual aesthetic faculty that art, according to Wilde, manages to "touch the soul."¹³⁹ So while Wilde denies that art itself can have "any other claim but her own perfection," he finds a "social aim" in the correct spectatorial response to art—hence the urgency of criticism, which will show the public in what "spirit" they should receive the "joy" of sensual, aesthetic experience.¹⁴⁰ Like Allen, Wilde suggests that art contributes to "modern progress and civilisation" not by teaching moral lessons, but by providing individuals with noncompetitive, nonviolent ways to interface with an often brutal world. Although Wilde discusses art in a more spiritualized register than Allen, they shared at this juncture a basic belief in the capacity for beautiful objects to cultivate (or as Allen put it, "tune") more humane, cosmopolitan subjects, thereby creating what Wilde describes as "a common intellectual atmosphere between all

¹³⁷ Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," 249.

¹³⁸ Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," 260-61.

¹³⁹ Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," 261.

¹⁴⁰ Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art," 261-62.

countries.”¹⁴¹ As Gagnier explains, Wilde’s cosmopolitanism was closely related to the forms of late Victorian liberalism that Spencer and Morris developed in their respective fields: a liberalism that made individualism compatible with the social good by stressing the power of self-culture to rein in anarchic individual impulses.¹⁴² In this way, Wilde reasoned that the proliferation of art and the education of taste could effect positive political and economic change. “For the good we get from art,” Wilde states toward the end of his lecture, “is not what we learn from it; it is what we become through it.”¹⁴³

By Richard Ellmann’s account, audiences in New York warmly applauded this message after Wilde first delivered the lecture in January 1882.¹⁴⁴ While the “Apostle of Aesthetics,” as several North American newspapers dubbed him, encountered a less friendly reception in the other cities on his tour, he remained sanguine about aestheticism’s revolutionary potential.¹⁴⁵ In his many interviews from this period, Wilde insists on the movement’s eventual triumph, chiefly on the basis of its status as a scientifically attested theory. To a journalist at the *New York Evening Post*, for instance, Wilde defines aestheticism as “the science of finding the beautiful by looking for it in pursuance of fixed laws”; in Rochester he declares, “I know that I am right, that I have a mission to perform.”¹⁴⁶ Flush with the self-assurance of his calling, he avows to another journalist that he has “not the slightest doubt of the complete success of the movement,” because

¹⁴¹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” 268-69.

¹⁴² Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 150, 6-7.

¹⁴³ Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” 273.

¹⁴⁴ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 166.

¹⁴⁵ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 176-77.

¹⁴⁶ “Oscar Wilde,” *New York Evening Post*, 1 January 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 17; “A Man of Culture Rare,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 8 February 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, 54.

“the desire for beauty is merely a heightened form of the desire for life.”¹⁴⁷ He elaborates on this quintessentially Wildean synopsis of physiological aesthetics in a later interview: “one of the uses of art is to cultivate the senses,” he explains in the *Montreal Star*, “the ears of people who do not often hear good music become very coarse. . . Any right theory of education, it seems to me. . . must be founded on a principle of educating the mind, not directly, but through the means of the senses.”¹⁴⁸ In the same interview, Wilde alludes to the radically democratic implications of this materialist approach to aesthetics, which Allen had also pointed out several years earlier in “Aesthetic Evolution in Man.” Since “we all have eyes, ears, and hands,” Wilde remarks, we all share the capacity to enjoy and create beautiful art, and anyone who does so “must be a better man, a better workman, a better citizen”—even without the benefit of “abstract” instruction.¹⁴⁹ With the sanction of physiology and psychology, Wilde can style the Aesthetic Movement—particularly its faith in the universal process of becoming through sensory experience—“the most democratic impulse in the history of the world.”¹⁵⁰

As Dowling observes, however, “Wilde’s early Whig optimism began to cool” in the years following his tour, as he confronted “what appeared to be the empirical results” of the individualist aesthetic: namely, a cultural landscape “now hideously defaced with the consequences of millions of individual aesthetic choices.”¹⁵¹ According to Dowling, the fact that Wilde, like Allen, “found himself implicated in and economically determined by the aesthetic

¹⁴⁷ “The Theories of a Poet,” *New York Tribune*, 8 January 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, 21.

¹⁴⁸ “Oscar Wilde: The Arch-Aesthete on Aestheticism,” *Montreal Star*, 15 May 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, 152-53.

¹⁴⁹ “Oscar Wilde: The Arch-Aesthete on Aestheticism,” 152-53; “Oscar Arrives,” *Sacramento Record-Union*, 27 March 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, 117.

¹⁵⁰ “The Aesthetic Bard,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 January 1882, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, 32.

¹⁵¹ Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art*, 90.

preferences of a vast new democratic audience” further demoralized the once-assured aesthete.¹⁵² For this reason, Wilde’s critical essays from the late 1880s and early 1890s evince a certain sardonic skepticism of democracy, which he dismisses in “The Soul of Man” as “simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people.”¹⁵³ Furthermore, the Wilde of the essays cannot so easily foresee the all-encompassing social change he had confidently anticipated in his American lectures. In “The Decay of Lying,” for instance, the aesthetic evangelist Vivian predicts that Britain will undergo an artistic revival “surely some day,” but his phantasmagoric predictions—he envisions Behemoths, Leviathans, dragons, and other “beautiful and impossible things” roaming the English countryside—renders his prophecy more ironic than sincere.¹⁵⁴ As a queer writer, Wilde also had to reconcile his evolutionism with personal tastes that seemed incompatible with the procreative aspect of evolution. Whitney Davis observes that many queer aesthetic writers in the period—including Wilde, Lee, John Addington Symonds, and Edward Carpenter—“accepted broadly naturalistic and evolutionary premises” even as they recognized that their “aesthetic tastes...had an anomalous or paradoxical status in Darwinian terms.”¹⁵⁵ These writers, Davis argues, consequently wondered whether a “same-sex taste for beauty, form, or art” might have “the same natural basis as the sense of beauty shaped, according to Darwin, in the cross-sex interactions of sexual selection.”¹⁵⁶ Wilde, like many of his aesthetic colleagues, remained uncertain about whether the principles of sexual selection, which he began to see as the

¹⁵² Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art*, 91.

¹⁵³ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 244.

¹⁵⁴ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” 101.

¹⁵⁵ Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 156.

¹⁵⁶ Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 157.

firmest scientific grounds for his vision of aesthetic progress, could operate through mechanisms beyond that of heterosexual reproduction.

These challenges notwithstanding, Wilde continued to advocate for the civilizing influence of decorative art by redirecting his attention toward the more diffuse effects of evolutionary process, and away from the immediate cultivation of “better men,” “better workmen,” and “better citizens” that he had described to the American press in the early 1880s. Allen contributed to Wilde’s renewed social optimism in several ways. First, Allen scientifically redefined individual desire as a progressive evolutionary instinct that operated most effectively under libertarian social conditions (as we have seen, many readers of “The New Hedonism” construed Allen’s argument as a defense of homosexuality). In this context, Wilde could conceive of individualistic, even anarchic forms of social organization that could generate evolutionary and social benefits without the need for forcible reform, unchecked Darwinian competition, or heteronormative eugenics. This logic was particularly instrumental in Wilde’s complicated politics. Secondly, Allen’s inquiries into the evolving cultural character of the “race” lent scientific support to Wilde’s own developing hypotheses about heredity and self-culture—hypotheses that culminated in “The Critic as Artist” (1890, revised 1891), Wilde’s most emphatic articulation of his evolutionary aesthetic aims.

By tracing Wilde’s utopian thinking through his early journalism, we can better understand the conflicted—and yet, for Wilde, compelling—reformist ambitions underlying later essays such as “The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man.” Though not as prolific a journalist as Allen, Wilde also relied on periodical publication for an income, and he spent much of the 1880s navigating the same industry that agonized his Canadian colleague. Wilde regularly contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, where he first encountered Allen, as well as arts periodicals

such as the *Dramatic Review* and the *Court and Society Review*; Wilde also edited and produced copy for *The Woman's World* from 1887 to 1889.¹⁵⁷ Wilde's and Allen's shared distaste for journalism—Wilde's experiences as both agent and target of journalistic rumor mongering led him to compare the press to the rack—did not prevent either writer from utilizing periodicals as platforms for their ideas.¹⁵⁸ While Allen, as we have seen, leveraged the market for scientific articles in order to popularize his evolutionary theories of culture, Wilde, in the meantime, used his dozens of critical reviews to promote his views on the social dimensions of art.

Wilde's 1885 report of James McNeill Whistler's famous "Ten O'Clock" lecture, for instance, applauds the American painter's "marvellous eloquence" but disputes his complete separation of the artist from social context: in Wilde's satirical estimation, Whistler effectively argued "that the only thing [the public] should cultivate was ugliness, and that on their permanent stupidity rested all the hopes of art in the future."¹⁵⁹ Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell situate this article within a "spirited, if eventually bitter, exchange" between Wilde and Whistler, who repeatedly accused Wilde of plagiarism.¹⁶⁰ In a veiled attack on Wilde, Whistler's lecture condemns the "voice of the aesthete" for venturing to "translat[e]" the sacred, self-sufficient work of art into accessible critical language.¹⁶¹ An artist, Wilde replies in his review,

¹⁵⁷ Ellmann points out that Wilde wrote for the *Pall Mall Gazette* even though the paper's editorial staff routinely mocked him in the early 1880s. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 263, 286, 293-94.

¹⁵⁸ The aesthete Gilbert adds in "The Critic as Artist": "modern journalism...justifies its own existence by the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest." Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," 255; Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, 135.

¹⁵⁹ [Wilde], "Mr. Whistler's Ten O'Clock," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 February 1885, in *Journalism Part I*, ed. John Stokes and Mark W. Turner, vol. 6 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 34.

¹⁶⁰ As Bristow and Mitchell note, such charges dogged Wilde throughout his lifetime and long into the twentieth century. Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 189-91.

¹⁶¹ James McNeill Whistler, "Mr. Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock,'" in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 152, 147.

“can no more be born of a nation that is devoid of any sense of beauty than a fig can grow from a thorn,” and this certainty alone proves the real “value of beautiful surroundings” and, by extension, his own critical project.¹⁶² In a later review, by contrast, Wilde praises John Addington Symonds’s final volume of the *Renaissance in Italy* (1886) for achieving “something like the science of the true historian”; in true “critical spirit,” Wilde continues, Symonds does not treat “life as a mere spectacle” but instead contemplates “the laws of its evolution and progress” with humane compassion.¹⁶³ As we can see here, Wilde’s refusal to hold the artist to ethical standards did not apply to the art critic, who he entrusted to instruct the public in the proper appreciation of beautiful objects. For Wilde, as for Allen, an understanding of the role that the sense of beauty played in cultural evolution was a vital part of the critic’s pedagogical duty, which was to proliferate a civilized (and civilizing) aesthetic temperament.

The specific critiques that Wilde levels at Symonds also speak to Wilde’s ongoing interpretation of socialism, a political creed that was closely tied to both his evolutionary worldview and his commitment to aesthetic individualism. Symonds, Wilde remarks in his notice of *Renaissance in Italy*, “has something of Shakespeare’s sovereign contempt of the masses” and “hardly realizes that what seems romance to us was harsh reality to those who were engaged in it.”¹⁶⁴ Wilde further points out that Symonds’s preoccupation with “great personalities”—also a hallmark of Pater’s historical criticism—occasionally tempts Symonds to view the past “rather as a picture to be painted than as a problem to be solved.”¹⁶⁵ While Wilde

¹⁶² Wilde, “Mr. Whistler’s Ten O’Clock,” 35

¹⁶³ [Wilde], “Mr. Symonds’ History of the Renaissance,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 November 1886, in *Journalism Part I*, 105.

¹⁶⁴ Wilde, “Mr. Symonds’ History of the Renaissance,” 105.

¹⁶⁵ Wilde, “Mr. Symonds’ History of the Renaissance,” 105.

identifies with this “desire to represent life at all costs under dramatic conditions,” he implies that this aestheticization of the past is inconsistent with the reformist “office of history” and Symonds’s own “widened...sympathies.”¹⁶⁶ History, Wilde here suggests, should recount the social and moral conditions of past ages with an eye toward the circumstances of the present: ideally, the historian’s all-encompassing sympathy (the “true critic,” he remarks elsewhere, “bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations”) allows him to envision more equitable social systems.¹⁶⁷

Wilde consequently approves of a lecture on tapestry that Morris delivered in 1888, because Morris, unlike Symonds, derives salient political lessons from history while still pleasing his audience with what Wilde summarizes as a “delightful” talk.¹⁶⁸ According to Wilde’s retelling, Morris argues that certain technological and economic conditions peculiar to the medieval period resulted in the development of a “really beautiful and decorative” art form; Morris further construes this as evidence that modern-day “commercialism, with its vile god cheapness, its callous indifference to the worker, [and] its innate vulgarity of temper, is our enemy.”¹⁶⁹ As Wilde’s review continues, his voice becomes indistinguishable from Morris’s, and by its end Wilde appears to have adopted Morris’s socialist ethos for himself. “To gain anything good,” Wilde concludes without irony, “we must sacrifice something of our luxury—must think more of others, more of the State, the commonweal.”¹⁷⁰ “Commonweal,” as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller reminds us, was also the title of Morris’s socialist newspaper, which

¹⁶⁶ Wilde, “Mr. Symonds’ History of the Renaissance,” 105, 107.

¹⁶⁷ Wilde, “Mr. Pater’s Last Volume,” *Speaker: The Liberal Review*, 22 March 1890, in *Journalism Part II*, ed. Stokes and Turner, vol. 7 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 244.

¹⁶⁸ [Wilde], “Mr. Morris on Tapestry,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 November 1888, in *Journalism Part II*, 97.

¹⁶⁹ Wilde, “Mr. Morris on Tapestry,” 97, 98.

¹⁷⁰ Wilde, “Mr. Morris on Tapestry,” 98.

Miller describes as a “utopian print space” that sought to counteract the commercialist tendencies against which Morris continually protested.¹⁷¹ “The art of the *Commonweal*,” Miller notes, was “surprisingly faithful to Wilde’s aesthetic vision,” and Wilde seems to have absorbed some of its utopian character in turn.¹⁷²

Morris’s conjunction between aesthetic progress and communitarianism, which Allen also articulated in an expressly evolutionary context, served to galvanize Wilde’s own progressive politics in the following years. The same year that he positively reviewed Morris’s lecture, Wilde also began attending meetings of the Fabian Society: the socialist advocacy group whose members included Morris, Allen, the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the poet Edward Carpenter, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, and other prominent progressives.¹⁷³ As Shaw later recounted, the Fabian Society in the 1880s was less a codified political party than a loose affiliation of radicals, in which “Anarchist and Socialist worked shoulder to shoulder” because neither “had any definite idea of what he wanted or how it was to be got.”¹⁷⁴ As Ian Britain further explains in his history of Fabianism, the Fabians generally advocated for gradual change through the introduction of socialist reforms, although different factions within the group often disagreed vehemently on how exactly these reforms should be implemented.¹⁷⁵ Unlike competing organizations such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, which professed to be working-class movements, the Fabian Society culled its members from the

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 42.

¹⁷² Miller, *Slow Print*, 45.

¹⁷³ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 290.

¹⁷⁴ George Bernard Shaw, *The Fabian Society: Its Early History* (London: Fabian Society, 1906), 16.

¹⁷⁵ Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts c. 1884-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 10.

middle-class literati: many Fabians, Britain argues, were thus “passionate connoisseurs and indefatigable advocates of the pleasures which art could afford.”¹⁷⁶ While Wilde’s participation in the Fabian Society was short-lived, the non-programmatic nature of the organization as well as its thoroughgoing interest in art attracted him to the socialist cause in this period.

Wilde’s equally strong interest in individualism, however, reminds us of the intricacies of his distinctive political philosophy, which combined elements of both Fabian socialism and liberalism. As Josephine M. Guy notes, “Individualism” (specifically when capitalized, as it appears in “The Soul of Man under Socialism”) was a distinct political movement that emerged in the early 1880s, around the time of Wilde’s North American lectures.¹⁷⁷ Individualists, Guy explains, “defined freedom as the absence of physical or legal constraints” and, for this reason, opposed both censorship and state-based welfare systems; many Individualists looked to the writings of Spencer and John Stuart Mill for philosophical support for this view.¹⁷⁸ Guy points out that this Individualist ideal of “negative liberty” appealed to Wilde, even as the movement’s leanings toward social Darwinism—Individualists often advocated for market deregulation and strong property rights—jarred with Wilde’s beliefs about the degrading effects of economic competition.¹⁷⁹ This form of capitalistic individualism, Elaine Hadley adds, also defined liberal politics in the nineteenth century, especially as practiced by the Liberal Party under the

¹⁷⁶ Britain, *Fabianism and Culture*, 106, 150.

¹⁷⁷ Guy, “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 2003), 70.

¹⁷⁸ Guy, “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” 70.

¹⁷⁹ Guy, “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” 70.

influential leadership of William Ewart Gladstone.¹⁸⁰ Wilde’s skepticism about practical reform and laissez-faire economics aside, his membership in the Eighty Club—a political gentlemen’s club closely tied to Gladstone and the Liberal Party establishment—indicates at least some involvement in party affairs.¹⁸¹ At the intersection of these influences, Wilde’s work from the 1890s attempted to unite the liberal values of self-determination and free thought with the democratic and artistic ideals of the socialist movement.

Two additional models of social and political reform, which appeared in the late 1880s, guided Wilde’s ongoing inquiries into the political repercussions of his aestheticism. The first of these was “Individualism and Socialism” (1889), Allen’s critique of the Liberty and Property Defence League—an organization that, as Guy notes, lobbied for Individualist causes.¹⁸² In this essay, Allen rejects what he sees as the antisocial motivations behind the LPDL and instead discerns “True Individualism” in the counter-competitive message of socialism.¹⁸³ Allen, drawing on Mill, defines “Individualism” as the belief in “the full, free, and equal right of every citizen to the unimpeded use of all his energies, activities and faculties, provided only he does not thereby encroach upon the equal and correlative right of every other citizen” (this conception

¹⁸⁰ Gladstone served as prime minister intermittently from 1868 to 1894, and his ministry oversaw the introduction of major educational, electoral, judicial, and economic reforms. Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2-7, 291.

¹⁸¹ Thomas Wright has recently rediscovered Wilde’s participation in the Eighty Club, so named for the year of its founding, 1880. As Wright points out, members of the Club—mostly MPs, young aristocrats, and journalists—were required to work on behalf of the Liberal Party. Once elected, members delivered lectures on political subjects and attended or hosted “At Homes,” where they discussed political strategy. Wilde joined in 1887, soon after a shake-up in Parliament led the Liberals to consolidate their support for Irish Home Rule. Wright demonstrates that Wilde also attended many Liberal functions in the late 1880s and early 1890s, both within and outside the Club. Thomas Wright, “Party Political Animal,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 June 2014, accessed 28 April 2017, <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/party-political-animal/>.

¹⁸² Guy, “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” 71.

¹⁸³ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 732.

of personal freedom reappeared in “The New Hedonism” several years later).¹⁸⁴ However, Allen appends a caveat both to Mill’s liberalism and the more reactionary brand of Individualism that groups such as the LPDL derived from Mill. A truly Individualist society, Allen contends, is only possible when every member “can start fair in the race for life, without finding [her or his] individuality encroached upon every side by hampering monopolies” such as exploitative labor practices, shortages of necessary resources, and moralistic legislation.¹⁸⁵ Socialist reforms, Allen continues, can keep these monopolies in check, thereby enabling the individual to pursue desires that, as he argues elsewhere, ultimately result in evolutionary good. Significantly for Wilde, Allen presses socialism in the service of Individualism, rather than the other way around: for this reason, Allen remains skeptical of “the State, that *deus ex machina* of current Socialistic thinking and writing,” and he warns against the “busybody meddlesomeness” of government and the redistribution of wealth by force.¹⁸⁶ But with regard to the “real revolutions actually in progress,” including Irish Home Rule and the nationalization of natural resources, Allen believes that socialists and Individualists can work “side by side most amicably.”¹⁸⁷ He accordingly embraces the “ideal and fanciful” nature of all “Utopias,” since the very impracticality of such “schemes” allows the Individualist and the socialist to join forces despite their differences.¹⁸⁸ With its bricolage of Gladstonian liberalism and Fabian socialism, its recognition of the complex social and biological conditions that jeopardize liberty, and its appreciation for the utopian sensibility, Allen’s “Individualism and Socialism” provided a helpful example to Wilde as he

¹⁸⁴ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 732.

¹⁸⁵ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 736.

¹⁸⁶ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 738.

¹⁸⁷ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 739.

¹⁸⁸ Allen, “Individualism and Socialism,” 739.

drafted “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” (Guy goes so far as to claim that Allen’s “tactic of combining an Individualist anti-statism with a Socialist critique of private property is virtually identical to that of Wilde in ‘The Soul of Man,’” though she grants that their respective essays diverge in tone and scope.¹⁸⁹)

The second of Wilde’s important political sources differed markedly from Allen’s essay in provenance, though not in intention. Around the same time that Wilde encountered Allen’s libertarian socialism, he also read and reviewed *Chuang Tzū: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* (1889), a translation of the extent works of Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi.¹⁹⁰ In a glowing 1890 review for the *Speaker*, Wilde calls the over two thousand-year-old treatise “the most caustic criticism of modern life I have met with for some time.”¹⁹¹ For Wilde, Zhuangzi is a proto-aesthetic philosopher, a consummate critic who combines the best aspects of every branch of human knowledge into an incisive “creed of Inaction” that upholds “self-culture and self-development” as the ultimate aims of life.¹⁹² In Wilde’s telling, Zhuangzi “sum[s] up in himself almost every mood of European metaphysical and mystical thought, from Herakleitus down to Hegel” and beyond; he “combines with the passionate eloquence of a Rousseau the

¹⁸⁹ Guy speculates that Allen’s comments on “The Soul of Man” (“I would have written every line of it myself”) may have been a gentle reminder that he had, in some sense, written part of the essay for Wilde. Similarly, Guy suggests that Wilde’s effusive praise for “The Celt in English Art” might “disguise embarrassment” over his appropriation of Allen’s ideas. Guy, “‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’: A (Con)Textual History,” 78-79.

¹⁹⁰ Bernard Quaritch, the publisher of *Chuang Tzū*, was a prominent bookseller who specialized in rare Orientalist texts and compendious scholarly editions. His most famous project was Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (1859), a translation of eleventh-century Persian poetry that exerted an important influence on Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Zhuangzi, *Chuang Tzū: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, trans. Herbert A. Giles (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889); Arthur Freeman, “Quaritch, Bernard Alexander Christian (1819–1899),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22943>; Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets, and Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 377.

¹⁹¹ Wilde uses “Chuang Tsū,” a variant spelling of the philosopher’s name; references here use a more modern transliteration. Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” *Speaker: The Liberal Review*, 8 February 1890, in *Journalism Part II*, 237.

¹⁹² Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 238, 242.

scientific reasoning of a Herbert Spencer,” and “he is one of the Darwinians before Darwin.”¹⁹³

This multifaceted temperament, Wilde continues, grants Zhuangzi rare foresight regarding the social, economic, and cultural problems that plague late nineteenth-century Britain. In an anticipation of Spencer’s critique of industrial capitalism, for instance, Wilde’s Zhuangzi sees that “the accumulation of wealth” only exacerbates the crushing force of “competition” and leads to “the waste, as well as the destruction, of energy.”¹⁹⁴ Wilde also highlights Zhuangzi’s timely critique of “Governments and Philanthropists,” which “tr[y] to coerce people into being good, and so destroy the natural goodness of man.”¹⁹⁵

Though implausible from Wilde’s Darwinian perspective, Zhuangzi’s vision of a pre-civilized “Golden Age” provides Wilde with a basis for discussing the ways in which sociocultural progress might arise from the “spontaneous” and “intuit[ive]” conduct of autonomous individuals.¹⁹⁶ In Wilde’s estimation, Zhuangzi’s “perfect man” is a model of Paterian contemplation whose “mental equilibrium gives him the empire of the world”; he can therefore “rest in inactivity, and see the world become virtuous of itself.”¹⁹⁷ But this serene, cerebral objectivity does not entail political apathy, as Wilde illustrates in a cutting aside:

All this is of course excessively dangerous, but we must remember that Chuang Tsū lived more than two thousand years ago, and never had the opportunity of seeing our unrivalled civilisation. And yet it is possible that, were he to come back to earth and visit us, he might have something to say to [Chief Secretary for Ireland Arthur Balfour] about his coercion and active misgovernment in Ireland; he might smile at some of our philanthropic ardours, and shake his head over many of our organised charities; the School Board might not impress him, nor our race for wealth stir his admiration.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 238, 241.

¹⁹⁴ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 240.

¹⁹⁵ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 240.

¹⁹⁶ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 239, 240.

¹⁹⁷ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 241.

¹⁹⁸ Wilde, “A Chinese Sage,” 241.

Far from withdrawing him from social and political concerns, Zhuangzi's (and by extension, Wilde's) eschewal of action is what allows him to penetrate the most oppressively imperialistic and exploitative ideologies of the Victorian middle class. By refusing to participate in these forms of political and economic subjugation, Zhuangzi's "strange philosophy" of self-cultivation and non-intervention proves "dangerous"—an adjective Wilde uses several times—to those in positions of power. Since self-culture and self-expression pose such potent challenges to the status quo, then, inactivity is not idleness but a vital form of dissident labor, which Wilde describes as the "work of the intellect."¹⁹⁹

Wilde weaves these multidisciplinary threads into two of the most memorable professions of aesthetic philosophy in this period: namely, his critical essay "The True Function and Value of Criticism" (1890), which he revised and republished as "The Critic as Artist" in his collection *Intentions* (1891), and his political manifesto "The Soul of Man under Socialism." In both pieces, Wilde once again waxes optimistic about the long-term social value of aestheticism, but his earlier emphasis on educational reform and the popular dissemination of decorative art—the core policies of "missionary aestheticism," to once again borrow Maltz's term—gives way to explorations of evolutionary process and racial development.²⁰⁰ Like Clifford, Pater, and Allen, Wilde's essays creatively reinterpret the modern sciences in order to postulate an attitude toward life that might safeguard the happiness of the individual, minimize the suffering of others, and bring about positive social as well as evolutionary change. It was in these essays that Wilde, as the journalist Holbrook Jackson remarks in his retrospective on fin-de-siècle Britain, "bridged

¹⁹⁹ Wilde, "A Chinese Sage," 242.

²⁰⁰ As Maltz points out, the most influential figures in this movement included Arnold, Ruskin, Morris, and, to a lesser extent, Pater. Although Maltz distinguishes Wilde's dandyism from the more antisocial practices of decadence, she generally does not classify him as a missionary aesthete. Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes*, 1-9, 20.

the chasm between the self-contained individualism of the decadents and the communal aspirations of the more advanced social revolutionaries.”²⁰¹

In keeping with this ambition, “The Critic as Artist” (subtitled “With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing”) touches on a vast array of biological, anthropological, artistic, and historiographical issues adjacent to Wilde’s central concerns about art and society. The two-part essay takes the form of a Socratic dialogue between Ernest and his mentor Gilbert, who continuously shocks Ernest out of his honest, but unoriginal, opinions about the role of the critic. The dialogue begins with Ernest parroting the mainstream view of art criticism (which Whistler also expressed in his “Ten O’Clock” lecture) as a “shrill clamour” that violates the sanctity of creative work; “the Greeks,” Ernest asserts, “had no art-critics.”²⁰² Gilbert counters with the example of Aristotle, who “concern[s] himself primarily with the impression that the work of art produces” and, “as a physiologist and psychologist, . . . knows that the health of [the aesthetic] function resides in energy.”²⁰³ As Gilbert’s gloss of Aristotle suggests, the evolutionary aesthetic theories of Spencer, Darwin, Clifford, Pater, and Allen are crucial to the cultural principles that Gilbert subsequently demonstrates to Ernest in part one of “The Critic as Artist.”

First and foremost, Gilbert’s Spencerian notion of health as a function of energy calls into question Ernest’s simplistic privileging of life over art. Gilbert explains *catharsis*, for instance, in terms that evoke Spencer’s idea of play as the salutary release of superfluous energy: Aristotelian tragedy “cleanses the bosom of much ‘perilous stuff’” by providing the viewer with

²⁰¹ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 29.

²⁰² Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 128, 135.

²⁰³ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 140.

“high and worthy objects for the exercise of the emotions.”²⁰⁴ Secondly, Spencer’s equation of progress with differentiation—and, more powerfully, Clifford’s related warnings against “propriety” and the “crystallisation of the race”—surfaces in Gilbert’s radical upending of Ernest’s moralism.²⁰⁵ After Ernest ingenuously asserts that “it is much more difficult to do a thing than to talk about it,” Gilbert scoffs at the “man of action” who defies “scientific laws” that dictate even seemingly conscious action.²⁰⁶ In the face of this reality, trying to do “good” deeds is futile, while acting to please oneself—which Gilbert provocatively describes as “sin”—“is an essential element of progress.”²⁰⁷ His scientific reasoning draws on both Darwinian conceptions of species and (given the erotic import of “sin”) the progressive logic of sexual selection. The “machine of life,” Gilbert explains, “may grind our virtues to powder...or transform our sins into elements of a new civilization, more marvellous and more splendid than any that has gone before.”²⁰⁸ “Through its curiosity,” he continues, “Sin increases the experience of race,” and “through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type...without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless.”²⁰⁹ Finally, Gilbert’s scientifically inflected individualism feeds into a parallel defense of critical autonomy that Wilde (like Pater, Clifford, and Allen before him) derives from Bainian psychology. Since aesthetic experience is “purely subjective,” Gilbert tells Ernest, the “meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it”; consequently,

²⁰⁴ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 140.

²⁰⁵ Clifford, “On Some of the Conditions of Mental Development,” in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1901), 1:117.

²⁰⁶ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 146-47.

²⁰⁷ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 148.

²⁰⁸ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 147.

²⁰⁹ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 148.

the “highest criticism” is really “the record of one’s own soul,” a creative work that rivals and often eclipses the artwork it critiques.²¹⁰

The second half of “The Critic as Artist” (subtitled “With some remarks upon the importance of discussing everything”) refines the causal relationship between art, critical independence, and racial progress by explicating the aesthetic faculty in terms of its sexual selective purpose. As Gilbert predicts at the end of part one, the intervening meal has a “subtle influence” on the conversation’s tenor: once he has taken care of his basic (or what Spencer and Allen might have deemed “life-serving”) needs, Gilbert becomes increasingly aware of the artistic “failures” of life.²¹¹ “Don’t let us go to life for our fulfillment or our experience,” Gilbert urges Ernest, “it is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance,” and ultimately dissatisfying to “the artistic and critical temperament.”²¹² Similarly to Pater and Clifford, Wilde chafes against the biological and physical forces that dictate day-to-day existence; like Allen, Wilde had sufficient familiarity with the journalism trade to count pecuniary need among these constrictions. For Wilde, art grants its audiences a degree of precious control over their lived experience of the world and, in some measure, compensates for life’s demoralizing conditions. By merely picking up a book or attending a play, Gilbert reasons, “we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom”; through art, we can “realize our perfection” while “shield[ing] ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.”²¹³

²¹⁰ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 154, 157.

²¹¹ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 161, 167.

²¹² Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 173.

²¹³ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 172-73.

In a broad sense, “life” and “art” come to connote, for Gilbert, the processes of natural selection—which operates through a confluence of external pressures—and sexual selection—with its intimations of free choice, excess, and pleasure—respectively. At his most sanguine moment, Gilbert thus imagines the possibility of self-perfection through the appropriation of progressive, sexual selective mechanisms. “In the development of the individual,” Gilbert declares,

even a colour-sense is more important...than a sense of right and wrong. Aesthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilization, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change. And when we reach the true culture that is our aim, we attain to that perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make the renunciations of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm.²¹⁴

Gilbert’s analogy subtly, but significantly, revises his comments on sin. While he maintains his previous claims about sin’s efficacy, “sin” here has morphed into the more benign locution of “do[ing] everything [one] wish[es].” When Gilbert situates his “antinomian” licentiousness in the paradigm of sexual selection, it sheds its moralistic valence and ceases to be “sin” at all, in part because he considers science, like art, “out of the reach of morals.”²¹⁵ In many ways, Gilbert appeals to the amoral “ethic of uselessness” that underwrote, as Christine Ferguson argues, both scientific philosophy and decadent literature in the *fin de siècle*: by invoking sexual selection, which provides an evolutionary standard for the selection of otherwise “useless” ornamental qualities, Gilbert is able to shake off the constraints of utilitarian “Ethics” and

²¹⁴ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 204-205.

²¹⁵ Gilbert adds that art is also “out of the reach of morals, for her eyes are fixed upon things beautiful and immortal and ever-changing.” Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 204, 190.

simultaneously assume the ethical high ground.²¹⁶ Like Allen, then, Wilde relies on the logic of sexual selection to align personal desire and “sin” with higher spiritual “perfection” (in this regard, Gilbert also explicitly defers to “Chuang Tsû the wise,” who defended “simple and spontaneous virtue” against the attacks of “wicked philanthropists”).²¹⁷ With the proper cultivation, they believed, individuals will instinctually gravitate toward the lovely, the beautiful, and the good, and their own diverse inclinations—so long as these inclinations are given free rein—will reap evolutionary profit over the course of generations.

In Gilbert’s esoteric discussions of race and heredity, Wilde elaborates on the mechanisms by which such beneficial aesthetic instincts might be preserved for future generations. While these discussions often resemble in substance and tone Swinburne’s, Clifford’s, and Pater’s visions of universal “Man,” Wilde departs from his predecessors in his interpretations of hereditary science. For instance, Gilbert strategically circumscribes, rather than magnifies, the power of individuals to shape humankind through conscious action: “by revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action,” he tells Ernest, the “scientific principle of Heredity” frees us from the “burden of moral responsibility” and becomes the “warrant for the contemplative life.”²¹⁸ As Michael Wainwright has shown, Wilde’s understanding of hereditary determinism draws on several competing theories of inheritance, including those of Spencer and

²¹⁶ Christine Ferguson, “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment,” *PMLA* 117, no. 3 (2002): 470.

²¹⁷ Hinton also anticipates this argument in his essay “On the Bases of Morals,” in which he claims that “perfect impulses mark the perfect man.” Hinton believed that moral perfection came about through the continuous alignment of one’s desires with the greater good of humankind, thus obviating the need for self-restraint. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 183; Hinton, “On the Bases of Morals,” 788.

²¹⁸ Gilbert undoubtedly alludes to Huxley’s landmark 1874 essay “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata,” in which Huxley clarified the “irrefragable fact” that “the living body is a mechanism.” Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177; Huxley, “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata,” *Fortnightly Review* 16 (1874): 555.

Darwin as well as the German naturalists Ernst Haeckel and August Weismann.²¹⁹ Like Spencer, Haeckel belonged to the Lamarckian tradition, which held that acquired traits could be passed down to one's offspring; Weismann and Darwin, as we have seen, generally disagreed.²²⁰ While David Clifford, in his summation of Wilde's evolutionary thinking, places the aesthete in the Lamarckian camp along with Spencer, Wilde's concession to hereditary determinism and reading of Weismann suggest that he may have been undecided on the subject.²²¹ Far from an abstract academic issue, the fundamental nature of heredity was a pivotal question for Wilde, in part because his most optimistic scientific antecedents—namely Spencer and Clifford—premised their optimism on the assumption that cultivated characteristics were heritable to some extent.

At the same time, the lack of scientific consensus on heredity gave rise to widespread speculations about hereditary culture that in turn facilitated Wilde's social and evolutionary investment in the critic. As Laura Otis argues, late Victorian psychologists and cultural critics alike detected apparent parallels between individual and cultural development and, on this basis, postulated the existence of an organic, racial memory.²²² Consequently, to an observer such as Wilde the notion of "cultural inheritance" would have raised a skein of contentious uncertainties regarding the role of biological transmission in the perpetuation of the critical temperament. In "The Critic as Artist," these mysteries validate Gilbert's imaginative figuration of heredity, a prismatic phenomenon that he alternately titles a "terrible shadow," the "last of the Fates," and

²¹⁹ Michael Wainwright, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic: Darwinian Essays in Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 25-28.

²²⁰ As Wainwright and others have noted, and as I point out in the first chapter, Darwin became more amenable to the idea of use-disuse inheritance later in his career. Wainwright, *Toward a Sociobiological Hermeneutic*, 27-28.

²²¹ David Clifford, "Wilde and Evolution," 213.

²²² Laura Otis, *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the Late Nineteenth & Early Twentieth Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 93.

“the only one of the Gods whose real name we know.”²²³ The elusiveness of heredity’s inner workings allows Wilde to represent heredity in language that harkens back to Pater’s reading of *La Gioconda* in “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci” (1869), in which Pater imagines the “strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions” lurking behind her famous smile.²²⁴ In this vein, Gilbert directs his critical faculty toward a creative, and ultimately recuperative, representation of heredity that resolves scientific fact into the aestheticized image of “Nemesis”: the Greek spirit of retribution who both “rob[s] energy of its freedom and activity of its choice” and gives us, in recompense, “gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities...wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other, and passions that war against themselves.”²²⁵ Like Pater’s *Giaconda*, who emblemizes the modern “idea of humanity as...summing up in itself all modes of thought and life,” Wilde’s hereditary soul is immortal and vampiric—a denizen of “fearful places” and “ancient sepulchers” who has suffered “many maladies” and committed “curious sins.”²²⁶ “And so,” Gilbert proceeds, “it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead”; similarly, the “soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity” but a kind of palimpsest upon which is written the experiences and desires of our ancestors.²²⁷

In “The Critic as Artist,” the conception of culture that Gilbert derives from hereditary science is at once rational and surprisingly democratic, even as it endangers the individualism

²²³ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177.

²²⁴ Pater, “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci,” *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1869): 507; Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 157.

²²⁵ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177.

²²⁶ Pater, “Notes on Leonardo da Vinci,” 507; Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177.

²²⁷ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 177.

that Wilde values so highly elsewhere.²²⁸ Gilbert's mystical characterization of heredity continually conflates mythological imagery with the technical idioms of modern science: heredity, in his articulation, is both a deity and a "scientific principle" that presides over the "transmission of racial experiences."²²⁹ As in his North American lectures, Wilde also underscores the democratic ramifications of his approach to hereditary culture. In Gilbert's scientific view, what we call the imagination "is simply concentrated race-experience," and every member of the race, at least in theory, enjoys equal access to this well of accumulated emotional capacities.²³⁰ Gilbert's use of "race," furthermore, leaves the precise criterion for membership ambiguous. In an unstated homage to Allen's essay "The Celt in English Art," for instance, Gilbert traces the "strange Renaissance" of aestheticism to a distinctly Celtic "creative instinct," but he suggests that anyone may follow the Celt's example.²³¹ With the proper critical training and the right artistic stimulation, he implies, our human capacity for imagination allows us all "to escape from our experience, and to realize the experiences of those who are greater than we are"; since we all have the ability to "see the dawn through Shelley's eyes" or "wander with [Keats's] Endymion," we can all potentially transcend those "ignoble" circumstances that "mar the perfection of our development."²³²

Most important for Wilde's utopian thinking, Gilbert's theory of a heritable culture also reveals a promising method for the conscious and progressive advancement of culture, not through "action"—which is always overdetermined by biological and environmental factors—

²²⁸ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 178.

²²⁹ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 177-78.

²³⁰ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 178.

²³¹ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 193.

²³² Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 177-78.

but through the concerted exercise of what he calls the “critical spirit.”²³³ Like Pater’s titular hero in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Gilbert’s “true man of culture” interrogates his hereditary patrimony and learns, “by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection,” how to “separate the work that has distinction from the work that has it not.”²³⁴ In this way, the critic makes “instinct self-conscious and intelligent”: that is, he analyzes his latent hereditary impulses, exteriorizes these indwelling instincts, and finally seizes control over an evolutionary process that structurally resembles sexual selection (sexual selection, after all, consists in the same procedures of passive consideration and “rejection” that Gilbert’s critic performs, only on a larger scale).²³⁵ The introspective “perfecting of [one]self” that Gilbert upholds as the critic’s only aim paradoxically becomes the very means by which the critic influences his wider milieu, because the critic, at the same time that he perfects himself, also “creat[es] in [the age] new desires and appetites” by “lending it his larger vision and his nobler moods”²³⁶ Sexual selection, as Wilde acknowledges, invests immense evolutionary power in the accumulated “desires and appetites” of individuals—to such a degree that Gilbert predicts that the critic will spearhead humankind’s evolution into a more enlightened species.²³⁷ (At the conclusion of “The Critic as Artist,” scientific accounts of culture furnish not only a philosophical basis for a theory of modern criticism, but also concrete examples of the critical spirit at work. In response to Ernest’s claim that criticism is “sterile,” Gilbert credits the work of two “critics” for making the nineteenth century “one of the most important eras in the progress of the world”: the first is Ernest Renan, the French Bible scholar

²³³ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 178.

²³⁴ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 178.

²³⁵ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 178.

²³⁶ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 197.

²³⁷ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 205.

who published a controversial biography of the historical Jesus in 1863, and the second is Darwin.²³⁸) In its rhetoric as well as its philosophy, “The Critic as Artist” recaptures some of the optimism of “The English Renaissance of Art”: in the intervening nine years, Wilde had only magnified the evolutionary importance of the independent and unorthodox personality.

In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* shortly before Wilde published a revised version of “The Critic as Artist” in *Intentions*, Wilde envisions ways in which we might “reconstruct society” so as to nurture more of these generative personalities.²³⁹ To this end, “The Soul of Man” picks up where “The Critic as Artist” left off: by praising those exemplary writers, such as Darwin, Renan, and Keats, who pursued their intellectual impulses without regard to the “clamorous claims of others.”²⁴⁰ By breaking free of artistic and intellectual tradition, Wilde enthuses, these “great” men “realise[d]” their “perfection,” to their “own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world.”²⁴¹ Wilde subsequently admits that these men are exceptional: “the majority of people...find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, [and] by hideous starvation,” and this “unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want” moreover compels them to do “work that is quite uncongenial to them.”²⁴² An individual in these circumstances, he observes, “is merely the infinitesimal atom of a force that...crushes him” and, in doing so, effectively bars him from ever achieving “grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization, or culture, or

²³⁸ In his earlier discussion of sin, Gilbert loosely quotes Renan as saying that “nature...cares little about chastity”—a summation that Wilde might have easily applied to Darwin’s *Descent* as well. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 205, n. 148.11.

²³⁹ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 232.

²⁴⁰ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 231.

²⁴¹ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 231.

²⁴² Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 233.

refinement in pleasures, or joy of life.”²⁴³ In Wilde’s representation of capitalism, which afflicts even the wealthy with its “demoralising” obligations, the compulsion to “sordid preoccupation” and “endless industry” seems as pervasive and inexorable as physical law.²⁴⁴

For Wilde, the only solution to the widespread oppression of the individual—a solution that he frames in the aesthetic discourse of the critic rather than the sentimental register of the “misdirected” altruist—is the comprehensive reorganization of society according to socialist principles.²⁴⁵ Similarly to Allen, Wilde merges socialism and individualism into a progressive political philosophy by drawing on an eclectic assortment of scientific ideas, including Spencer’s conception of organic evolution, Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, and Clifford’s iconoclastic vitalism. Socialism, Wilde explains, “will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community” by “converting private property into public wealth” and “substituting cooperation for competition.”²⁴⁶ In this way, socialism will “give Life” what Wilde calls “its proper basis and its proper environment” and allow the “disturbing and disintegrating force” of individualism to thrive.²⁴⁷ This individualist spirit will, in turn, combat “monotony of type, slavery of custom, [and] tyranny of habit,” thereby bringing “Life to its highest mode of perfection.”²⁴⁸ Wilde’s adoption of Spencer’s idiom of perfectibility here is strategic rather than naïve: Wilde was sufficiently familiar with Darwin to understand that the systems of competition Wilde associated

²⁴³ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 233-34.

²⁴⁴ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 234.

²⁴⁵ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 231.

²⁴⁶ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 233.

²⁴⁷ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 233.

²⁴⁸ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 233, 250.

with capitalism were inseparable from biological existence. Instead, his deference to Spencerian sociology—which was founded, as Wilde notes in his *Commonplace Book*, on a “real analogy between the individual and the social organism”—is part of the essay’s concerted aestheticization of organic “Life.”²⁴⁹ Spencer’s organismic metaphor for society, like Clifford’s concept of the “tribal self,” reifies socialism’s communitarian ideals and thus enables Wilde to postulate a rational alternative to what he calls the “stress of competition and struggle for place.”²⁵⁰

In this regard, Wilde’s vision of a socialist revolution mirrors his aspirations about aesthetics and its intervention in human evolution: just as aesthetics entail alternative evolutionary processes that privilege diversity, spontaneity, and pleasure over the exigencies of survival, socialism “substitut[es]” stable communalism for the brutality and volatility of capitalism. Consequently, Wilde also tacitly relies on Darwinian sexual selection in “The Soul of Man,” although the theory is more problematic here than in “The Critic as Artist.” A beneficial side-effect of the abolition of private property, Wilde observes in “The Soul of Man,” is the consequent disappearance of “marriage in its present form.”²⁵¹ Like Allen in *Philistia* and “Falling in Love,” Wilde predicts that the liberated assertion of personality in sexual matters will lead not to anarchy, but to a more perfect social order: “individualism,” he writes, “converts the abolition of legal restraint into a form of freedom that will help the full development of personality, and make the love of man and woman more wonderful, more beautiful, and more

²⁴⁹ Wilde, “Commonplace Book,” 109.

²⁵⁰ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 250.

²⁵¹ As Sally Ledger notes, and as we have seen in relation to Allen’s polemical work, denunciations of traditional marriage such as Wilde’s angered a “puritanical strand” in the fin-de-siècle women’s movement, which cleaved to more conservative notions of sexual purity. Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 243; Sally Ledger, “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism,” in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33.

ennobling.”²⁵² In a provocative application of Biblical exegesis, Wilde vindicates his vision of sexual liberation by looking to the story of Jesus and the adulteress, who was forgiven “not because she repented, but because her love was so intense and wonderful” that it fulfilled the higher ethical and evolutionary aim of self-development.²⁵³ Yet, it is important to note that “The Soul of Man,” unlike “The Critic as Artist,” never mentions sexual selection explicitly. This relative reticence, I suggest, speaks to Wilde’s unresolved reservations about the theory’s basis in heterosexual reproduction. As Davis notes, and as I will elaborate in my discussion of Lee in the next chapter, Wilde and other queer aesthetes had an ambivalent relationship to evolutionary theory: even as evolutionary accounts of beauty corroborated their optimistic aestheticism, the coercive heteronormativity of sexual selection threatened to spoil these utopian projections of generational progress. In this light, Wilde’s ambiguous reference to the “love of man and woman” not only sidesteps potential accusations of sexual immorality (which critics such as Stutfield leveled at Wilde regardless) but also purposefully dissociates the salutary aspect of aesthetic and romantic desire from its reproductive functions.²⁵⁴

Through its strenuous efforts to reshape our perception of material reality—which recall Pater’s and Clifford’s work from the 1870s and 1880s—“The Soul of Man” finally imagines an expressly “Utopian” evolutionary future without having to rely on Allen’s eugenic reasoning. Consider, by contrast, Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”: in that essay, Wilde dismisses nature’s “curious crudities” and interprets its aesthetic “defects” as evidence of a general “lack of

²⁵² Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 243.

²⁵³ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 242-43.

²⁵⁴ Wilde’s maneuver is also broadly based in Spencer’s biology. As his biographer Mark Francis observes, Spencer thought that the “shape of life reached its perfection in the individual adult form, a form that was often damaged or destroyed by reproduction.” In contrast to Darwinian evolution, Spencer’s theory relied more on the concept of moving equilibrium than on heredity and sex. In a way, Wilde synthesizes Darwin’s naturalization of sexual pleasure with Spencer’s focus on the energy and health of the individual organism. Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2007), 191.

design,” which the artistic imagination alone can remedy.²⁵⁵ In “The Soul of Man,” however, Wilde occludes nature’s shortcomings by stressing the ways in which beauty, individuality, and perfection are immanent in evolutionary order. Individualism, he claims in a reference to Spencerian biology, “comes naturally and inevitably out of man,” because “it is the differentiation to which all organisms grow” and the “perfection that is inherent in every mode of life.”²⁵⁶ Instead of positioning individual freedom and aesthetic pleasure in opposition to nature, as he does in “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde heralds individualism as the highest manifestation of the laws of organic growth: “evolution,” he asserts, “is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards Individualism.”²⁵⁷ By redefining evolutionary process in this way, Wilde can declare avarice and jealousy unnatural qualities resulting from social and economic constructs that suppress humankind’s natural cooperative instincts. To be “natural,” conversely, is to be “absolutely unselfish” in one’s sympathies, which spontaneously extend to life’s “joy and beauty and energy” as well as its “sores and maladies.”²⁵⁸ Socialism, he concludes, is the political prerequisite for this natural process of individuation: by emancipating individuals from the brutalizing constraints of natural selection and the free market, socialism will pave the way for the unfettered exercise of choice that, as Allen had shown, was necessary for both personal and evolutionary progress. But in “The Soul of Man,” Wilde argues that the self-perfection of the individual spreads to the rest of humankind through the abstruse, osmotic workings of cultural heredity and social equilibration, not through sexual reproduction.

²⁵⁵ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” 74.

²⁵⁶ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 263.

²⁵⁷ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 263.

²⁵⁸ Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” 264-65.

In a less overtly polemical, but potentially more utopian way, Wilde further reflects on the social possibilities of aesthetic self-cultivation in his fairy tale “The Young King,” the first story from his collection *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). While Wilde’s turn to the fairy tale in many ways emphasizes the impracticality of his utopian vision, the tale’s fantastic elements also sharpen his condemnation of the social conditions that render his utopia unobtainable. As Jack Zipes argues, Wilde contributed to the ongoing radicalization of the fairy tale genre, a trend in children’s literature that the aesthete inherited from mid nineteenth-century reformists such as Morris and Charles Kingsley (I would also add Clifford to this tradition).²⁵⁹ At the end of the nineteenth century, Wilde and other children’s authors honed the reform-minded fairy tale into what Zipes calls “social dynamite,” artfully designed to “subvert” traditional modes of childhood “socialization by posing infinite textual possibilities for the subjects/readers to define themselves against the background of finite choices proposed by society.”²⁶⁰ In this context, the hermeneutic instability of “The Young King”—Jarlath Killeen identifies a “divide” between critics who focus on the story’s exploration of homosexual desire and those who highlight its status as a socialist text—is a continuation of the political critique that Wilde articulates in “The Soul of Man.”²⁶¹ For Wilde, the fairy tale was a fitting medium for criticisms of both the status quo as well as the moralistic bromides that philanthropists offered as solutions to systemic social issues. Through his fantastic representation of the young king’s awakening social consciousness, Wilde ultimately seeks to arouse a utopian and humanistic sensibility in his readers without prescribing a specific course of action—which, after all, would contradict Wilde’s belief in the progressive power of self-development.

²⁵⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 107.

²⁶⁰ Zipes, *Fairy Tales*, 107-08.

²⁶¹ Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 108.

The protagonist of Wilde's "The Young King" stands as an exemplar of the Paterian aesthetic sensibility, which matures into an expansive, humane sympathy at the tale's conclusion. The product of an illicit love-match between a princess and a poor artist, the infant king is hidden away with a goatherd and grows up in "the fine freedom of [a] forest life," far away from the court and its restrictive rules of etiquette.²⁶² After he is recognized as the rightful heir, the boy finds escape from "tedious Court ceremonies" in solitary "journeys of discovery" that take him through the palace's wondrous art collection: he kneels "in real adoration" before a Venetian painting, gazes for hours at a carved figure of Adonis, and kisses a statue of Hadrian's beloved slave Antinous.²⁶³ His fascination with the beautiful male form brings with it an "exquisite joy" in the "magic and the mystery of beautiful things"—an appetite for the ornamental that Wilde elsewhere declared crucial to the critical temperament.²⁶⁴ The king also takes special pleasure in contemplating the golden robe and bejeweled crown and scepter that he will wear at his impending coronation. The night before his coronation, however, the king has a series of dreams in which he witnesses the miseries that a series of weavers, pearl divers, and miners have endured to produce his regalia. Although his courtiers dismiss his dreams, the king refuses to wear "what Grief has fashioned" and attends his coronation in the coarse garb of a goatherd.²⁶⁵ As an angry mob storms the cathedral, bent on assassinating the "dreamer of dreams...who brings shame upon our state," the king is miraculously clad in "fair raiment": the sunbeams

²⁶² Wilde, "The Young King," in *A House of Pomegranates, the Happy Prince, and Other Tales* (London: Methuen, 1908), 3, 6.

²⁶³ Wilde, "The Young King," 6-7.

²⁶⁴ Wilde, "The Young King," 10.

²⁶⁵ Wilde, "The Young King," 20, 24.

weave him a new robe, his plain staff blossoms into “lilies...whiter than pearls,” and his modest garland blooms into a crown of roses “redder than rubies.”²⁶⁶

Like all of Wilde’s fairy tales, “The Young King” defies easy moral interpretation. In doing so, the story resolutely declines to participate in the discourses of reform that Wilde considers complicit in the very injustices they seek to redress. The concluding miracle appears, at first glance, to reward the king’s Christ-like sacrifice of luxury, which will presumably allow him to rectify the abuses he witnesses in his dreams. But the king’s rejection of his accouterments has no practical impact on the suffering of those who made them: a poor man in the crowd astutely reminds the king that workers earned their living by producing the luxuries that he now refuses to wear, and the man further wonders whether anyone can “cure” his poverty by regulating the price of goods.²⁶⁷ The king’s elusive reply—he asks, “are not the rich and the poor brothers?”—acknowledges the idealism of his sartorial statement by evading the worker’s questions about economic policy in favor of a more abstract question about human kinship.²⁶⁸ Once inside the church, the king confronts an equally skeptical bishop, who excuses social injustice as part of the systemic cruelty of the “wide world,” in which the same predatory impulses drive lions to kill and pirates to pillage.²⁶⁹ Again, the youth rebuffs the bishop’s inquiries into his practical plans for remedying the Darwinian brutality of life (“Wilt thou take the leper for thy bedfellow,” the bishop asks, “shall the lion do thy bidding, and the wild boar obey thee?”) by silently kneeling before the cathedral’s beautifully decorated altar.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Wilde, “The Young King,” 26-27.

²⁶⁷ Wilde, “The Young King,” 23.

²⁶⁸ Wilde, “The Young King,” 23.

²⁶⁹ Wilde, “The Young King,” 25.

²⁷⁰ Wilde, “The Young King,” 26.

As this scene suggests, the king's newfound humanitarian sympathy does not require that he exchange his "strange passion for beauty" for the monastic self-denial that Wilde considered fatal to the development of personality.²⁷¹ Instead, the same aesthetic instincts that motivate the king's "real adoration" of Venetian painting also attract him to the "image of Christ" in its "jewelled shrine," flanked by "marvellous vessels of gold."²⁷² The king's love of beauty therefore helps him answer both the worker's and the bishop's functionalist objections to this sympathy. Both of the king's interlocutors attempt to limit his genuine, spontaneous feelings of compassion to what is economically expedient or practically feasible. By reasserting his individuality—in particular, by embracing ever more steadfastly his devotion to sensual beauty—the youth is able to transcend the worker's and the bishop's utilitarian calculus: a calculus that perniciously reinforces the monetization and consequent debasement of individuals. The material signs of divine favor that the king receives on the altar thus serve to hallow his passive aesthetic attitude and legitimize it as an ethical stance. The king's intervention in the social order, such as it is, stems not from his intention to act, but from his decision to "detach [himself] from action": like Gilbert and Zhuangzi, Wilde suggests, the king makes his most powerful critique when he wordlessly opts out of exploitative ideologies that value people merely for what they can produce rather than for who they are.²⁷³

IV. The Eclipse of Happiness in Wilde's Late Work

"The Young King," however, marked the zenith of Wilde's utopianism. While the king's "strange passion for beauty" could generate a triumphant humanitarianism within the confines of

²⁷¹ Wilde, "The Young King," 5.

²⁷² Wilde, "The Young King," 6, 26.

²⁷³ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," 178.

a fairy tale, Wilde's final works—produced in the wake of his conviction and imprisonment in 1895—find no such straightforward correspondence between personal happiness and social regeneration. Both *De Profundis* (composed 1897, published in abridged form 1905) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) bear out the hopelessness that Wilde felt during a two-year sentence that left him, in Ellmann's words, "a broken man."²⁷⁴ In *De Profundis*—the title that Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross, gave to a letter Wilde wrote from prison to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas—the progressive conception of history that Wilde inherited from Spencer and Clifford gives way to his sense of life's "unchangeable pattern."²⁷⁵ "With us time does not progress," Wilde remarks, "it revolves [and] seems to circle around one centre of pain."²⁷⁶ More devastatingly for his evolutionary aestheticism, Wilde conceives of his prison term as a necessary "repentance," not for his crime, but for his previous disavowal of "suffering and sorrow" and his concomitant determination to "live entirely for pleasure."²⁷⁷ Although he maintains that personal growth benefits from wide experience ("to regret one's experiences is to arrest one's own development," he asserts), he abandons the ethic of hedonism that he once confidently derived from both evolutionary aesthetics and Paterian philosophy.²⁷⁸ In retrospect, Wilde observes, "sorrow is the ultimate type both in life and art," and pain is the crucible in which the soul "reach[es] its full stature of perfection."²⁷⁹ Tellingly, Wilde argues that he "foreshadowed" this revelation in a scene from "The Young King," in which the bishop asks the

²⁷⁴ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, xv.

²⁷⁵ Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *De Profundis, 'Epistola: In Carcere Et Vinculis,'* ed. Ian Small, vol. 2 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 159.

²⁷⁶ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 159.

²⁷⁷ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 169.

²⁷⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 166.

²⁷⁹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 170.

kneeling boy, “Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?”²⁸⁰ When he first penned the story, Wilde reflects, the bishop’s question “seemed . . . little more than a phrase”—an empty non sequitur for the king to demolish with the force of his aesthetic personality. In *De Profundis*, a chastened Wilde retroactively defers to the bishop’s orthodox objections to the young king’s utopian sympathy.²⁸¹

Even Wilde’s exaltation in the beauty of “love”—a subject that he broaches frequently in *De Profundis*—fades in his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The ballad reflects on the real-life case of Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who was imprisoned in Reading and hanged for murdering his wife while Wilde was incarcerated there.²⁸² In accordance with the poem’s ballad form—a meter associated with Swinburne’s republican verse as well as older folk traditions—the speaker often adopts a collective voice that speaks on behalf of the mostly working class men who make up the prison’s “outcast” community.²⁸³ Gagnier thus claims that *Reading Gaol* sustains rather than rescinds Wilde’s commitments to political and sexual radicalism: the ballad, in her reading, stands as “a plea for sympathy for outcasts and for their re-entry into society,” “a personal testament to the power of sexual love,” and a “reaffirm[ation] of the dignity of the beloved body.”²⁸⁴ Certainly, the speaker promises that his circle of “broken heart[ed]” men—both the inmates of Reading Gaol and the community of homosexuals who endured increasing hostility in the wake of Wilde’s trial—will finally be vindicated by the “holy hands that took /

²⁸⁰ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 172.

²⁸¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*, 172.

²⁸² Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” in *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, vol. 1 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), n. 119.

²⁸³ Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 212.

²⁸⁴ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 176.

The Thief to Paradise.”²⁸⁵ His description of this redemption, however, falls back upon the mystical language of scripture and its representations of divine judgment rather than the utopian, but still worldly, visions of social progress that Wilde entertained in his earlier works. The ballad’s crushing refrain, “each man kills the thing he loves,” likewise bespeaks Wilde’s newly equivocal attitude toward the erotic.²⁸⁶ The revolutionary promise of sexual selection finally collapses under the weight of both institutional injustice, which the poem concretizes in its descriptions of the insurmountable prison wall, and the destructive, monopolistic drives that the speaker sees as inextricable from sexuality (Wooldridge, the story goes, killed his wife out of sexual jealousy).²⁸⁷ While Wilde, as Gagnier suggests, was perhaps “neither changed nor redeemed” by his punishment, he seemed no longer assured of the individual’s power to resist, much less transform, what he calls “Humanity’s machine.”²⁸⁸

But in the popular consciousness, Wilde’s more famous writings, which he produced before his imprisonment, had already connected aestheticism with a utopian evolutionary sensibility. Inspired by his prodigious undergraduate reading in science, philosophy, and literature, the young Wilde first conceived of aestheticism as a rational reform movement: it was this prophecy of imminent social renovation that the “Apostle of Aestheticism”—armed with a pseudo-religious exuberance that channeled the late Clifford—carried with him to North America in the early 1880s. In the late 1880s, as aestheticism failed to deliver on its reformist potential, Wilde found new avenues for his social concerns in long-term projections of evolutionary improvement. In the meantime, Allen had posited a causal link between aesthetic

²⁸⁵ Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 215.

²⁸⁶ Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 196.

²⁸⁷ Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 200.

²⁸⁸ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 231; Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 214.

pleasure and evolutionary advancement by creatively synthesizing Darwinian sexual selection with Spencerian conceptions of play; on these biological grounds, Allen further theorized the ways in which socialist reform might create socioeconomic conditions more conducive to generative self-gratification. Although Wilde's detractors often charged him with a nihilistic selfishness, his exhortations to individualism, as well as his own iconic performance of the aesthetic lifestyle, were motivated by his deeply held conviction that the cultivation and expression of one's unique desires could radically transform society for the better. Wilde and Allen, then, launched an explicitly political iteration of evolutionary aestheticism, one that applied Pater's and Clifford's relatively abstract ideals of the receptive temperament toward the most pressing social and economic issues of the day. As we will see in the next chapter, Lee and her circle adapted the tacitly ethical (and, at times, moral) elements of evolutionary aestheticism into psychological theories of artistic encounter that persisted long after the fin de siècle.

Chapter 4
“Art for the Sake of Life”:
The “Life-Enhancing” Aesthetics of Vernon Lee and Bernard Berenson

A self-described “believ[er] in scientific method, in human development, and in evolutionary morality,” the cultural critic Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) continuously grappled with a tension between the corporeal origins of beauty and her own hope that art might elevate humankind by making us “more and more different from the original brutes that we were.”¹ As a result, her early work often exhibits a profound ambivalence toward the aesthetic legacy of her mentor, Walter Pater. In *Belcaro* (1881), for instance, Lee concludes that beauty “has no moral value,” because aesthetic feeling is entirely a matter of “physical sensation.”² Her reasoning clearly calls to mind Pater’s famous conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), in which he describes experience as a ceaseless stream of physical sense impressions.³ Yet, as Vineta Colby observes, Lee refused to “reduce [art] to hedonism” (the charge that was generally leveled at Pater’s “Conclusion”), and *Belcaro* thus sharply rebukes “the men who go in for art for art’s sake” for “hanker[ing] vaguely after imaginary sensuous stimulation.”⁴ By contrast, Lee’s “Valedictory” to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895)—a retrospective on Pater’s work that appeared a year after his death—modulates her earlier criticism in telling ways. Pater’s image had changed in the fifteen years between *Belcaro* and *Renaissance Fancies*: he had returned to church in his middle age, and his reputation as a serious scholar had largely

¹ Vernon Lee, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,” *Contemporary Review* 41 (1882): 796.

² Lee, “Ruskinism,” in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), 211.

³ Walter Pater, conclusion to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 188.

⁴ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 96; Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” in *Belcaro*, 246, 250.

superseded his notoriety as the author of the controversial *Renaissance*.⁵ In 1893, literary critic Edmund Gosse declared Pater the “first of our living critics,” unrivalled for both his brilliance and his “modesty.”⁶ As she looked back at his life in the “Valedictory,” Lee claimed that Pater had undergone nothing less than a “spiritual evolution” (a loaded word, for Lee) from “aesthete” to “moralist.”⁷ Lee reappraises his central doctrine accordingly: “his conception of art,” she claims, “was inevitably one of art, not for art’s sake, but of art for the sake of life.”⁸ With Lee’s revision of the aesthetic creed in mind, Stefano Evangelista argues that the “Valedictory” marked a “definitive closure” to Lee’s “personal engagement with aestheticism.”⁹

But a closer reading of the “Valedictory” suggests that Lee did not break entirely from Pater’s philosophy. On the contrary, Lee implies that her mantra, “art for the sake of life,” only hews closer to the aesthetic principles that inspired her teacher’s misguided coinage of “art for art’s sake” in *The Renaissance*. Like Pater’s *Renaissance*, Lee’s “Valedictory” emphasizes self-cultivation through pleasurable “impression[s].”¹⁰ At times, she pushes Pater’s ideas to the extreme and defends beauty from moral scrutiny in language more extravagant than the comparatively understated *Renaissance*: though beauty may be “united to perverse fashions” and art “employed to adorn the sentiments of maniacs and gaol-birds,” Lee asserts, “the beauty and

⁵ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 77-81.

⁶ Edmund Gosse, “Mr. Walter Pater on Platonism,” *New Review* 8 (1893): 420.

⁷ Lee, “Valedictory,” in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, 1895), 255.

⁸ Lee, “Valedictory,” 259.

⁹ Stefano Evangelista, “Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism,” in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 109.

¹⁰ Lee, “Valedictory,” 258.

the art remain sound.”¹¹ Her “Valedictory,” then, does not reject Paterian aestheticism so much as modify it by intensifying the ethical import of the essentially amoral, because physiological, experience of beauty.

For Lee, this new area of intellectual engagement arose in part from her contact with her colleague and sometime rival, the American connoisseur Bernard Berenson.¹² In *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, which he published in the same year as *Renaissance Fancies*, Berenson upholds an ethic of physical wellbeing that amplifies Pater’s aesthetics through a more recognizable evolutionary diction. The gratification that we receive from beautiful artworks, Berenson maintains, “arises from their power to directly communicate life, to immensely heighten our sense of vitality”; in the presence of an exquisite painting, our very muscles move in sympathy with its figures, and thus “we feel as if the elixir of life, not our own sluggish blood, were coursing through our veins.”¹³ Here, Berenson attributes the spiritual effects of artistic encounter to its stimulation of bodily energy in excess of the requirements for mere survival—an idea of surplus that reminds us of Herbert Spencer’s theory of play. Significantly, Berenson imbues aesthetic encounter with mystical as well as evolutionary value: the experience of the

¹¹ Lee’s gesture toward perversity, insanity, and crime is more reminiscent of Wilde’s work or Pater’s later imaginary portraits. See, for example, my earlier discussion of Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” in which he claims that “sin is impossible” to the cultured lover of beauty. Pater’s late portrait “Apollo in Picardy” (1893) also features scenes of aestheticized violence that seem to depart from the delicate subjects of *The Renaissance*: in “Apollo in Picardy,” a discus thrown by the beautiful Apollyon flies through the air like “a twirling leaf in the wind,” only to “saw through [a] boy’s face, . . . crushing in the tender skull upon the brain.” Lee, “Valedictory,” 251; Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205; Pater, “Apollo in Picardy,” in *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014), 289-90.

¹² Berenson’s Lithuanian parents christened him “Bernhard,” but he changed the spelling to “Bernard” shortly after the U. S. joined WWI: Berenson, who had built a career consulting for prominent American art collectors, felt the original spelling was too Germanic. Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

¹³ Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance: With an Index to their Works* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896), 54-55.

beautiful refines the ugly inefficiencies of real biological life (“our own sluggish blood”) into an aestheticized fantasy of organic perfection (“the elixir of life”).¹⁴

In this final chapter, I trace the evolutionary aestheticism of the late nineteenth century to its culmination in Lee’s and Berenson’s respective works in art history and cultural criticism. In many ways, their notion of the “life-enhancing” qualities of form—a term that Lee occasionally borrowed after Berenson first used it in *Florentine Painters*—mediates between and expands upon the scientific aesthetics of their predecessors, including Pater and Spencer as well as Charles Darwin, Alexander Bain, Oscar Wilde, and Grant Allen.¹⁵ Lee’s and Berenson’s physiological conceptions of aesthetic experience and their investments in science (especially its “promise,” to quote Berenson, “of constant acquisition and perpetual growth”) recall Allen’s and Wilde’s utopian hedonisms.¹⁶ At the same time, Lee recoiled from the “moral anarchy” that she saw in the Renaissance, and she sought an alternative ethics in “our new creed of the perpetual development of the nobler by perpetual elimination of the baser motives of our nature”—a progressive doctrine upon which she hoped to found a “noble religion of choice and improvement.”¹⁷ She eventually settled on a theory of “psychological aesthetics” that she

¹⁴ Elixirs of longevity or immortality were a popular motif in nineteenth century fiction of all kinds, often appearing in conjunction with Orientalist and occult themes. Honoré de Balzac’s *The Elixir of Life* (1830), Robert Browning’s verse drama *Paracelsus* (1835), and H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1886-1887) are a few examples.

¹⁵ As Mandy Gagel recounts, this term became a point of contention between Berenson and the older Lee. Shortly after Lee published her article “Beauty and Ugliness” (1897), co-authored with Kit Anstruther-Thomson, Berenson accused her of stealing ideas he had discussed with her on their visits to various galleries around Italy. Based on her readings of the two historians’ correspondence, Gagel determines that the accusation was motivated by Berenson’s personal dislike for his more established colleague, not by any real violation on Lee’s part. In any case, the dispute quickly cooled and Lee later looked on the incident as a mere “comedy.” Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 64, 70; Mandy Gagel, “1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism: Letters Between Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Mary Costelloe,” *Literary Imagination* 12 (2010): 154, 158, 165.

¹⁶ Berenson, preface to *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894), 3rd ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1907), viii.

¹⁷ Lee, “Valedictory,” 252; “Of Honour and Evolution,” in *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), 183-84.

developed initially in conversation with Berenson, who based his critical practice on the theory that painting stimulated a viewer's "tactile imagination."¹⁸ Lee, in her more exhaustive accounts of aesthetic pleasure, conceived of perception as a holistic physiological and emotional experience: one that activated the observer's entire body, including her brain and her respiratory, circulatory, and nervous systems. Since the perception of form both stimulated and relieved "the most important organs of animal life," the consumption of art fulfilled a crucial function in the "stringent regulation" of the perceiving individual's physical and emotional health.¹⁹ It was through the maintenance and proliferation of healthy bodies that art, for Lee, interceded in the evolution of the species. In this way, Lee's psychological aesthetics sought to rescue Paterian aestheticism from its solipsistic tendencies without resorting either to Allen's aesthetic eugenics or to Wilde's radical, libertarian politics.²⁰

Lee is a pivotal figure in the tradition of evolutionary aestheticism, for several reasons. First, she produced an astoundingly expansive body of writing that spanned multiple literary and scientific fields, and she continued working across disciplines in the early twentieth century, a period when amateur science was losing its cultural authority.²¹ More than any other predecessor or contemporary, Lee brought scientific thought to bear on her aesthetics and historiography. Her histories of the Renaissance and her critiques of Victorian culture enlarged on a range of positivist models of aesthetics, including Theodor Lipps's notion of empathy (or

¹⁸ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 5.

¹⁹ Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," *Contemporary Review* 72 (Oct. 1897): 544.

²⁰ Lee, "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality," 267.

²¹ Almost without exception, the library that Lee left upon her death in 1935 consisted in texts on science, linguistics, philosophy, and social science, indicating her persistent interest in technical disciplines. Lightman helpfully contrasts the professionalization of science in the twentieth century with the relative fluidity of fields in the nineteenth century. Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 272; Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 12-13.

Einfühlung) and Karl Groos's theory of play (which drew, in turn, on Spencer's work). In this regard, she and Berenson (who considered his methods of connoisseurship "scientific") perpetuated the methodologies of Clifford, Allen, and other Victorian science writers well beyond the nineteenth century.²² Since the early 2000s, scholars such as Vineta Colby, Christa Zorn, Patricia Pulham, Catherine Maxwell, and Shafquat Towheed have revived critical interest in the interdisciplinary aspects of Lee's work, which demonstrate her impressive facility for biology, sociology, art history and theory, and psychology. Secondly, Lee was a queer writer, and she associated both socially and professionally with other queer aesthetes such as Wilde, John Addington Symonds, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Michael Field (the joint pseudonym of the lesbian aunt-niece duo Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper). Her place within this milieu urges us to consider the ways in which these writers—all of whom accepted Darwin's theory of sexual selection—balanced their belief in evolutionary science with tastes that, as Whitney Davis observes, "seem[ed] to have derived from nonprocreative aesthetic attractions and interests."²³ Lastly, Lee's affiliation with the Bloomsbury Group after the turn of the century forced her to engage with modernism's shifting conceptions of both evolutionism and aesthetics. By studying the trajectory of her ideas, we can better understand the afterlife of evolutionary aestheticism in the twentieth century and its important intervention in modernist aesthetics and modern-day literary criticism—subjects I discuss in the coda to this dissertation.

Lee's lifelong fascination with science and its promise of a unified theory of art had its origin in her cosmopolitan childhood. Born in France to British parents, Lee grew up primarily in Italy, where she—like the titular youth of her essay "The Child in the Vatican" (1881)—fell

²² Berenson, preface to *Venetian Painters*, xii.

²³ Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 156-57.

“intensely, passionately,” even painfully “in love” with art.²⁴ As a girl, she toured Florentine galleries, attended shows at the Paris Opera, and rambled around Rome with her close friend, the soon-to-be famous portrait painter John Singer Sargent.²⁵ Various tutors and family members supplemented Lee’s independent aesthetic education with rigorous training in philosophy, rhetoric, music, and mathematics.²⁶ As Christa Zorn recounts, Lee’s mother strenuously impressed on the young Lee a “general belief in the soundness of rational thought,” while Lee’s older half-brother, the poet Eugene Lee-Hamilton, took an interest in cultivating his sister’s evident genius for comparative history.²⁷ In keeping with her upbringing, her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880), presents a “heterogeneous” picture of the “constitution and evolution of various arts compared with one another.”²⁸ Her use of “evolution” is no coincidence: *Studies of the Eighteenth Century* relies on a Spencerian narrative of organic development that tracks Italian literature and music through phases of “spontaneous national growth” and natural “decay.”²⁹ Lee’s formidable synthesis of art history with a general account of the religious, political, and philosophical “character of the eighteenth century” also indicates some familiarity with Spencer’s sociology, which treated culture and society as scientifically

²⁴ The title and subject of her essay, which follows the psychological development of a young aesthete, clearly pays homage to Pater’s “The Child in the House” (1878). Lee, “The Child in the Vatican,” in *Belcaro*, 26.

²⁵ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 8-10.

²⁶ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 9.

²⁷ Lee-Hamilton was one inspiration for the pseudonym that Lee adopted in the 1870s. Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 3; Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 12.

²⁸ Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (London: W. Satchell, 1880), 1.

²⁹ Lee, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century*, 138, 75.

explicable “organisms.”³⁰ In her early historical work, the figure of the social organism provides Lee a basis for asserting the role that art necessarily plays in the rise and fall of civilizations. Her later, more sweeping statements on the evolutionary stakes of artistic creation and consumption arose from these preliminary applications of scientific method to art history.

More important, Lee’s conversance with scientific theory powerfully motivated her early aestheticism, which she explores in *Belcaro*. In “Ruskinism,” she rejects John Ruskin’s claim “that the basis of art is moral” and “that the whole system of the beautiful is a system of moral emotions, moral selections, [and] moral appreciations.”³¹ By “making the physical the mere reflexion of the moral,” Lee continues, Ruskin perpetuates a charmed but mistaken perception about the “true state of things.”³² In *Modern Painters* (1843-60), as we have seen, Ruskin claimed that nature evidenced the omnipotence and generosity of its divine creator; the painter’s highest duty, he asserted, was to capture nature as faithfully as possible, in a spirit of religious “adoration.”³³ Contrary to this worldview, Lee counters, “Sin and Pain and Injustice” exist “not despite Nature, but through Nature.”³⁴ Thanks to Darwin, she continues, we now know that destruction and decline are written into the very fabric of nature, and “evil and good,” far from opposing one another in heroic contest, join together in “the same great work of action and reaction.”³⁵ Her clear-sighted knowledge of this messy “world of reality”—in which “evil leads

³⁰ As George Stocking notes, and as we have seen in previous chapters, Spencer’s application of evolutionary logic to organic as well as “superorganic” entities was hugely influential in late Victorian historical, sociological, and anthropological thought. George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 135.

³¹ Lee, “Ruskinism,” 205.

³² Lee, “Ruskinism,” 206.

³³ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1848), 56, 422.

³⁴ Lee, “Ruskinism,” 206.

³⁵ Lee, “Ruskinism,” 207.

to good” and the “abstract instinct for beauty” can be reduced to a “mere nerve tickle”—compels Lee to separate beauty from morality and truth:

A true thing need by no means be a beautiful thing: that generations of men are doomed to sin and misery is no good fact; that millions of putrifying [*sic*] bodies lie beneath the ground is no beautiful fact, but both are nevertheless true facts, true with that truth of which science, had it perception of good and of beauty as well as mere perception of truth, should say, “I recognize, but I shudder”—And thus also is it with the good and the beautiful: they have no connection except that each, in its kingdom, is the best, the desirable, that for which we should all strive, that for which the whole of nature, despite its inextricable evils, seems to crave and to struggle.³⁶

In a remarkable echo of Pater’s “Poems by William Morris” (1868), “Ruskinism” logically deduces its counter-natural aesthetic from scientific conceptions of the natural world. Similar to Pater and Clifford, Lee’s scientific refutation of Ruskin’s moralism leads neither to despairing quietism nor to cynical endorsements of debauchery. Her meditations instead prompt a tacit call for aesthetic and moral self-perfection—one that she would repeat, with increasing urgency, in her later work. By yoking this personal aspiration for excellence to a universal tendency for the “whole of nature” to progress, Lee also hints at a more encouraging cosmic vision that both recalls Clifford’s essays and presages Mathilde Blind’s *Ascent of Man* (1889).³⁷

Belcaro expands upon this responsibility to “strive” for “the best” in “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” which both reinforces and complicates the aesthetics of “Ruskinism.” “Poetic Morality” consists in an imagined conversation between the enlightened aesthete Baldwin—an alter ego of Lee’s that appeared in many of her subsequent books—and his younger companion

³⁶ Lee, “Ruskinism,” 207-208.

³⁷ By 1880, Lee was likely aware of Clifford’s work; in any case, she had certainly read “On the Scientific Basis of Morals” (1875) and “Cosmic Emotion” (1877) before 1882, when she quoted both essays in the epigraph to her polemic, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists.” Specifically, she quotes Clifford’s definition of “good” action as one that “makes an organic thing more organic” and moves the individual “further away from those intermediate forms through which [the] race has passed.” She also includes a passage from “Morals” in which Clifford denounces utilitarian ethics. Lee met Blind in 1881, and by 1882 she claimed to be “good friends” with the poet. Lee, “Vivisection,” 788; Lee to Matilda Paget, 20-22 June 1881, in “Selected Letters of Vernon Lee (1856-1935),” ed. Mandy Gagel (PhD diss, Boston University, 2008), 215; Lee to Matilda Paget, 27-28 June 1882, in “Selected Letters,” 260.

Cyril, who feels guilty about wanting to write poetry “when there is so much evil to remove” from the world (as Emily Harrington has pointed out, Cyril “roughly corresponds” with Robinson, the poet and intimate friend to whom Lee dedicated *Belcaro*).³⁸ Baldwin, in anticipation of Wilde’s aphoristic Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” (1890, revised 1891), responds to Cyril’s dilemma with an apparent paradox: while the “only true religion” is “the religion of good,” Baldwin insists, “the creation of perfect beauty is the highest aim of the artist.”³⁹ Baldwin resolves this paradox by discriminating between two forms of ethical and moral “good.” He explains that individuals can “do good” either by “destroying evil” or by “creat[ing] good”; scientists, doctors, and social reformers pursue good by removing falsehood and pain from the world, while the artist “not merely removes pain, but adds pleasure to our lives.”⁴⁰ For this reason, Cyril really “defraud[s] the world” of his poetic gifts—that is, his capacity to give readers “immense and long-lasting pleasure”—when he insists on pursuing practical matters to appease his conscience.⁴¹ In Baldwin’s reasoning, Cyril does the most good when he follows his inclination and writes poems that transport his audience “away for a moment from the struggle with evil”: his poetry is morally and socially instrumental precisely because it gives his readers, as he needlessly fears, “useless and selfish pleasure.”⁴² Though it rejects the label of aestheticism, “Poetic Morality” offers a moralistic gloss on many of Pater’s aesthetic ideas. Baldwin’s insistence that poetry provide a respite from “struggle,” for instance, reiterates Pater’s previous injunction to the artist to “give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom”

³⁸ Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” 232; Emily Harrington, “The Strain of Sympathy: A. Mary F. Robinson, *The New Arcadia*, and Vernon Lee,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 61 (2006): 78.

³⁹ Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” 241.

⁴⁰ Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” 242.

⁴¹ Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” 243.

⁴² Lee, “A Dialogue on Poetic Morality,” 245.

that Darwinian nature denies.⁴³ Likewise, Baldwin's variation on "art for art's own sake"—"I should have been more precise," he tells Cyril, "in saying 'art for beauty's sake'"—clarifies Pater's doctrine without refuting it. As Regenia Gagnier and Ian Small have shown us (and as we have seen in the previous three chapters), late-Victorian aesthetics increasingly focused on aesthetic feeling rather than art objects: by displacing all of the transcendent possibilities that Pater ascribed to "art" onto the subjective perception of "beauty," Lee upholds the critical practices that Pater spearheaded in the 1870s.

As Zorn observes, however, Lee nonetheless "frowned upon 'immoral' artists and all forms of (male) egocentrism or self-indulgence."⁴⁴ Baldwin, who otherwise agrees with much of Pater's philosophy, denounces Algernon Charles Swinburne's poems as "morbid and obscene," and he chides Walt Whitman and other "mystico-sensual" poets (whom Pater, Clifford, Allen, and Wilde all appreciated) for "calling nasty things by beautiful names."⁴⁵ In Baldwin's reluctance to beautify concepts and actions he considers "nasty," Lee begins to articulate her unique position within late Victorian debates concerning the regenerative or degenerative social possibilities of art. To the extent that Lee agreed with Pater's (and later Wilde's and Allen's) emphasis on aesthetic pleasure, she absolutely belongs to the aesthetic school of thought that Small credits for the subjective turn in criticism, and which Gagnier associates with the consumerist figure of the "pleasured body."⁴⁶ But Kristin Mahoney rightly points out that Lee

⁴³ Walter Pater, "Winckelmann," *Westminster Review* 31 (1867): 110.

⁴⁴ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 8.

⁴⁵ Lee, "Of Doubts and Pessimism," in *Baldwin*, 349; "A Dialogue on Poetic Morality," 260.

⁴⁶ Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 9-10; Regenia Gagnier, "Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 136.

“cannot be described as submitting uncritically to this tradition.”⁴⁷ Instead, Mahoney explains, Lee “develop[ed] a method of consumption that engage[d] with modern theories of aesthetic pleasure and desire while preserving what was redemptive and ethical in previous theories of appreciation,” including those of John Ruskin and William Morris.⁴⁸

Lee’s negotiation of these two paradigms—the hedonic aesthetics of Allen, Wilde, and Pater versus the almost ascetic self-discipline of Ruskin (and what she sees as the older, spiritually “evolved” Pater)—occurred over the course of years. Consequently, many of her works from the 1880s evince her as-yet-unresolved stance toward these scientific and redemptive aesthetics. Lee began seriously grappling with this tension after she moved to London in 1881, where she was “taken up” (as she put it in a letter to her brother) by the Paters, Leslie Stephen, and W. K. Clifford’s widow, Lucy Clifford.⁴⁹ Lee’s writings in this period—her first, unsuccessful novel *Miss Brown* (1884), her essay collections *Euphorion* (1884) and *Baldwin* (1886), and several ghost stories from her collection *Hauntings* (1890)—offer us glimpses into her ongoing theorization of evolutionary aestheticism, which prompted her intense interest in both psychology and Berenson’s connoisseurship in the 1890s.

Lee’s circle in London in the early 1880s was a diverse *mélange* of writers, editors, aesthetes, scientists, and revolutionaries, many of whom shared her interest in liberal causes. When she first arrived in the city, Lee was still in her early twenties and relatively little known—William Michael Rossetti and Oscar Wilde, she was surprised to discover, “were the only two creatures who seemed to have heard of [her] as a writer”—but she quickly cultivated friendships with more established Victorian writers such as Robert Browning and the feminist critic Frances

⁴⁷ Kristin Mahoney, “Haunted Collections: Vernon Lee and Ethical Consumption,” *Criticism* 48 (2006): 42.

⁴⁸ Mahoney, “Haunted Collections,” 43.

⁴⁹ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 78; Lee to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 5 July 1882, in “Selected Letters,” 268.

Power Cobbe.⁵⁰ Her many literary acquaintances soon grew to include Rossetti, Wilde, Walter Pater and his sisters Clara and Hester, Mathilde Blind (whose poetry she and Robinson greatly admired), and Edmund Gosse. Lee also befriended Lucy Clifford, whose salon included many of her late husband's friends and, later in the century, the American novelist Henry James and his brother, the psychologist William James.⁵¹ The young Lee often described "Mrs Clifford" and her friends in unflattering terms: "She is an agreeable sort," Lee wrote to her mother, but she "lives at the world's end, & the visit cost me 5 shillings, certainly more than it was worth."⁵² As we learn in Lee's letters, Clifford also introduced Lee to several prominent scientific figures, including the science writer Edward Clodd (also a close friend of Allen's), the rationalist Leslie Stephen (whom Lee described as a "solemn, scraggy lantern jawed Rubens type"), and T. H. Huxley (a "little apish creature," Lee remarked, "talking atheism sixteen to the dozen").⁵³

Lee's lively caricatures aside, she incorporated the ideas of her London milieu into her ongoing formulation of aestheticism. Surrounded by W. K. Clifford's friends and admirers, Lee developed an appreciation for his almost religious sense of responsibility for future generations (a posterity that, as we saw in the second chapter, he often personified as "Man"). The mathematician, who died several years before Lee moved to London, makes brief, but significant, veiled appearances in her first novel, *Miss Brown*. The novel tells the story of Anne Brown, a poor nursery maid who attracts the sexual attention and financial patronage of wealthy aesthete Walter Hamlin. The statuesquely beautiful Anne, soon the toast of Hamlin's bohemian

⁵⁰ Lee to Matilda Paget, 25 June 1881, in "Selected Letters," 218.

⁵¹ Lucy Clifford enjoyed an especially long and warm friendship with Henry James. M. Chisholm, *Such Silver Currents: The Story of William and Lucy Clifford* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2002), 85-99.

⁵² Lee to Matilda Paget, 25 June 1881, in "Selected Letters," 218.

⁵³ Lee to Matilda Paget, 25 June 1881, in "Selected Letters," 218.

set, is quickly disillusioned with the callous frivolity of aesthetic society. Seeking to rescue Anne from her melancholy, her principled and philanthropic cousin Richard takes her to the lectures of a young philosopher who clearly resembles Clifford: the speaker, Andrew Richmond, is “a red-haired young man of genius, dying of consumption, who had for truth and righteousness a passion such as other men may have for sport.”⁵⁴ Richmond shares many of Clifford’s ethical principles as well as his distinctive fervor and sickly constitution; Anne listens, enraptured, as he touts the “value of each good impulse carried out, and each evil one resisted, in making morality more natural and spontaneous in the world.”⁵⁵ Inspired by Richmond’s “secular and scientific religion,” Anne escapes the Bunyanesque “slough of desponding pessimism” into which she has fallen and finds instead a “new faith in the triumph of right” and a “new belief in the necessity of doing one’s duty for the sake of mankind and of progress.”⁵⁶ Lee’s description of Richmond as a much-slandered “prophet of the advent of justice” also recalls Clifford’s fierce rejection of “fatalism” and his contentious posthumous reputation.⁵⁷

Beyond demonstrating her interest in the mathematician’s legacy, Lee’s fictionalized Clifford brings to our attention some of her anxieties about the libertarian strain that Clifford and Pater (and later Wilde and Allen) injected into aesthetic and evolutionary philosophy. While Richmond’s call for moral “spontane[ity]” brings to mind Clifford’s endorsement of “quasi-spontaneous...action from within,” Lee omits Clifford’s concomitant advocacy for social,

⁵⁴ Lee, *Miss Brown* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1884), 2:332.

⁵⁵ Lee, *Miss Brown*, 3:54.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Miss Brown*, 2:333.

⁵⁷ Gowan Dawson, in *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability*, discusses at length the attempts of Clifford’s friends to sanitize his image after his death. Lee, *Miss Brown* 3:54; Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” *Nineteenth Century* 2 (1877): 417, 426.

sexual, and political “freedom.”⁵⁸ For Clifford, progressive evolutionary processes depended on the “selection of *sports*,” or extraordinary organisms whose deviances from the norm open up possible avenues for the future development of the species.⁵⁹ He thus urged others to defer to their own “inner core” of “conscience and reason” (a phrase that Lee uses in her sketch of Richmond), which both tapped into the hereditary “spirit of man” and induced individuals to act in novel and potentially generative ways.⁶⁰ His stringent standards of ethical good, in other words, rejected stultifying codes of moral conduct in favor of a radical individualism that Allen and Wilde later incorporated into their highly politicized aestheticism.

By contrast, Lee’s Richmond cautions against “yielding to the preferences of [one’s] own nature” and “departing from the moral rules of the world” in the mistaken belief that, in doing so, one is merely “following the highest law.”⁶¹ This extreme moral self-determinism, he adds, is the real “danger of our epoch of moral transition.”⁶² Richmond’s alarm here smacks more of Ruskin’s critiques of modernity—one thinks of Ruskin’s warning against the “love of pleasure” that leads to the “greatest catastrophes” of the race—than Clifford’s breathless excitement about the impending “kingdom of Man.”⁶³ As Colby observes, the often humorless satire of *Miss Brown* especially targeted those who would pervert “the lofty Platonic aestheticism of Walter Pater into sensuality and hedonism,” and Lee’s concerns about this hazard emerge in her

⁵⁸ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 425.

⁵⁹ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 426.

⁶⁰ Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 428.

⁶¹ Lee, *Miss Brown* 3:55.

⁶² Lee, *Miss Brown* 3:55.

⁶³ Ruskin delivered some of his most famous social critiques in his 1864 lectures “Of Kings’ Treasuries” and “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which were published together as *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). Ruskin, “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” in *Sesame and Lilies* (London: John Wiley & Son, 1865), 8; Clifford, “Cosmic Emotion,” 429.

characterization of Richmond (in another departure from the real Clifford, Richmond never cites those “mystico-sensual” poets Whitman or Swinburne).⁶⁴ By transmuting Clifford’s ethic of freedom into Richmond’s concession to the “moral rules of the world,” Lee attempts to rewrite one of the founding expressions of evolutionary aestheticism in order to downplay its intimations of licentiousness. Her qualified representation of Clifford is one of several instances in which the novel vacillates between radical appeals to individual (and, Zorn argues, particularly female) self-assertion and worried injunctions against the dangers of runaway self-indulgence.⁶⁵ We also see this uncertainty in the novel’s uneven attitude toward aesthetic art: for instance, Anne recoils from the moral bankruptcy of Hamlin’s sketches even as the narrator describes the “flower-like” nakedness and “burning lips” of his figures with Swinburnean relish.⁶⁶ The novel’s inconsistent tone is especially conspicuous in its unexpectedly defeatist ending, in which Anne, only just uplifted by Richmond’s religion of progress, resigns herself to a loveless marriage with Hamlin. The reviews of *Miss Brown* that most bothered Lee pointed out this self-contradiction and led her to wonder privately whether she had written an “immoral book,” guilty of all the offenses for which she would have “execrate[d] Zola or Maupassant.” Lee was so steeped in aesthetic culture that her mission to “moralise the world,” as she reflected in her journal shortly after the novel’s publication, seemed to have resulted in a novel curiously divided against itself.⁶⁷

In many ways, the erratic irony and dour social vision of *Miss Brown* reflected the line of historical research that Lee was pursuing in the early 1880s. The central contradictions that troubled her novel—her dueling commitments to Pater’s aesthetic philosophy and social

⁶⁴ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 102.

⁶⁵ Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 119-20.

⁶⁶ Lee, *Miss Brown*, 3:292.

⁶⁷ Lee, journal entry from 31 Dec. 1884, qtd. in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 110.

amelioration, her desire to remain optimistic in the face of a Darwinian world, her simultaneous belief in the primacy of pleasure in art and its ethical efficacy—also motivate *Euphorion* (1884), a collection of essays about the Italian Renaissance and her fellow Victorians' relationship to the period. As Hilary Fraser reminds us, Victorian poets, novelists, and critics adopted a multiplicity of stances toward the Renaissance—a relatively recent concept that the European historians Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt codified in the 1850s.⁶⁸ Fraser situates Lee within a particularly celebratory tradition of British scholarship, which “represented the Renaissance as the transition from the corrupt and obsolete world view of the Middle Ages to the free and enlightened civilization of the modern world”; although they took differing approaches to the study of history, the aesthetic critics Pater and Symonds also belonged to this tradition.⁶⁹ Despite their affirmations of the Renaissance, Fraser adds, these writers readily acknowledged “the infamous depravity of the period which Ruskin so deplored.”⁷⁰ On the one hand, the Renaissance exemplified to these aesthetes the triumph of scientific and artistic progress—an “onward progress [in] which we still participate,” Symonds wrote in his first volume of *Renaissance in Italy* (1875)—over the entropic decline of the medieval period.⁷¹ On the other hand, episodes of Renaissance history betrayed what Lee called a “horrible moral gangrene” at the heart of sixteenth-century Italian society.⁷² Ruskin, in his influential *Stones of Venice* (1851-53), blamed

⁶⁸ Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1.

⁶⁹ Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 234.

⁷⁰ Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 235.

⁷¹ Symonds reiterated his convictions about modern-day progress later in the same book: “Whether the Utopia of a modern world in which all men shall enjoy the same social, political, and intellectual advantages be realised or not, we cannot doubt that the whole movement of humanity from the Renaissance onward has tended in this direction.” John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 1, *The Age of Despots* (London: Smith, Elder, 1875), 4, 30.

⁷² Lee, “The Sacrifice,” in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), 1:28.

the Venetians’ “unscrupulous and insatiable pursuit of pleasure” for the collapse of their empire, and he furthermore declared this hedonism to be the “consummation” of the Renaissance “spirit.”⁷³ Even Symonds, who boldly defended homosexuality against the opprobrium of mainstream Victorians, denounced Renaissance vice as “shameful.”⁷⁴ It is the apparent “anomaly” of Renaissance history—“seething with good and evil,” as Lee explains, brimming with shocking stories of “assassinations and fratricides” amid its marvelous artworks—that occupies Lee’s *Euphorion*. In particular, her essay “The Sacrifice” deals with the apparent incompatibility of public morality and artistic innovation, one that the Renaissance and the contemporary Aesthetic Movement so forcefully brought to Lee’s attention.

Like Pater, to whom she dedicates *Euphorion*, Lee defines the Renaissance not as a temporal period but as a “condition” produced by the confluence of certain sociopolitical, geographic, demographic, and economic factors.⁷⁵ For Lee, the Renaissance arose wherever “feudal and ecclesiastic” influences, which had “crushed the spontaneous life” of earlier classical revivals, lost their hold over “democratic and secular communities.”⁷⁶ The awakening of civic and humanistic sentiment in these communities, according to Lee’s account, depended on the spread of political and religious freedom; “the great revival of human intelligence and character [could] thoroughly succeed,” she reasons, only where citizens lived a “free political, military,

⁷³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3, *The Fall* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1881), 111-12.

⁷⁴ Symonds’s most famous statement on homosexuality is his essay “A Problem in Greek Ethics,” which he wrote in 1873 and had privately printed ten years later. Shockingly for its time, the essay historicizes and defends the Greek practice of pederasty. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, 408; Sean Brady, *John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 16.

⁷⁵ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 30.

⁷⁶ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 30.

and commercial life.”⁷⁷ Her definition of the Renaissance thus recognizes the necessity of liberty (or as Pater put it, the “sense of freedom”) to social development. Based on Spencer’s model of the social organism, Lee’s notion of social “growth” also contains within it what she poetically calls “the seed of death,” or “that expanding element which develops, ripens, rots, and finally dissolves all living organisms.”⁷⁸ Therefore, it was not “the volition of the Italians” but “the very nature of their political forms” that produced Italy’s violent and anarchic power relations.⁷⁹ As in *Miss Brown*, freedom of conduct in “The Sacrifice” proves a double-edged sword, both allowing the spontaneous self-expression so crucial to Renaissance invention and encouraging the Machiavellian political scheming that led to Italy’s disintegration. For Lee, the Renaissance illustrates the cyclical structure of evolutionary sociology as well as the agon of her aestheticism: “self-cognizance,” “intellectual freedom,” and all its accompanying cultural benefits appeared to Lee (and Pater, Allen, and Wilde, to varying extents) to demand a “heavy price” in the form of a “loss of all moral standard, all fixed public meaning.”⁸⁰

In a departure from the cynicism of *Miss Brown*, however, “The Sacrifice” ultimately affirms the long-term cultural profits of this bargain by recasting the “moral chaos” of the Renaissance into the precious “sacrifice” of the essay’s title.⁸¹ Again, Spencer’s analogy

⁷⁷ As Alison Brown argues, Lee gleaned this notion of the Renaissance as a liminal “phase between feudalism and the rise of nation states” from Burckhardt’s work from the 1860s. Burckhardt, who had helped define the “Renaissance” as such, also saw these political trends mirrored in Renaissance art and literature. In this way, Burckhardt was an important source for Lee’s Renaissance studies, which combine his interest in the material causes of the Renaissance with Pater’s and Symonds’s more abstract discussions of the Renaissance as a kind of spirit or ethos. Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 35; Alison Brown, “Vernon Lee and the Renaissance: From Burckhardt to Berenson,” in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. John E. Law and Lene Østermark-Johansen (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 190.

⁷⁸ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 35.

⁷⁹ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 44.

⁸⁰ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 47.

⁸¹ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 51.

between biological evolution and the evolution of culture, government, and society is instrumental to this reinterpretation of Renaissance history. As in “Ruskinism,” Lee grants that nature’s “system of evolution and progression” inevitably “includes such machinery as hurricanes and pestilence, carnage and misery, superstition and license, Renaissance and Eighteenth Century.”⁸² The imprecise parallelisms of Lee’s sentence position the Renaissance and the eighteenth century in vaguely homologous relationships to both cultural trends (“superstition and license”) and Malthusian natural phenomena (“pestilence” and “carnage”). This syntactic slippage encourages us to see historical periods as not only the end products of a deterministic evolutionary “system,” but also the “machinery” for future evolutionary development. For Lee, the shift from the freedom of the Renaissance to the “happy-go-lucky practicalness” of the eighteenth century is part of the continuous equilibration between opposites that drives “progress” in the organic and inorganic realms.⁸³ Just as cells or human beings, though short-lived in themselves, have a hand in perpetuating the superstructures of which they form constituent units (i.e., the body and the species), the Renaissance, Lee argues, needed to collapse in order to perform its larger function: disseminating its “strong intellectual food” to “the starvelings of the North,” who benefited from Italy’s cultural “riches” at the same time they plundered its material wealth.⁸⁴ Lee consequently asserts: “the entire political collapse of Italy was not only inevitable from the essential nature of the civilization of the Renaissance, but it was also indispensable in order that this civilization might fulfil its mission.”⁸⁵ The conclusion of “The Sacrifice” situates Italy’s decline within a larger timeframe that includes “modern

⁸² Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 53.

⁸³ Lee, introduction to *Euphorion*, 17

⁸⁴ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 46.

⁸⁵ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 44-45.

society”—on this scale, the tragic history of the Renaissance reveals a comedic, even teleological trajectory that culminates in Lee’s own “calm, safe, scientific” era.⁸⁶ Before Wilde ever claimed that the commission of “sin” was the driving force behind cultural innovation, Lee used the same provocative logic in order to surmount Ruskin’s moralistic critique of the Renaissance. If it is true that the “Italians had seen the antique and let themselves be seduced by it,” Lee writes in a later essay in *Euphorion*, we should “only rejoice thereat,” because this seduction triggered “the union of antique and modern” that laid the groundwork for progress.⁸⁷

This continuity between far-flung historical periods made the practice of history, for Lee, more than a purely academic exercise. From the 1880s onward, her studies of the Renaissance energized her increasingly ambitious critiques of late Victorian society, which she believed could only benefit from the lessons of fifteenth-century Italy. Like Pater and Symonds (and Ruskin, to his chagrin), Lee saw in the Renaissance certain “habits of thought, a mode of life, political, social, and literary institutions, not unlike those of to-day”; “the Renaissance,” she adds, “possessed the germs of every modern thing,” including that “thorough consciousness of our own freedom and powers.”⁸⁸ More significant for her later cultural criticism, Lee implicates scientific discovery in the moral decay of the Renaissance: “had [the Italians] not discovered,” she asks in *Euphorion*, “that what had been called right had often been unnatural, and what had been called wrong natural? Moral teachings, remonstrances, and judgments belonged to that

⁸⁶ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 54.

⁸⁷ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 148; Lee, “Symmetria Prisca,” in *Euphorion*, 212.

⁸⁸ Pater credits the Renaissance for “the leading instinct, the curiosity, the initiatory idea” that inspired the enlightened ideas of his “own generation.” In *Renaissance in Italy*, Symonds finds the “vital and expansive” energy of the Renaissance still at work “in the modern world,” particularly in the continued growth of science (“the first-born of the spirit of the modern world”). Ruskin, Fraser observes, saw the Renaissance as “the beginning of the modern decline.” Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 27, 46; Pater, “Pico Della Mirandola,” *Fortnightly Review* 10 (1871): 378; Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, 4, 18; Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, 234.

dogmatism from which they had broken loose.”⁸⁹ The growth of science, according to Lee’s history, produced an ontological crisis that in turn destabilized preexisting systems of ethics, which she suggests were based on notions of natural morality. By nullifying the preexisting alignment of “right” with “natural,” new conceptions of nature precipitated the Italians’ “instinctive and universal disbelief in all that had been taught them.”⁹⁰ Lee here gestures toward an exciting but also unsettling parallel between the Renaissance Italians and her contemporaries, whose perceptions of the world have undergone similar changes. Implicit in her history of Renaissance irreverence is the revolution in worldview central to every articulation of evolutionary aestheticism: the intellectual “bombshell,” as Allen describes it in his 1885 retrospective *Charles Darwin*, which exploded all notions of a divinely directed, “anthropocentric universe.”⁹¹ To Lee, the moral relativism that such a worldview warranted (a relativism that, as we will recall, Clifford, Pater, Allen, and Wilde welcomed) had spiraled into moral anarchy in the Renaissance, and threatened to do so again.

In light of this cautionary example from history, Lee produced a second collection of critical dialogues, *Baldwin* (1886), in which she addresses just such moral anarchy. Her introduction to *Baldwin* offers a gently facetious biographical sketch of the titular sage, whose story resembles Lee’s: born in France and educated in Rome, Baldwin has lived a Paterian “life of exclusively mental experiences, . . . merely receiving a series of impressions and responding thereunto by a series of opinions.”⁹² With his “illusive, shimmering,” and (as Pater might say) diaphanous personality, Baldwin suffers acutely from the spiritual and moral agonies of his time,

⁸⁹ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 47.

⁹⁰ Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 47.

⁹¹ Grant Allen, *Charles Darwin* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), 111, 195.

⁹² Lee, “Of Baldwin, Introductory,” in *Baldwin*, 4.

in particular the “moral discomfort attendant upon a disbelief in a future life.”⁹³ Lee thus uses Baldwin to explore more socially constructive ways in which philosophy might surmount the “moral shock” peculiar to both the Renaissance and the late nineteenth century.⁹⁴ For instance, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief” pits the agnostic Baldwin against interlocutors who embody alternative responses to the “scientific view of the world.”⁹⁵ In a tacit continuation of Clifford’s 1877 essay “The Ethics of Belief”—which condemned, on moral grounds, the “sweet illusions and darling lies” of orthodox religion—Lee’s dialogue examines the various moral doctrines that might fill the now-vacant role of traditional faith.⁹⁶ On one side, the solicitous, well-meaning Vere argues that everyone be allowed to partake in the “beautiful and consoling fictions” of whatever belief system they choose, while the elitist Rheinhardt cares little for public morality so long as he can savor his “own intellectual ambrosia” unmolested.⁹⁷ Against his friends’ individualistic philosophies (ones associated, in Lee’s mind, with misreadings of Pater’s aestheticism), Baldwin proposes an aristocracy of thought: a class of individuals, exempted from “all necessity of manual labour and business routine,” who will “separate the true from the false, and gradually substitute higher aims and enjoyments for lower ones.”⁹⁸ Importantly, the aristocracy that Baldwin describes performs its moral function via the methods of aestheticism, which emphasizes the positive effects of disinterested discrimination and selection. Wilde’s

⁹³ Lee, “Of Baldwin,” 13; “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” in *Baldwin*, 57.

⁹⁴ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 56.

⁹⁵ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 60.

⁹⁶ Clifford concludes “The Ethics of Belief” with his most iconic turn of phrase: “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” *Contemporary Review* 29 (1877): 294-95.

⁹⁷ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 49, 33.

⁹⁸ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 38.

early lecture “The English Renaissance of Art” (1882), for instance, endorses the “exquisite spirit of choice” that allows the artist to “realise for us that which we desire”—an ideal world free from the “social problems of today” and absolutely superior to the “world of real fact.”⁹⁹ Pater’s novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) similarly upholds its eponymous protagonist’s “hieratic refinement” as an ethical (and not simply aesthetic) drive toward “the selection, the choice, of what was perfect in its kind.”¹⁰⁰ In Baldwin’s appeal to the leisure class, Lee promotes the same detachment from quotidian life that Pater and Wilde associate with the ideal aesthetic temperament.

But Lee’s intense interest in morality, which she expresses more persistently than either Pater or Wilde, leads her to stress the progressive social function and real intellectual labor that this aristocracy must perform. For example, Baldwin’s process of separation and substitution results in the development of explicitly “higher” cultural norms, and he considers his rejection of Vere’s “consoling fictions” only one foray in “the great battle to make the kingdom of that which is into the kingdom of that which should be.”¹⁰¹ The inherent upward tendency of this “battle” is writ small in Baldwin’s (and, by association, Lee’s) own life story. In his youth, Baldwin is a stereotypical aesthete, “engrossed in artistic and archaeological subjects” and laboring under the belief (a false one, Baldwin later learns) “that the only worthy interest in life was the beautiful”; as a young man, this “narrow happiness” is destroyed, first by his gradual apprehension of the “frightful dissonances of the world” and then by the sudden death of his close friend, whose loss

⁹⁹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” in *Miscellanies*, vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (Boston: Wyman-Fogg, 1921), 251.

¹⁰⁰ Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), 229.

¹⁰¹ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 49.

induces in Baldwin an “acute, moral sickness.”¹⁰² For Lee, Baldwin’s spiritual crisis miniaturizes the upheavals of the Renaissance and the late nineteenth century, and his response further exemplifies the constructive forms of unbelief that this crisis could produce. Instead of retreating into “those beautiful dreams which consoled other men,” Baldwin “forced [himself] to keep awake in that spiritual cold,” reading “only scientific books” that made him “doubt and examine all the more.”¹⁰³ Through rigorous self-training, he reaches a truer, evolutionary understanding of morality: the moral sense, he could now see, “had arisen in the course of the evolution of mankind,” and thus “right and wrong meant only that which was conducive or detrimental to the increasing happiness of humanity.”¹⁰⁴ Baldwin extracts from this insight not “moral solitude,” but an ardent conviction that he is “but a drop in the moral flood called progress,” because his moral sense is both the product of previous generations and “an essential contribution to the morality of millions of creatures who will come after me.”¹⁰⁵ At the end of “Unbelief,” Baldwin succeeds in transforming evolutionary theory’s devaluation of the individual—its Malthusian nightmare of “millions of creatures,” all jostling for space—into an affirmation of his own role in the species’ onward march toward progress. “If I fall,” he tells his companions, “those on either side of me will be less united and less vigorous to resist, those following me will stumble.”¹⁰⁶ (Baldwin’s epic figuration of personal belief reminds us of Clifford’s equally dramatic condemnation of credulity as a “sin against mankind”—an

¹⁰² Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 35-36.

¹⁰³ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 65.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 66.

¹⁰⁵ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 68.

¹⁰⁶ Lee, “The Responsibilities of Unbelief,” 68.

apparently trivial offense that drags the species “back into savagery.”¹⁰⁷) Like all of the figures associated with evolutionary aestheticism, Lee relies on the generational consciousness of evolutionary thought to resist the solipsistic nihilism that modern science seemed to invite.

Lee elaborates on this system of moral progress in “Honour and Evolution,” a later essay in *Baldwin* that returns to the central issues of her 1882 polemic, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists.” In publishing “Vivisection,” Lee joined a heated public debate about animal experimentation that became more turbulent after the passage of the Cruelty to Animals Act in 1876.¹⁰⁸ The question of how morality—which was often bogged down in what Lee dismissed as “so much sentimental twaddle”—could be applied to rational and dispassionate scientific pursuits was central to this debate.¹⁰⁹ As Lucy Bending explains, anti-vivisection activists cataloged the suffering of lab animals in melodramatic detail and denounced as monstrous any experimentalist who could tolerate such sights; meanwhile, supporters of the practice either denied that animals experienced pain in the same way that humans did, or pointed to the useful information that scientists gleaned from the procedure.¹¹⁰ A rationalist from childhood, Lee was skeptical of the often gendered language of sensibility in which many antivivisectionists articulated their objections to experimental science (she shared these concerns with Cobbe, a prominent antivivisectionist who instructed women supporters to temper excessive expressions of emotion in favor of thoughtful moral objections).¹¹¹ Nonetheless, Lee’s credence in

¹⁰⁷ Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” 295.

¹⁰⁸ Lucy Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 120-23.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,” 797.

¹¹⁰ Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain*, 120-23, 141.

¹¹¹ See Sally Mitchell’s biography of Cobbe for an extensive discussion of Cobbe’s role in the antivivisection movement. Mitchell notes that antivivisection “was increasingly viewed as a silly cause backed only by sentimental women.” For this reason, Cobbe often tried to modulate overwrought language and far-fetched

Spencerian theories of play and her own fascination with physiological aesthetics convinced her of the evolutionary harm that accompanied both the experience and the infliction of physical pain. Her argument thus targets rational partisans on both sides of the conflict: she grants the expediency of vivisection while rejecting it as an unconscionable violation of “honour,” which for Lee forbids the accumulation of “advantages...at the expense of wholesale and profitless agony to another race.”¹¹² By commanding us to forego material gain in the disinterested pursuit of justice, Lee argues, honor suppresses the “baser motives of our nature” and elevates the “nobler” ones; as such, honor is both an ancient chivalric code and “the most crowning perfection of the evolution of society.”¹¹³ Vivisection, because it subjects the wellbeing of others to the dictates of self-interest, represents a breach of honor that threatens society with devolution. In this sense, Lee’s early outcry against the “temptation” of vivisection was motivated by a typically aesthetic distaste for utilitarianism as well as her specific concern about “evolutional morality.”¹¹⁴

“Of Honour and Evolution,” which consists in a dialogue between Baldwin and the disenchanted amateur chemist Michael, repeats much of the material from “Vivisection” verbatim. However, Lee’s dialogic version of her argument offers subtle but important revisions of her earlier discussion of “evolutional morality.” These revisions speak to the ways in which Lee’s morality in the 1880s was still inextricable from her aesthetics, however doggedly she criticized Ruskin for “making the physical the mere reflexion of the moral.” “Of Honour and

claims in her own writing as well as that of her allies. Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain*, 128; Sally Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 327, 230.

¹¹² Lee, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,” 804.

¹¹³ Lee, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,” 811.

¹¹⁴ Lee, “Vivisection: An Evolutionist to Evolutionists,” 806.

Evolution” begins by addressing Ruskin’s recent intervention in the antivivisection movement: in 1884, he resigned as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford after the physiologist and vivisectionist John Burdon-Sanderson was appointed to the medical faculty.¹¹⁵ Early in Lee’s essay, Michael tells Baldwin that Ruskin’s protest has inspired him to read more about the practice of vivisection. Michael is repulsed by what he learns, so he determines to “wash [his] hands of science” and renounce “this rationalism which rationally abets abomination.”¹¹⁶ As in “Unbelief,” the older Baldwin has already passed through this period of self-doubt and introspection, and he has emerged with the spiritual maturity that Lee believed could be forged only in that crucible. Baldwin, aware that his protégé is approaching the tipping point, sets out to vindicate “the doctrines of evolution and evolutionary morality” before Michael, like Vere, retreats into the comforts of “any mystically established code of right and wrong.”¹¹⁷ Baldwin thus defines “evolutionary morality” in the same scientific, and yet reverential, vocabulary that Lee used in “Vivisection.” Evolutionary morality, he claims, is a rational “religion” that derives its code of behavior not from abstract belief or received dogma but from the evolutionary principle of selection: this morality seeks to cultivate the best in human nature by encouraging individuals to choose “justice” over convenience, “fortitude” over irresolution, and “forbearance from the coveted” over destructive self-indulgence.¹¹⁸

By framing her “new creed” as an exercise in individual “choice,” Lee bases her evolutionary morality on the discriminating aesthetic attitude that Pater praised in figures such as

¹¹⁵ Bending, *The Representation of Bodily Pain*, 122.

¹¹⁶ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” in *Baldwin*, 145.

¹¹⁷ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 154.

¹¹⁸ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 183-84.

Marius and Leonardo da Vinci.¹¹⁹ Lee makes this connection between the evolutionary moralist and the aesthete even clearer in a passage unique to “Honour and Evolution,” in which Baldwin points to concrete examples of human progress. As Baldwin and Michael walk through a train station, the latter glumly observes “that modern civilization has a sort of mark of the beast,” a “sugges[tion] of hell” into which vivisection “neatly” fits.¹²⁰ Baldwin responds to Michael’s Ruskinian pessimism by reminding him that the modern era is a “moment of transition.”¹²¹ “We may have new evils,” Baldwin admits, but “we have also new sensitiveness to them. In former days there was no such hideosity [*sic*] as a large London railway station, but I question whether there was either any capacity for feeling its hideousness as we do. So also as to vivisection.”¹²² Here, Lee’s rigid separation of the aesthetic from the moral sphere—a distinction that she postulated in *Belcaro* and struggled to maintain in her subsequent works—breaks down once again in Baldwin’s comparison between the improved “capacity for feeling...hideousness” and the “sensitiveness” to “new evils.” Importantly, the only way in which he can substantiate his promises about the impending moral evolution of Victorian society is by equating moral development with more patent advancements in popular taste. For instance, Baldwin characterizes both the moral and the aesthetic sense as faculties of perception that mostly operate on the level of bodily sensation (the “capacity for feeling,” or “sensitiveness”). He further implies that both evolve through the accretion of apparently minor decisions on the part of individuals: an operation that Lee, like Wilde and Allen, identified with Darwinian sexual selection. While Lee elsewhere distinguishes aesthetic from moral qualities (aesthetic beauty,

¹¹⁹ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 184.

¹²⁰ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 180.

¹²¹ Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 180.

¹²² Lee, “Of Honour and Evolution,” 180-81.

Baldwin remarks in a later essay, “exists...only in the domain of the senses”), she fuses the two here in the service of a larger argument against the reactionary despondency of thinkers such as Ruskin.¹²³ But as Allen, Bain, and others had shown—and as Lee well understood from her Renaissance scholarship—aesthetic preferences reflected corporeal appetites, and so refinements in taste did not necessarily entail corresponding improvements in character. In “Honour and Evolution” and other essays in *Baldwin*, we begin to understand why morality and aesthetics converge, often confusingly, in Lee’s early writing: her uncompromising rejection of “mystically established codes of right and wrong” left only evolutionary (and therefore materialist) explanations for the moral feelings. She thus could never divorce the moral sense entirely from the sensate body that produced aesthetic and “moral impressions” alike.¹²⁴

Lee certainly understood the difficulties that this confusion between the aesthetic realm (associated with the body, free play, and Renaissance paganism) and the moral realm (associated with the soul, self-discipline, and medieval Christianity) posed for her project of evolutionary morality. In many ways, her concurrent work in the supernatural genre, which she theorized in her early essay “Faustus and Helena” (1881) and pursued in her collection of ghost stories *Hauntings* (1890), reflected critically on these difficulties in her evolutionism. I dwell at some length on Lee’s understanding of the supernatural in order to elucidate the dialectical nature of her evolutionary aesthetics in the 1880s. As Patricia Pulham observes, the conventions of

¹²³ Later on in her life, Lee would reassess Ruskin’s attitude toward modernity. “We must remember,” she reminds readers in *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908), “that ‘modern’ meant for Ruskin, not our latter-day habits of mind...but the ‘mental habits’...of the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century; of that period of chaotic materialism, of hand to mouth ruthless egoism, against which not only Carlyle came to protest, but Karl Marx also.” In other words, Ruskin opposed the same systems of laissez-faire competition that Lee (like Allen and Wilde, two otherwise progressive thinkers excited by the prospect of modernity) found so distasteful. Lee, “Of Novels,” in *Baldwin*, 202; Lee, “Ruskin as a Reformer,” in *Gospels of Anarchy, and Other Contemporary Studies* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 305.

¹²⁴ Lee, “Of Novels,” 202.

supernatural fiction allowed Lee the freedom to play with the “boundaries...between the past and the present” in ways that challenged the notion of evolutionary progress.¹²⁵ The ghost story presented to Lee (in Pulham’s words) an “elemental space,” within which the modern world—with its “calm, safe, scientific” rationality and its mechanistic schemes for economic and social growth—commingled with an insuppressible ancient world—a world marked by violence, superstition, and a grotesque, as well as alluring, Dionysian abandon.¹²⁶ Consequently, the tone and temporality of her supernatural fiction is often at odds with her critical nonfiction. On the whole, Lee’s earlier nonfiction (and, to a lesser extent, *Miss Brown*) looks forward to evolutionary futurity and highlights the individual’s small but meaningful contribution to the cultural progress of the species. By contrast, her supernatural fiction fixates on what she calls the “real spectre of the antique”: the encounter with the “ghostly” that resurrects, if only momentarily, the “imaginative power” of “the divinities of old.”¹²⁷

It was the retrospective, protean mode of the supernatural genre that enabled Lee to explore several obstacles to evolutionary morality that her earlier essays had glossed over: issues such as the patently uneven advancement of evolution, the moral perils of aesthetic pleasure, and, more intensely, the degenerative potential inhering in her passion for the past. As Lee defined it, the supernatural genre appealed to a uniquely modern desire to re-experience the magical thinking of one’s childhood. Since “we moderns,” Lee remarks in “Faustus and Helena,” now “view nature as a prosaic machine built by no one in particular,” we can no longer believe in the genuine existence of the supernatural, whether in the form of demons, spirits, or

¹²⁵ Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), xviii.

¹²⁶ Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object*, xix; Lee, “The Sacrifice,” 54.

¹²⁷ Lee, “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Toronto: Broadview, 2006), 319, 309.

deities.¹²⁸ As a result, she argues, we seek to recapture the “delightful semi-obscurity of vision and keenness of fancy of our childhood; when a glimpse into fairyland was still possible, when things appeared in false lights, brighter, more important, more magnificent than now.”¹²⁹ She concludes that the ghost story—because it grants us, albeit temporarily, “this liberty of seeing in things much more than there is, which belongs to man and to mankind in this childhood”—is the best medium for satisfying this “passionate, nostalgic craving for the past.”¹³⁰

But to an evolutionary thinker such as Lee, the analogy between the childhood of “man” and the childhood of “mankind” was not merely a metaphor: it was a scientific fact that made the revival of the infantile imagination a potentially degenerative prospect. The biological theory of recapitulation—popularly theorized by Darwin, Spencer, and, later, the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel—asserted that individuals, in the course of their embryological development, repeated the evolutionary phases through which their species had passed.¹³¹ This blurring between ontogeny (the development of the individual) and phylogeny (the development of the race) had a far-ranging impact on Victorian cultural figurations of the child. Evolutionary studies of culture and psychology, as Athena Vrettos and others have pointed out, “fostered a view of children as primitive, instinctual, and wild,” both “susceptible to, and in need of, civilizing influences.”¹³² The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor tacitly relied on recapitulation theory when he used his own memories of childhood (a time when “we dwelt at the very gates of the realm of myth”) to

¹²⁸ Lee’s conception of the supernatural builds on Spencer’s essay “Use and Beauty” (1852), in which the philosopher argues that the aesthetic appeal of a story or object is inversely proportional to its practical function, religious import, or truth-value. Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” 312.

¹²⁹ Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” 312.

¹³⁰ Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” 312, 315.

¹³¹ Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 228-29.

¹³² Athena Vrettos, “Victorian Psychology,” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 74.

speculate about the emotional power of animism during the “childhood of the human race.”¹³³ Lee’s essay “The Child in the Vatican,” taking its cue from these discussions of childhood development, frequently refers to the titular child as a “small barbarian”; in *Althea* (1894), Baldwin treats “the barbarian, the child, the brute, [and] the degenerate” as more or less interchangeable (all four individuals, Baldwin elaborates, are incapable of penetrating the “shell of egoism”).¹³⁴ Jessica Straley, in her survey of Victorian children’s literature, concludes that recapitulation theory “generated a crisis about childhood,” which appeared to be both an age of innocence and “a living relic of a still prehuman, even bestial past.”¹³⁵

In this context, Lee’s conception of the supernatural genre had serious consequences for evolutionary morality and the “noble religion of choice and improvement” upon which she founded her hopes for the future. Evolutional morality, we recall, demanded that the individual relate to her environment in a disinterested, rational, and (to use Lee’s coinage) “honourable” way. The Victorian child, in a literal sense, was a throwback to the pre-civilized human, whose experience of material life was more magical, more aesthetic, but also more animalistic than the civilized adult’s. Since there was little substantive difference, in this view, between the “delusory” imagination of childhood and the “retrograde” mysticism that Lee, through Baldwin, so staunchly demolished, the nostalgia for childhood (and, by extension, the past) betrayed an

¹³³ As I have discussed, Tylor’s work—particularly his concept of survivals—was important for evolutionary aesthetes as well as for historians such as Symonds. Lee was no exception: Baldwin occasionally uses the term in “The Consolations of Belief” (1886). Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:257; Lee, “The Consolations of Belief,” in *Baldwin*, 84-87.

¹³⁴ Lee, “The Child in the Vatican,” 19; “The Spiritual Life,” in *Althea: A Second Book of Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1894), 241.

¹³⁵ Straley also traces the central ideas of recapitulation theory to the earlier evolutionist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Recapitulation became well known in Britain after Robert Chambers discussed the idea in his bestseller, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which proposed a pre-Darwinian version of evolutionary theory. Jessica Straley, *Evolution and Imagination Victorian Children’s Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6-7.

atavistic desire to regress to primal forms of belief.¹³⁶ The phenomenon of haunting—insofar as Lee defined it as a pleasurable psychological regression to a prior stage of development—thus tested the viability of evolutionary morality, and progress more generally, when confronted by the emotional appeal and hereditary weight of the past.

In stories such as “Amour Dure” (1887) and “Oke of Okehurst” (1886), Lee dramatizes the friction between the potentially degenerative desire for the “antique” and the progressive practice of evolutionary morality. These concerns are reflected in the stories’ exploration of the psychological burden of familial, national, and racial history. The Prussian historian Spiridion Trepka, protagonist of “Amour Dure,” travels from Posen to Italy in order “to come face to face with the Past”—a desire that is thwarted, at first, by his own enmeshment in “modern, northern civilisation” and what he sees as the “degeneracy” of modern Italians.¹³⁷ Like Lee, Spiridion is acutely conscious of his status as expatriate: in the diary entries that comprise the story, he often refers to his Prussian citizenship, and he turns his Germanic ethnicity into a recurring pun on “Vandal” (most amusingly, he describes his research in Italy as an act of “modern scientific vandalism,” by which he resumes the colonization that his Vandal ancestors began in 455).¹³⁸ Spiridion’s more recent progenitors also cast a shadow on his life, as we learn when he attributes his infatuation with the sixteenth-century *femme fatale* Medea da Carpi to familial proclivities: “shaken” by a ghostly encounter with Medea’s portrait, he attempts to calm himself by soberly considering the “case of [his] uncle Ladislas, and other suspicions of insanity in the family.”¹³⁹ His academic interest in Medea’s life and personality, which soon ripens into frenzy, likewise

¹³⁶ Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” 312; “Of Honour and Evolution,” 154.

¹³⁷ Lee, “Amour Dure,” in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, 41, 55.

¹³⁸ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 41.

¹³⁹ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 61.

tends to cluster around questions of hereditary determinism. Her long list of lovers—“Pico, the Groom, Stimigliano, Oliverotto, Frangipani, [and] Prinzivalle degli Ordelaffi,” all of whom died violently as a result of Medea’s scheming—becomes for Spiridion a kind of pedigree, which he repeats with the growing conviction that he, too, must sacrifice himself for the long-dead Medea.¹⁴⁰ Spiridion’s temperamental fatalism leads him to believe that even his horoscope (which “tallies almost exactly with that of Medea da Carpi”) and his palm (a palm reader in Poland, he recalls, found there a “cut-line which signifies violent death”) have destined him to die for Medea’s love.¹⁴¹ Over the course of the story, Lee purposefully overdetermines Spiridion’s increasingly eccentric behavior, which he ascribes alternately to hereditary impulse, supernatural interference, the influence of alcohol, and fate.

Spiridion’s compromised autonomy, in turn, calls to his mind vivid and irresistible reminiscences of childhood. Zorn points out that these instances of “heightened spiritual sensation” tend to provoke Spiridion’s ghostly encounters, because they compromise the “boundaries between imagination and reality, past and present.”¹⁴² Lee’s distinctly aesthetic sketches of the historian’s memories thus broach, for her, the problematic linkages between aestheticism, nostalgia, and degeneration. Toward the beginning of the story, for instance, the “sight of snow falling gently” makes Spiridion “feel back at Posen, once more a child.”¹⁴³ Not coincidentally, this is the point at which his fragile sense of identity begins to fracture and merge with Medea’s doomed lovers: “I fancied I saw it all,” he records, “and that I, somehow, was

¹⁴⁰ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 73.

¹⁴¹ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 72, 73.

¹⁴² Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 161.

¹⁴³ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 60.

Marcantonio Frangipani come to liberate her.”¹⁴⁴ Several weeks later, as Spiridion awaits what he knows will be a fatal meeting with Medea, the smell of incense rouses “the recollection, almost the sensation, of those Christmas Eves long ago at Posen and Breslau, when [he] walked as a child along the wide streets.”¹⁴⁵ Lee, continuing the psychological inquiry she began in “Faustus and Helena,” posits a loose association between the historian’s affinity for the past, his reliving of childhood, and his rapid descent into a petty lawlessness that ends in his death. Spiridion’s regressions to childhood are both the symptom and the mainspring of a broader confluence of hereditary pressures that constrain his thoughts and actions.

The consequences for morality become clear in the story’s climax, in which Spiridion commits a literal “act of vandalism”: at Medea’s urging, he hacks at the statue of her arch-nemesis, Duke Robert, and flees guiltily as if “pursued by the tramp of hundreds of invisible horsemen.”¹⁴⁶ Lee never states whether his crime and subsequent death are the result of a familial neurological condition (“some little coil of [the] brain, the twentieth of a hair’s-breadth out of order”), racial predispositions to criminality, the workings of fortune, or the Machiavellian manipulation of a real ghost.¹⁴⁷ In any case, Spiridion cedes his capacity for ethical choice to degenerative, and yet perversely seductive, forces outside his control—forces that, at times, are indistinguishable from the evolutionary pressures of heredity and accident. By taking full advantage of the “essentially vague” nature of the supernatural, Lee in “Amour Dure”

¹⁴⁴ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 60.

¹⁴⁵ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 74.

¹⁴⁶ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 72, 76.

¹⁴⁷ Lee, “Amour Dure,” 69.

experiments with the aleatoric elements of Darwinian evolution and presents a world resistant to the positivist morality of “choice and improvement” that she proposed in her earlier essays.¹⁴⁸

Alice Oke, the central character of “Oke of Okehurst,” is similarly preoccupied with history, but her attraction to the past expresses itself in a conscious intention to imitate (and, from an evolutionary standpoint, recapitulate) the life of her ancestor, also named Alice Oke. Over the course of the story, Lee’s narrator—an unnamed painter and amateur psychologist with a taste for unusual personalities—relates the strange occurrences he witnessed during his stay at Okehurst, the country home of William and Alice Oke. The narrator, he tells his friend, first meets Alice after William commissions him to paint her portrait. On his arrival at Okehurst, the painter immediately deems William an “absolutely uninteresting” Englishman, whose sole notable feature is an ominous facial expression that the narrator terms the “maniac-frown.”¹⁴⁹ Alice, by contrast, furnishes the painter with a fascinating object of both artistic and scientific study. Her ineffable “grace and exquisiteness...hits off exactly [his] desires for beauty and rareness,” while her “fantastic” and “morbid” imagination piques his psychological interest.¹⁵⁰ Alice and William, the narrator learns, are first cousins and descendants of a Jacobean-era couple, Alice and Nicholas Oke; according to legend, the seventeenth-century Alice disguised herself as her husband’s page in order to help him murder her lover, the poet Christopher Lovelock. The narrator soon realizes that the modern-day Alice has developed a “psychological mania” for her namesake, whom she resembles so closely as to seem her “reincarnation.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” 295.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, “Oke of Okehurst,” in *Hauntings*, 108.

¹⁵⁰ Lee, “Oke of Okehurst,” 114, 116.

¹⁵¹ Lee, “Oke of Okehurst,” 122, 142.

Lee's mixed scientific and mystical idiom leaves room for her reader to interpret Alice's eerie resemblance to her ancestor as a sign of Alice's pathological psychology. More specifically, Lee invites us to attribute Alice's "mania" to a diseased aestheticism that threatens to suspend Alice in a perpetual state of psychological and evolutionary immaturity. Angela Leighton argues that Lee "uses the ghost story to express all the seduction and ambiguity of aestheticism itself"; as Leighton further points out, the aestheticism that appears in Lee's ghost stories is a "materialistic creed" that seeks bodily contact with historical objects.¹⁵² Alice Oke, with her "curious, inactive, half-invalidish life," her affection for Jacobean relics (perhaps best exemplified in her attachment to the old Alice's yellow drawing room), and her "contemptuous indifference" to her husband's practical affairs, exemplifies many of the "diaphanous" qualities that Lee vested in her own alter ego, Baldwin.¹⁵³ In Alice, however, these qualities become bizarrely repellent, even to the aesthetically inclined narrator. He describes Alice as an incongruous "mixture of self-engrossed vanity, of shallowness, [and] of poetic vision," at once a "wonderful...exotic creature" and a "repulsive" female "Narcissus."¹⁵⁴ Alice thus magnifies elements of the aesthetic temperament to monstrous proportions—her uncanny ability to emulate her ancestor's seventeenth-century aesthetic appears "abominable," her dreamy detachment from real life spirals into a break with reality, and her "poetic" imagination becomes ungovernable.¹⁵⁵ Though the narrator fails to make the connection, Lee implies that this perverse aestheticism is

¹⁵² Angela Leighton, "Ghosts, Aestheticism, and Vernon Lee," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (2000): 2.

¹⁵³ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 129, 126, 128, 123.

¹⁵⁴ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 130, 128, 116, 140.

¹⁵⁵ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 139.

ted to Alice's arrested development: the narrator often compares Alice to a "naughty child," utterly incapable of resisting her impulses or demonstrating compassion for others.¹⁵⁶

Gradually, the narrator apprehends the grave moral "mischief" that Alice's infantile aestheticism unleashes within the household, as her obsession with Lovelock and her speculations about reincarnation spark a *folie à deux* that includes her apparently innocuous, but in reality "hysterical," husband.¹⁵⁷ Alice ("with the enjoyment of a perverse child," the narrator observes) actively feeds William's growing paranoia about an intruder on the estate, cementing his worrying "maniac-frown" into "a permanent feature."¹⁵⁸ At the climax of the tale, William imagines he has caught his wife in intimate conversation with Lovelock. He then accidentally kills Alice in an attempt to shoot the interloper, subsequently tries and fails to shoot himself, and finally dies a few days later, "raving" mad.¹⁵⁹ While the modern-day Okes do not follow their ancestors' example exactly, their demise delivers on the portents of history. William's pattern of suspicious thinking, which results in Alice's murder, ominously echoes the homicidal jealousy of his ancestor, Nicholas; the murder itself fulfills both Nicholas's dying vow to kill his own wife and his "prophecy" that the family line would end when a "master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke."¹⁶⁰ In "Oke of Okehurst," as in "Amour Dure," the desire to raise a "real spectre of the antique" (which Lee identifies, at times, with her own aesthetic approach to history) leads to the disastrous recapitulation of hereditary violence. By structuring her ghost stories in this way, Lee quite intentionally stages a series of emblematic conflicts between a

¹⁵⁶ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 124, 122; Lee, "The Spiritual Life," 241.

¹⁵⁷ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 122, 144.

¹⁵⁸ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 140, 141.

¹⁵⁹ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 153.

¹⁶⁰ Lee, "Oke of Okehurst," 134.

particular kind of aestheticism—one alive to the decadent pleasures of the “antique”—and her forward-looking evolutionary morality: an already endangered doctrine that relied, to her frustration, on harrowingly violent and often unpredictable natural processes.

By the late 1880s, Lee’s dialectical oscillation between the evolutionary and the aesthetic seemed to have come to an impasse. Colby, Lee’s biographer, attributes Lee’s apparent intellectual troubles to the “series of breakdowns” that she endured after A. Mary F. Robinson unexpectedly announced her engagement in 1887.¹⁶¹ We may hesitate to chalk up Lee’s self-critical turn entirely to melancholy (Colby rather dramatically claims that Lee felt as if “life had betrayed her”), but Colby rightly highlights the unusually world-weary tone of Lee’s *Juvenilia* (1887), which captures an important transitional moment in her thinking.¹⁶² In the introduction to *Juvenilia*, she mourns the “comparative Elysium” of “those aesthetic, classic, Goethian days” of her youth, when she trusted the “morality of all antique art and philosophy,” and “the Beautiful” (at least “when it is temperate, harmonious, perfect”) seemed to be tantamount to “the Good.”¹⁶³ Lee resumes this wistful strain in the “Epilogue”: whereas “beauty...is simple, harmonious, complete,” Lee laments, “the human element, *the world*, full, even at the best, of dissonance, imperfection, complexity, and enigma, that awaken suspicion and evil thoughts, [leaves] us...with a notion that under the surface all is far from beautiful.”¹⁶⁴ In the wake of her

¹⁶¹ In August 1887, Lee was shocked to learn that Robinson had agreed to marry James Darmesteter, a distinguished French philologist who suffered from serious physical disabilities. While Lee believed Darmesteter to be a “good” person, she cruelly christened him “Quasimodo” in her letters, and she privately worried that Robinson and Darmesteter might consummate the marriage, only to “produce cripples & abortions.” Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 131-34; Lee to Matilda Paget, 30 August 1887, in “Selected Letters,” 445-46; Lee to Matilda Paget, 27 September 1887, in “Selected Letters,” 449.

¹⁶² Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 131.

¹⁶³ Lee, introduction to *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), 6-7, 9.

¹⁶⁴ Lee, epilogue to *Juvenilia*, 429.

devastating separation from Robinson, Lee is especially attuned to the gulf between the aesthetic ideal of beauty and the painful realities of the world, and she once again connects aesthetic idealism to childhood. While she drops the intimations of degeneration that made the child so fraught in “Faustus and Helena,” her resignification of childhood in her supernatural fiction makes her youthful conflation of beauty and goodness appear, from her mature perspective, irresponsible as well as naïve.

Alongside this elegiac mode, however, *Juvenilia* makes another dialectical countermovement toward an affirmative vision of the future that resembles much of Lee’s extant critical work. But this is a resemblance with a difference. In *Juvenilia*, Lee diverts her attention away from the moral duties of the “aristocracy” she anticipated in *Baldwin* and toward the aesthetic life of the average person. On the subject of “beautiful things,” she remarks,

there is no doubt that we, privileged people, are given too much of them and give them too much of our attention; but that is not saying that in the world at large there is too much of them or too much attention given thereunto. It is an evil of distribution. And one result, let us hope, of our thinking somewhat of matters less pleasant, may be, in the long run, in the long-expected future, which yet sometimes comes with a rush, that the less selfish work of the world will be no longer the mere removal of evil, but also the distribution of good; and among various sorts of good, one of the best is beauty.¹⁶⁵

Lee’s focus on the unequal “distribution” of beauty marks, for her, a relatively new interest in aestheticism’s democratic undercurrents (Allen and Wilde, of course, were already exploring this topic in their respective discussions of physiological aesthetics and cultural criticism). In 1887, Lee attended at least one meeting of the Fabian Society, where she heard speeches by William Morris and women’s rights activist Annie Besant.¹⁶⁶ While Lee declined to join the group, she broadly agreed with the Fabian vision of gradual socialist reform: H. G. Wells, the lifelong

¹⁶⁵ Lee, epilogue to *Juvenilia*, 423-24.

¹⁶⁶ Lee to Matilda Paget, 19 June 1887, in “Selected Letters,” 428.

socialist and one time Fabian who became a warm correspondent of Lee's in the early 1900s, addressed her affectionately as his "Sister in Utopia."¹⁶⁷ By the late 1880s, as she distanced herself from the dreamy, elitist aestheticism *Juvenilia* associates with childhood inexperience, Lee was also beginning to consider Ruskin's work afresh. In particular, his essay collection *Unto This Last* (1862) proposes a political economy based not on a "Science of Accumulation" but on what he calls a "Science of Distribution"; "THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE," Ruskin declares, and "that country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings."¹⁶⁸ In Ruskin's formula of wealth and life, Lee discerned a route by which the "privileged" aesthete could act in "the world at large" without trafficking in the destructive forms of laissez-faire commerce that, for Lee, only exacerbated the world's "dissonance." Members of the cultured elite, she hints in *Juvenilia*, might be perfectly placed to patronize an alternative economy of "good" (a subtle pun on "goods") in which capital flows through the circulation of "beautiful things."

The distributive role of the critic proved increasingly compelling to Lee in the early 1890s, when she settled at Il Palmerino—her country home in Florence—and came into contact with several like-minded art lovers whose work dovetailed with her new aesthetic interests.¹⁶⁹ Her coterie in Florence included her devoted partner and accomplished painter Kit Anstruther-Thomson, the aspiring young art historian Maud Crutwell, the American novelist Edith Wharton, and several other women admirers that Lee's friend, the composer Ethel Smyth, called her

¹⁶⁷ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 280-281.

¹⁶⁸ Ruskin, *Unto this Last*, in *Unto this Last, Munera Pulveris, Time and Tide, with Other Writings on Political Economy 1860-1873*, vol. 17 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), 88, 105.

¹⁶⁹ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 134.

“cultes.”¹⁷⁰ Bernard Berenson, a fresh Harvard graduate with few publications to his name, arrived with a letter of introduction in 1889. He was only one of many expatriate Italophiles to make the obligatory “pilgrimage” (as Colby describes it) to Il Palmerino, but the intellectual exchange that began with this first meeting lasted for decades and had a special impact on their respective bodies of work.¹⁷¹ Lee and Berenson’s personal relationship, however, was a troubled one: both Colby and Fraser describe the young Berenson as competitive and insecure (especially when it came to Lee’s comfortable reputation as a Renaissance expert), and Colby further suggests that their temperaments (“volatile, argumentative, sensitive to every slight”) were too alike to harmonize.¹⁷² Berenson soon moved nearby and established his own clique of writers, historians, and aesthetes, many of whom also knew the woman he ironically dubbed “Sibylla Palmerina.”¹⁷³ His circle included his partner and eventual spouse Mary Costelloe, the poets Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper (known professionally and personally as Michael Field), the art critic Sidney Colvin, and William James.¹⁷⁴ At this stage, Colby remarks, Lee regarded Berenson “as a kind of junior colleague”; Lee guided him through Florentine galleries and provided gracious, but honest, feedback on his manuscripts, which he accepted grudgingly.¹⁷⁵ His most influential ideas about art attribution and connoisseurship had their genesis in the period between 1892, when he became a regular visitor to Il Palmerino, and 1897, when his

¹⁷⁰ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 132, 176, 184.

¹⁷¹ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 158.

¹⁷² Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 158-59; Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37.

¹⁷³ Berenson to Mary Costelloe, 15 January 1896, in *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson*, ed. A. K. McComb (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 44.

¹⁷⁴ Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 139, 265.

¹⁷⁵ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 159-60.

allegations of plagiarism against Lee and Anstruther-Thomson put an end to their friendship.¹⁷⁶

It was in the intervening years that Berenson, often with help from Costelloe and the Fields, began exploring the psychological mechanisms underlying the experience and enjoyment of art (according to Berenson's biographer Ernest Samuels, the topic was "a favorite staple of debate in the Anglo-American salons of Florence").¹⁷⁷

A survey of Berenson's intellectual precedents shows us why his work both excited and challenged Lee in the mid-1890s. Like Lee, Berenson decided early on in his career that the secret to aesthetics lay in the natural sciences rather than metaphysics.¹⁷⁸ By the 1890s, Berenson could draw on a rich tradition of materialist histories of the Renaissance, including Pater's *Renaissance*, Lee's *Euphorion*, and Symonds's seven-volume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-86). As we have seen, the latter half of the nineteenth century also witnessed an uptick in scientific publications on the physiology and psychology of beauty: Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* (1855), Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871), Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), and Edmund Gurney's *Power of Sound* (1880) all treated the perceptions of sound, color, and form as functions of the nervous system, subject to the laws of evolution. Alison Brown and Ernest Samuels note that Berenson and Costelloe developed an interest in this line of research in the early 1890s, when the pair began to copy extracts from the work of Gustav Fechner and

¹⁷⁶ Colby, Gagel, and Brown, among others, touch on this controversy. There is some uncertainty about when Lee and Berenson finally reconciled—Gagel claims 1913, but Colby suggests 1920, when Lee was in her 70s—but, in either case, the rift lasted decades. Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 316; Gagel, "1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism," 165; Brown, "Vernon Lee and the Renaissance," 198-203.

¹⁷⁷ Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 152.

¹⁷⁸ Lee also urged Berenson in this direction, telling him in 1894 that the "scientific treats art phenomena, historical, or emotional, as so much material towards evolutionary or psychological hypothesis." "You must be rigidly scientific," she continued, "you must learn to describe a picture as a physiologist describes a brain." Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 174; Lee to Bernard Berenson, 25 January 1894, in "Selected Letters," 545-46.

Gurney—both experimental psychologists who studied the sensations of color and sound, respectively—into their shared commonplace book.¹⁷⁹

Along these lines, Berenson found additional encouragement in the work of William James, his psychology professor at Harvard and an old acquaintance of Lee's. Most obviously, James's general approach to psychology provided a scientific model for Berenson's own inquiries into the bodily experience of art. James held that every mind was "yoked to a body through which its manifestations appear," and that this nexus of sensation, thought, and emotion operated on the basis of natural laws that the science of psychology could discover.¹⁸⁰ James also put forward the influential James-Lange theory of emotion, so called because James developed the idea concurrently with Danish physician Carl Lange in the 1880s.¹⁸¹ According to James and Lange, bodily sensations were the direct cause, not the physiological side effect, of the emotions. As James explains in *Principles of Psychology* (1890), he and Lange agree that "*bodily changes follow directly the perception of an exciting fact, and...our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion.*"¹⁸² Every organism, he elaborates, is a "sounding-board" upon which sense impressions play, producing unique emotional "reverberations" via the stimulation of the "skin, glands, heart, and other viscera" as well as the muscles.¹⁸³ Significantly for Berenson and Lee, the James-Lange theory prioritized the rudimentary corporeal sensation

¹⁷⁹ Brown, "Bernard Berenson and 'Tactile Values' in Florence," in *Bernard Berenson: Formation and Heritage*, ed. Joseph Connors and Louis A. Waldman (Villa I Tatti, Florence: Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2014), 103; Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 152.

¹⁸⁰ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1:197.

¹⁸¹ Brown, "Vernon Lee and the Renaissance," 195.

¹⁸² James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2:1065-66.

¹⁸³ Berenson, who thought that James's account concurred with Pater's description of consciousness as a "whirlpool" of "flickering" impressions, introduced Pater's *Renaissance* to James. James apparently disapproved of the book's sensual language. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1:450; Pater, conclusion to *The Renaissance*, 187; Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 37.

over its complex mental emanations, making the body the gateway to the “higher” social, moral, and aesthetic emotions.

Moreover, James’s insistence on the scientific practice of psychology pushed Berenson toward Giovanni Morelli’s trademark “experimental method” of connoisseurship: a “science of Art,” in Morelli’s words, that determined the course of Berenson’s career.¹⁸⁴ An Italian revolutionary and doctor as well as an art critic, Morelli’s background in anatomy primed him to notice minute variations in the representation of the human form.¹⁸⁵ In *Italian Masters in German Galleries* (1880), he searches for artistic signatures in the minor details of a painting—often the rendering of hands and ears—and catalogs and compares these minutiae in order to attribute paintings to their creators.¹⁸⁶ Morelli’s singular method, which claimed the scientific mantle of Galileo and Darwin for the previously humanistic discipline of connoisseurship, was also peculiar for its combination of rigorous empiricism and candid personal response.¹⁸⁷ For instance, when Morelli finds himself “quite cold” in the presence of a “universally celebrated picture,” he “must pronounce this picture *repainted*,” even in the absence of concrete proof.¹⁸⁸ He “cannot help it,” he confesses: “either I am crazed, or all my predecessors are fundamentally mistaken.”¹⁸⁹ Throughout *Italian Masters*, Morelli makes use of both objective and subjective

¹⁸⁴ Giovanni Morelli, preface to *Italian Masters in German Galleries: A Critical Essay on the Italian Pictures in the Galleries of Munich—Dresden—Berlin*, trans. Louise M. Richter (London: George Bell and Sons, 1883), vii.

¹⁸⁵ Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 86.

¹⁸⁶ Morelli’s diagnostic posture and fixation on the apparently meaningless (but really suggestive) detail was widely influential beyond the art world. Carlo Ginzburg argues that Morelli’s conception of the “clue” shaped Victorian approaches to criminal investigation, most famously in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series. Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, 228; Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop* 9 (1980): 8.

¹⁸⁷ Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, 85.

¹⁸⁹ Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, 85.

data, supplementing his meticulous examination of artistic technique with running commentary on his physiological and emotional reactions to the pieces in question—e.g., his frigid lack of “enthusiasm” over an alleged Rafael, or his “delight” in the harmonious colors of a genuine Moretto.¹⁹⁰ For Morelli, good connoisseurs relied as much on their elusive capacity for bodily responsiveness—the ability to serve as a “sounding board,” in James’s paradigm—as on their eye for formal detail.

This marriage of empirical observation to psychological self-analysis appealed to the young Berenson, who sought out Morelli’s disciples in Italy and eventually met the expert himself in 1890, shortly after he first called on Lee.¹⁹¹ Berenson’s first major publications, *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894) and *Lorenzo Lotto: An Essay in Constructive Criticism* (1895), bear the traces of his aesthetic education. His indebtedness to Pater, Lee, and Symonds is clear in his preface to *Venetian Painters*, which hails the Renaissance not simply as a golden age of art, but also as a pervasive “spirit” of “intellectual curiosity and energy.”¹⁹² “Our faith in science and the power of work,” Berenson writes, is “instinctively in sympathy with the Renaissance”; in particular, the Renaissance “foreshadowed...the promise [that modern science] holds out of constant acquisition and perpetual growth.”¹⁹³ “The Renaissance,” he adds in a later chapter on Tintoretto, “had resulted in the emancipation of the individual, in making him feel that the universe had no other purpose than his happiness...In this lies our greatest debt to the Renaissance, that it instituted the welfare of man as the end of all action.”¹⁹⁴ For Berenson, as

¹⁹⁰ Morelli, *Italian Masters in German Galleries*, 85, 401.

¹⁹¹ Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 86-87, 103.

¹⁹² Berenson, preface to *Venetian Painters*, viii.

¹⁹³ Berenson, preface to *Venetian Painters*, vii-viii.

¹⁹⁴ Berenson, *Venetian Painters*, 49.

for Allen, Clifford, Wilde, and other evolutionary aesthetes, the Renaissance was a touchstone in the history of liberal humanism and its cherished values of individuality, rationality, and progress. “Even if it had had no art whatever,” Berenson concludes, the Renaissance deserves scholarly attention for what it can teach Victorians about how they might cultivate and direct this emancipatory zeitgeist in their own day.¹⁹⁵

Berenson’s *Lorenzo Lotto*, his biography of the sixteenth-century painter, begins to flesh out the scientific methodology that he was developing from his reading of James and Morelli as well as his conversations with Lee. Following Morelli, Berenson identifies Lotto’s paintings by analyzing details such as “the ears, the hands, the ringlets of hair,” and “other such unimportant and even trivial things.”¹⁹⁶ In homage to James, Berenson regards Lotto as a “psychological problem,” one that the connoisseur must solve by parsing “clue[s]” embedded in the painter’s “habitual” execution of seemingly meaningless details.¹⁹⁷ Besides his focus on form—the painting’s visual features as opposed to its subject matter and “general look”—Berenson also relies on the subjective introspection that was the hallmark of both Paterian and Morellian assessments of art.¹⁹⁸ (“What is this song or picture,” Pater famously asked in his preface to *The Renaissance*, “to me?”¹⁹⁹) Berenson’s critical analysis thus often consists in descriptions of what Lotto’s paintings “make us feel”: Lotto’s depictions of architecture, for instance, give us the

¹⁹⁵ Berenson, *Venetian Painters*, 49.

¹⁹⁶ Berenson, introduction to *Lorenzo Lotto: An Essay in Constructive Art Criticism* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1895), xiv.

¹⁹⁷ James discusses habit at length in his first volume of *The Principles of Psychology*. Put simply, James defined “habit” as the tendency of mind and body to be shaped passively by their environment—its opposite was “attention,” or the conscious contemplation of a specific object or train of thought. For Morelli and Berenson, the artist’s habits of execution (such as his or her method of drawing hands) reveal the artist’s origins, precisely because these habits are acquired in early training and are very rarely consciously changed. Berenson, introduction to *Lorenzo Lotto*, xvii-xviii; James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:110-11, 381.

¹⁹⁸ Berenson, introduction to *Lorenzo Lotto*, xiv.

¹⁹⁹ Pater, preface to *The Renaissance*, xix-xx.

dizzying “effect of unexpected sheerness of depth,” and his portraits elicit our “spontaneous kindness” and “sympathy” for his sitters.²⁰⁰

More dramatically, Berenson concludes *Lorenzo Lotto* by revealing that the “mere cataloguing” of previous chapters was only the groundwork for the study’s true aim, which is to excavate “our” own attitude toward Lotto and his art.²⁰¹ Now that we have processed the evidence, Berenson writes, we are

at last free to ask ourselves what is our final impression of the artist...[O]ur final impression of works of art remains an equation between them and our own temperament. Every appreciation is, therefore, a confession, and its value depends entirely upon its sincerity... The perfect masterpiece, among the many requirements it must fulfil, must give us the attitude of a typical human being toward the universe. The perfect criticism should give us the measure of the acceptability at a given time of the work of art in question.²⁰²

Berenson’s definition of criticism as “confession” clearly looks back to the work of Pater and especially Wilde, who categorized criticism as a type of “autobiography.”²⁰³ But Berenson, more consciously than his predecessors, opens up this line of critical inquiry to a lay public: his recommendation that readers of *Lorenzo Lotto* consult with photographic reproductions of Lotto’s paintings suggests that his target audience lacks immediate access to the originals, and his notion of “perfect” criticism presupposes an element of social consensus about what is “acceptable at a given time.” His subjective approach further invites non-specialists to interrogate their own emotional responses to artworks, responses whose merits lie not in their sophistication or erudition but in their “sincerity.” Berenson makes this point more explicitly in

²⁰⁰ Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 218, 156, 321.

²⁰¹ Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 308.

²⁰² Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 308.

²⁰³ An early admirer of Berenson’s work, Wilde visited Berenson, Costelloe, and the Paget family in Florence in spring 1894, when Berenson was drafting *Lorenzo Lotto*. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 154; Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 189-91.

“Rudiments of Connoisseurship,” a theoretical treatise that he began before *Lotto* and published, still incomplete, in 1902. The connoisseur, he argues in this fragment, ultimately makes use of three types of data: historical documentation (including contracts of sale and other supporting records), critical tradition, and “the works of art themselves.”²⁰⁴ The most reliable of these materials is the work itself, and specifically the “morphological characteristics” that Morelli had taught him to interpret.²⁰⁵ But alongside these tools of scientific authentication, Berenson stipulates that a “Sense of Quality is indubitably the most essential equipment of a would-be connoisseur.”²⁰⁶ More “Art” than science, Berenson’s “Sense of Quality” seems to correspond with the affective, self-interrogative facet of the Morellian method. Since the “Sense of Quality” refers to emotions and responses rather than “demonstrable things,” its precise nature seems to elude explanation: Berenson’s essay thus abruptly ends after he introduces the subject.²⁰⁷

Michael Field—who accompanied Berenson on his gallery visits and undoubtedly heard early versions of his aesthetic theories—allude to this critical principle in their collection of ekphrastic poetry *Sight and Song* (1892).²⁰⁸ Each of the volume’s poems, in keeping with Field’s attraction to both Berenson and his brand of criticism, attempts to translate the visual experience of a specific painting into lyric poetry. In the preface to *Sight and Song*, Field

²⁰⁴ Berenson, “Rudiments of Connoisseurship (A Fragment),” in *The Study and Criticism of Italian Art* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1902), 2:111.

²⁰⁵ Berenson, “Rudiments of Connoisseurship,” 116.

²⁰⁶ Berenson, “Rudiments of Connoisseurship,” 147.

²⁰⁷ Berenson, “Rudiments of Connoisseurship,” 148.

²⁰⁸ Bradley and Cooper met Berenson in 1890 and hired him as an art history tutor. Over the next five years, Berenson (for whom the women coined several fond nicknames, including “Faun” and “Doctrine”) escorted them through the major European galleries. As Martha Vicinus discovers, he also wreaked havoc in their lives: though they were devoted to each other, Bradley and Cooper became infatuated with Berenson’s gamine beauty, irreverent humor, and charismatic intellectualism. Martha Vicinus, “Faun Love: Michael Field and Bernard Berenson,” *Women's History Review* 18 (2009): 753-54.

stresses the importance of “see[ing the paintings] from their own center,” even as they allow that the “inevitable force of individuality must still have play” in any given encounter with art.²⁰⁹ Here, the poets walk a fine line between Pater’s subjective criticism and the aesthetic ideal (one equally important to Pater) of serene disinterestedness and impersonality. As Julia F. Saville argues, *Sight and Song* thus “follows the imperative of Berenson and Morelli to respond to each painting on its own representational terms.”²¹⁰ The poems themselves subtly appropriate Berenson’s hybrid method: their speakers inhabit the perspective of a disinterested but responsive viewer, who feels the “dizzy sickness” of Bellini’s Christ as keenly as she revels in the “delicious womanhood” of Giorgione’s Venus.²¹¹ That is, the paintings, to quote Field’s headnote to *Sight and Song*, “objectively incarnate” certain formal qualities independently of their audiences; the viewer, however, must serve as a “pure” conduit for the work’s aesthetic signals in order to receive a “more intimate” impression of the work as it truly exists.²¹² For Field as well as for Berenson, the good-faith effort to ascertain one’s honest impression of the work—to sympathize with it, and to analyze one’s resulting feelings—was more conducive to aesthetic appreciation than the knowledge, however encyclopedic, of a painting’s historical context or technical achievements.

The democratic notion that anyone with some modicum of sensitivity could enjoy the enriching pleasures of art encouraged Berenson to broaden the scope of his established theories in *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896). As Costelloe reported, the purpose of the

²⁰⁹ Michael Field [Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper], preface to *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), vi.

²¹⁰ Julia F. Saville, “The Poetic Imaging of Michael Field,” in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 183.

²¹¹ Field, “Giovanni Bellini’s *Blood of the Redeemer*,” in *Sight and Song*, 95; “Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*,” in *Sight and Song*, 102.

²¹² Field, preface to *Sight and Song*, v-vi.

survey was to uncover “the ‘why’ of real art enjoyment”: that “why,” Berenson determines, is what he terms “tactile values,” or those “muscular sensations of movement” that combine with “retinal impressions” in order to produce a sense of three-dimensional space.²¹³ By building on the hedonic aesthetics of Spencer and Allen as well as James’s psychological insights, Berenson assumes that artistic representation “stimulates to an unwonted activity psychical processes which are in themselves the source of most (if not all) of our pleasures.”²¹⁴ In contrast to the “ordinary sensations” of sight, he reasons, the “enhanced pleasure” of aesthetic experience “never tend[s] to pass over into pain,” because art can stimulate the viewer’s nervous system without physically taxing the muscles.²¹⁵ In conveying “tactile values” more efficiently than real life, a good painting “gives us the pleasures consequent upon a more vivid realisation of the object,” and these pleasures, in turn, “immensely heighten our sense of vitality.”²¹⁶ Pollaiuolo’s *Battle of the Nudes*, for instance, simulates the sensation of “muscular strain” in our own bodies, thereby allowing us to “imagine ourselves imitating all the movements...without the least effort on our side.” As we gaze upon Pollaiuolo’s *Hercules and Antaeus*, he enthuses, we “feel as if a fountain of energy had sprung up under [our] feet and were playing through [our] veins.”²¹⁷ Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, which for Berenson exemplifies this aesthetic and physiological phenomenon, likewise draws us into its drama without drowning us: “how we revel,” he reflects, “in the force and freshness of the wind, in the life of the wave!”²¹⁸ These works therefore give

²¹³ Qtd. in Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 229; Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 4.

²¹⁴ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 9.

²¹⁵ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 9.

²¹⁶ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 9-11.

²¹⁷ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 55.

²¹⁸ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 71.

us a “hyperaesthesia not bought with drugs, and not paid with cheques drawn on our vitality,” and it is this “life-enhancing” or “life-communicating” quality that, for Berenson, makes art spiritually fulfilling as well as sensually stimulating.²¹⁹

Berenson’s economic metaphor for vitality—which he describes, in Spencerian terms, as a fund of energy that grows or shrinks according to our actions—raised the social and evolutionary stakes of his aesthetics in ways that proved critical for Lee. As Berenson describes it, the muscular sensation of “tactile values” is a necessarily vicarious and nonproductive experience. In the hands of a good artist, a scene of “strain and pressure” stirs in viewers sympathetic feelings of exertion, but “without the confusion and fatigue of actuality”; since we, the audience, never perform any physical activity ourselves, we are able to “enjoy” the sensation of exercise “at our leisure.”²²⁰ Like Allen’s *Physiological Aesthetics*, Berenson’s theory of tactile values posits a method of creation and consumption that bypasses the Malthusian corollaries of depletion, scarcity, and competition. His notion of “hyperaesthesia,” which signals an excessive sensibility, thwarts the Darwinian laws of nature by allowing spectators to feel “as if” they were expending “energy” while simultaneously increasing (or at least, not depleting) their stock of vitality. The vitality that comes from art, then, is an endlessly renewable physiological, emotional, and spiritual resource that, for the young connoisseur, broaches

²¹⁹ According to the *OED*, “hyperaesthesia” originated in the 1840s as a medical term for an “excessive and morbid sensitiveness of the nerves or nerve-centres.” By the 1860s, “hyperaesthesia” had broadened to denote “excessive sensibility or sensitiveness” in general. The term gained traction in conservative critiques of aestheticism as early as 1883: the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley, in his book *Body and Will* (1883), denounced “art for art’s sake” and related movements for their effeminate “sentimentalities, which are the outcome of exaggerated egoisms—a true egoistic hyperaesthesia.” Berenson, with his background in psychology, would have understood the term’s pathological and pejorative connotations, as well as its association with aestheticism. In this context, his characterization of “hyperaesthesia” as liberating and healthy represents a reclamation of the concept. Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 56, 92; *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hyperaesthesia, n.,” accessed 16 August 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/90277?redirectedFrom=hyperaesthesia&>; Henry Maudsley, *Body and Will: Being an Essay Concerning Will in its Metaphysical, Physiological & Pathological Aspects* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1883), 327-28.

²²⁰ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 51.

correspondingly boundless evolutionary prospects. He voices this evolutionary hope (which he considers in itself “life-enhancing”) most emphatically in his overview of Leonardo da Vinci’s “universal genius”: Leonardo’s nearly perfect career, Berenson declares, “brings us the gladdest of all tidings—the wonderful possibilities of the human family, of whose chances we all partake.”²²¹ While he never specifies how tactile values aid in the improvement of the “human family,” Berenson may have presumed that his readers already understood the connection between aesthetics and sexual selection, given Wilde’s and Allen’s highly public pronouncements on the subject. In any case, Berenson broadly extrapolates his aesthetics into a stirring projection of humankind’s evolutionary advancement.

As both Brown and Samuels affirm, Berenson’s principle of tactile values was his foremost contribution to art criticism, particularly twentieth-century criticism surrounding impressionism and its modernist descendants.²²² For her part, Lee considered the idea central to Berenson’s important intervention in modern aesthetic thought: his “intellectual mission,” she instructed him in a letter from 1894, was not the advancement of Morellian “picture-expertise,” but the “mission of bringing the essential, pleasure-giving qualities of art within the reach of a greater number of persons whose nature would permit them to enjoy if only time & effort were saved for them.”²²³ Lee’s characterization of Berenson’s connoisseurship as a “mission” is telling: his early work pioneered a new form of “missionary aestheticism” (to borrow Diana Maltz’s term) that accorded with Lee’s longing for a Ruskinian economy of “life” while also

²²¹ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 67-69.

²²² Brown, “Bernard Berenson and ‘Tactile Values’ in Florence,” 102; Samuels, *Bernard Berenson*, 229.

²²³ Lee to Bernard Berenson, 8 January 1894, in “Selected Letters,” 539-40.

satisfying her standards of scientific rigor.²²⁴ In a momentous boon for Lee, who had long sought for a way to reconnect aesthetics to morality, Berenson identified, through tactile values, the psychological effect that made the proliferation and consumption of art “life-enhancing” and therefore ethical. She could begin to see that his work fulfilled an important social and cultural task: his surveys saved otherwise responsive amateurs the “time & effort” of sifting through the entire archive of Renaissance painting, and in doing so granted the public an easier entrée into the invigorating world of art.

Berenson’s ethical connoisseurship thus presented a possible solution to the problem of “distribution” that Lee first posed in *Juvenilia*. She had continued to contemplate this topic in her subsequent writings, most pressingly in the retrospective “Valedictory” to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, with which I began the chapter. In the “Valedictory,” Lee recommends that the “mere reader, who comes to art not for work, but for refreshment...go straight to the masters.”²²⁵ Rather than “arrang[ing] pictures and statues as we might minerals or herbs in a museum,” she further muses, perhaps her fellow critics should concentrate on leading the “poor tired people, longing for a little beauty,” to those artworks that (in accordance with each individual’s “natural affinities”) could provide this refreshment “unmixed.”²²⁶ To Lee, Berenson’s *Florentine Painters*—with its attentiveness to those works that the connoisseur deemed the “best vehicle[s]” for tactile values—served as a practical demonstration of the critic’s ability to promulgate artistic pleasure via a phenomenon she would later call “aesthetic

²²⁴ Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2.

²²⁵ Lee, “Valedictory,” 244.

²²⁶ Lee, “Valedictory,” 241, 245-46.

sociability.”²²⁷ Lee was so intrigued by Berenson’s science of connoisseurship that she reviewed *Florentine Painters* for the psychological journal *Mind* shortly after the monograph appeared. Her review grants that the book “shows no traces of psychological training” (an unfair assertion, given Berenson’s course of study under James) but advises that psychologists read the volume anyway, because its investigation into the aesthetic emotions coincides “with some of the most significant recent psychological discoveries.”²²⁸ Among Berenson’s chief psychological breakthroughs, she writes, is his notion that the experience of tactile values operates through the “translation” of external visual data into internal “bodily states.”²²⁹ Lee also foregrounds his choice of the term “life-enhancing”: his vitalist diction suggests that the “aesthetic phenomenon” is not an “accident in evolution” but an essential biological and psychological activity, one that perpetuates our existence by prompting “a direct increase of vitality” in our bodies.²³⁰

Lee found corroborating evidence for Berenson’s ideas in her own psychological experiments, which she conducted throughout the 1890s with the willing assistance of Anstruther-Thomson. For nearly a decade, the women toured galleries, studios, and churches across Italy together, always following the same procedure: while Anstruther-Thomson inspected a painting or circled a column, Lee watched her young companion’s movements and asked her probing questions about her sensations.²³¹ Anstruther-Thomson also kept journals in which she scrupulously recorded her physical reactions to art and architecture, including changes in her posture, heart rate, and temperature, her breathing patterns, and the loosening and tightening of

²²⁷ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 42, 87; Lee, “Nisi Citharam,” in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), 51.

²²⁸ Lee, “New Books: *Florentine Painters* by Bernhard Berenson,” *Mind* 5, no. 18 (1896): 270.

²²⁹ Lee, “New Books,” 271.

²³⁰ Lee, “New Books,” 270.

²³¹ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 156-57.

her various muscles. Many subsequent commentators—from their friend and contemporary Ethel Smyth to modern-day scholars Fraser and Maltz—have pointed out the voyeuristic eroticism of the pair’s gallery visits, which seemed to stand in for Lee’s repressed desires for sexual intimacy.²³² Carolyn Burdett and Susan Lanzoni, by contrast, highlight the serious scientific aims of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s unusual method, which built on and tested the limits of preexisting psychological theories.²³³ Their underlying motivations aside, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson searched tenaciously for an evolutionary explanation for the sense of beauty that might accord with their solemn reverence toward art. Though the impact of their experiments on the discipline of psychology was minimal—and Lee herself later tempered the physiological aspects of her aesthetics to focus on the more ideational concept of “empathy”—elements of their evolutionary aesthetics, as I will discuss in the coda, continued to shape art criticism in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The immediate result of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s long collaboration was their joint publication of “Beauty and Ugliness” (1897), a *Contemporary Review* article that is both a milestone in Lee’s career and one of the most fascinating examples of the Victorian science of aesthetics. The two-part essay begins by dismissing older aesthetic theories as either erroneous or misguided. Predictably, Lee’s long-standing aversion to both utilitarianism and mysticism leads her to reject any theory that explains the aesthetic sense “by reference to . . . utility and

²³² For a brief history of criticism regarding Lee’s gallery experiments, see Carolyn Burdett, “‘The subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’: Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 12 (2011): 5. For examples of queer readings of Lee’s psychological aesthetics, see Fraser, *Women Writing Art History*, 97; Maltz, “Engaging ‘Delicate Brains’: From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson’s Psychological Aesthetics,” in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 211-29.

²³³ Burdett, “Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” 5-7; Susan Lanzoni, “Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics of Empathy,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2009): 332-33.

inutility” or “supernatural origin.”²³⁴ More surprisingly, she and Anstruther-Thomson also express some skepticism about Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, Spencer’s concept of play, and Allen’s *Physiological Aesthetics*, deferring instead to the “artistic intuition” and “experience” of Ruskin.²³⁵ Lee’s renewed appreciation for Ruskin, whom she once roundly castigated for his opposition to science, is part of her important reappraisal of evolutionary aesthetics. As Burdett has shown, Lee carefully annotated Allen’s monograph on aesthetics and read widely in the field of evolutionary psychology, whose leaders included Spencer as well as James Sully and Francis Galton.²³⁶ Her differences with these evolutionists stemmed not from their materialist explanation of aesthetics—her faith in scientific rationalism remained solid throughout her career—but from their limited claims for the sense of beauty. Spencer, as we have seen, classified aesthetic emotion as a healthy play activity (as distinguished from “life-serving” work), and many evolutionary psychologists followed suit by assigning aesthetic experience a relatively minor role in psychic life. In his notorious 1894 essay “The New Hedonism,” Allen used the play theory of aesthetics as the basis for an ethic of pleasure, which looked to the individualistic pursuit of happiness—and in particular, sexual satisfaction—to bring about a higher civilization.²³⁷ While Allen, like Lee, envisioned an entire society built upon the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity, he still credited the “love of bright colours, graceful form, melodious sound, [and] rhythmical motion” to the “sexual instinct.”²³⁸ To Lee, the dominant evolutionary theories therefore appeared to reduce aesthetic emotion either to harmless

²³⁴ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 544.

²³⁵ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 544, 552, 551.

²³⁶ Burdett, “Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” 11-12.

²³⁷ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” *Fortnightly Review* 55 (1894): 384-88.

²³⁸ Allen, “The New Hedonism,” 384.

frivolity (in the case of Spencer) or to hedonic decadence (in the case of Allen). Ruskin, for all his resistance to evolutionary theory, imbued the aesthetic sense with the divine magnitude that Lee believed the subject merited. Though she still very much situated herself within an evolutionary tradition, she sought in “Beauty and Ugliness” to address deficiencies in the theory that, for years, had troubled her attempts to formulate an aesthetics that was both morally irreproachable and scientifically grounded.

In the introduction to “Beauty and Ugliness,” Lee and Anstruther-Thomson thus immediately acknowledge the indispensable function of the “aesthetic phenomenon,” which regulates the individual’s “perception of Form” for the ultimate “benefit of the total organism.”²³⁹ The “perception of Form,” as they define it, comprises the intricate bodily and mental operations by which we amalgamate “elementary impressions”—the basal sense data that Allen had discussed in *Physiological Aesthetics*—into the “aesthetic cognition” of an external object.²⁴⁰ Like many physiologists and psychologists in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson assume that visual stimuli induce a complex assortment of embodied reactions: the sight of a chair, for example, initiates “movements of the two eyes, of the head, and of the thorax, and balancing movements in the back... accompanied by alterations in the equilibrium of various parts of the body.”²⁴¹ Like James, they consider these reactions to be constitutive of the perception of the chair itself, not mere side effects of an independent process of visual sensation. More unusually, the collaborators also argue that these corporeal responses correlate closely with the physical properties of the object under observation. In the presence of a jar, they explain in another illustration, “one accompanies the *lift up*, so to speak,

²³⁹ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 544.

²⁴⁰ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 547-48.

²⁴¹ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 548.

of the body of the jar by a *lift up* of one's own body"; meanwhile, the jar's tapered sides "bring both lungs into equal play" by provoking gentle inward breaths.²⁴²

Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's ideas about physiological mimicry lead them to a distinctive interpretation of beauty that harkens back to Pater's subjective criticism while attempting to tackle "the abstract question [of] what beauty is in itself" that Pater had refused to undertake.²⁴³ Their answer to this question is closely tied to their concept of "Form Perception," by which they mean a kind of aesthetic internalization.²⁴⁴ When we call an object "round, or high, or symmetrical," they argue in "Beauty and Ugliness," we are actually describing a "change in ourselves productive of the sense of height, or roundness or symmetry": the aesthetic adjectives we apply to objects, in psychological fact, pertain to subjective states that we have transferred onto the "non-ego."²⁴⁵ "It is we, the beholders," the co-authors powerfully assert in the second part of their essay, "who...*make form exist* in ourselves," and only in a secondary psychological maneuver do we turn the "subjective inside us...into the objective outside."²⁴⁶ In their line of reasoning, we append the descriptor "beautiful" to forms that stimulate beneficial internal sensations: sensations that are "extraordinarily composed, balanced, co-related in their diversity," or otherwise "favourable to the [organic] processes in question."²⁴⁷ "Beauty" is thus a catch-all term for the feelings of bodily and mental harmony that spectators gain in the course of seeing, internalizing, and realizing certain forms. Since these interludes of harmonious

²⁴² Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," 554.

²⁴³ Pater, preface to *The Renaissance*, xx.

²⁴⁴ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," 554.

²⁴⁵ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," 546.

²⁴⁶ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness II," *Contemporary Review* 72 (Nov. 1897): 686, 688.

²⁴⁷ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," 554.

wellbeing are advantageous to the individual, they further reckon, the human race must have “evolved” a “special [aesthetic] instinct...which forces us to court or to shun those opposite qualities of Form which we call beauty or ugliness.”²⁴⁸

Certainly, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson found precedent for their psychological aesthetics in Robert Vischer’s and Theodor Lipps’s respective theorizations of *Einfühlung*, or the process by which individuals project their psychic states onto external objects. (Although most scholars translate *Einfühlung* as “empathy,” in this period the German term referred to a specific psychological relationship between observers and their inanimate surroundings, not the feeling of sympathy among sentient subjects that “empathy” generally denotes today.²⁴⁹) Similarly, the German psychologist Karl Groos had already proposed that observers took pleasure in aesthetic forms by imitating them in a motor process he called “Inner Mimicry.”²⁵⁰ Berenson’s previous discussions of “life-enhancing” tactile values also paved the way for Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s subsequent dissection of artistic form into a series of physiological triggers (the parallels inspired Berenson, later that year, to accuse his colleagues and neighbors of stealing his ideas—or as he bitterly quipped, “putting [them] freshly, with all the illusion of lucidity”).²⁵¹ More generally, the central argument of “Beauty and Ugliness” fixates on the spectator’s psychological experience of pleasure, in a manner reminiscent of the earlier work of Pater, Allen, and other scientifically minded aesthetes. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson’s peculiar contribution

²⁴⁸ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 554.

²⁴⁹ Burdett, “Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” 15-16.

²⁵⁰ Burdett, “Vernon Lee’s Psychological Aesthetics,” 21-22.

²⁵¹ Berenson made his initial allegation of plagiarism after Lee sent him proofs of “Beauty and Ugliness” in August 1897. In his sarcastic reply, he congratulated Anstruther-Thomson for her “startling” memory and thanked Lee for helping him “appreciate” his own ideas “afresh.” Lee responded with a long and placid defense, in which she cited her own earlier essays as evidence that she had arrived at ideas similar to Berenson’s before the two had ever met. Gagel, “1897, A Discussion of Plagiarism,” 165.

to this body of thought lies in their bold contention (opposite Spencer's play theory and its adherents) that the aesthetic sense serves as the interface between the self and the entire physical world, not just "aesthetic" objects narrowly defined. In their view, our attraction to beauty constitutes far more than an escapist urge or peripheral procreative compulsion: if the perception of form is a master mechanism that presides over respiration, balance, and circulation by synchronizing them with the environment, then the presence of beauty signals an environment that is conducive to the healthful continuation of these vital processes. The aesthetic faculty, for Lee and her partner, regulates a fundamental instinct toward whatever is best for the individual's somatic and psychological wellbeing. "Pleasure," Lee would later clarify, "lead[s] us along livable ways."²⁵²

In "Beauty and Ugliness," this understanding of the beautiful informs Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's ambitious declaration of the evolutionary stakes of the aesthetic sense. "So far from narrowing and lowering the importance of the aesthetic instinct," the authors profess, "we are really widening and elevating it when we define it as the regulator of Form Perception."²⁵³ By diverging from the strictly counter-functional theories of Spencer, Pater, Allen, and Wilde, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson assign a diffuse use-value to the aesthetic sense:

For while we refuse [the aesthetic instinct] the impulses toward making or doing things (by the old theory) utterly useless in themselves, we attribute to it a selective and coercive power which fashions to its purposes the constructive and expressive impulses of mankind, and selects and rejects with the imperiousness of a great organic function among the experiments and possibilities of daily life; till, from claiming a merely negative influence in the work and the play of existence, it ends, in its highest power, with setting the active impulses of man to work for its sole and single gratification, and to create out of reality a world more consonant with the most deeply organised and most unchanging modes of man's existence.... [I]t is all this stringent insistence that necessary objects and actions should obey a law different from that of practical necessity, which

²⁵² Lee, "Wasteful Pleasures," in *Laurus Nobilis*, 311.

²⁵³ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness I," 554.

really teaches us the importance of the aesthetic instinct among rude civilisations of the past and the present.²⁵⁴

Importantly, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson's refusal to conflate beauty with uselessness—a tenet of aestheticism that, to them, unfairly devalued beautiful buildings, vessels, and other “necessary objects”—does not entail a concession to utilitarianism. “Beauty and Ugliness,” following Lee's earlier work, instead seeks an aesthetics that might simultaneously transcend the petty exigencies of “practical necessity” and still somehow intervene in the messy domain of “daily life.”

Lee and Anstruther-Thomson come closest to theorizing such an aesthetics in the long passage above, in which they locate the aesthetic instinct within the post-Darwinian framework of selection. For all their criticisms of the sexual selective account of beauty—criticisms related to the “strict code of morality...in matters of sex” that Lee, according to Colby, inherited from her mother—the co-authors nevertheless characterize the aesthetic instinct as a “great organic function” analogous, though not identical, to sexual selection.²⁵⁵ Like Allen's and Wilde's aesthetic conceptions of sexual selection, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson envision aesthetic taste as a discriminative force beholden to the “sole and single gratification” of “man” rather than the oppressive demands of competition. But the ultimate “work” of this process of selection, as they articulate it, is not to maintain what they call the “organs of animal life,” or even to make life more agreeable by differentiating (in a “merely negative” way) beautiful and pleasurable experiences from ugly and unwholesome ones.²⁵⁶ Neither do the authors accept the hypothesis that the aesthetic instinct, because it is the engine of sexual selection, can promote positive change only over the course of generations. Instead, the aesthetic faculty shifts from a

²⁵⁴ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 554.

²⁵⁵ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 102.

²⁵⁶ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness I,” 544.

mechanism of passive judgment into a “power”—one unburdened by what Lee considered sexual selection’s numerous drawbacks—for active creation and lateral, as well as generational, transformation. (Even their syntax subtly reinforces this shift by ceding grammatical agency to the aesthetic instinct: at first, the authors “refuse” and “attribute” various qualities “to it,” but after the semicolon the aesthetic instinct itself “ends...with setting the active impulses of man to work” and thus becomes the subject of the sentence).

By postulating standards of value more virtuous than “that of practical necessity,” and diligently applying this loftier standard to every area of life, the aesthetic instinct promises “to create out of reality a world” more amenable to humankind’s physical and emotional needs. Lee and Anstruther-Thomson thus arrogate the vocabulary and logic of evolutionary selection to their own ideal of the demiurgic aesthetic faculty, which presses the “imperious” forces of nature into the service of human culture and progress. Their psychological aesthetics—with its basis in hard-nosed physiology, its intimation of an ethics rooted in the harmonious operations of organic life, its generous recognition of aesthetic value in everyday sense experiences, and its program for evolutionary development without the need for sexual reproduction—seemed finally to resolve Lee’s decades of intellectual effort.

As is so often the case in her career, Lee lived to regret the more idiosyncratic generalizations of “Beauty and Ugliness,” which she later attributed to youthful “cocksureness.”²⁵⁷ In her 1912 collection *Beauty & Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics*, she admits that she had “confused in [her] mind” the “closely connected” but “independent” aesthetics of James, Groos, and Lipps (Lee reports that Lipps, the theorist of

²⁵⁷ Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, “Beauty and Ugliness,” in *Beauty & Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), 162.

Einfühlung, had been particularly unsparing in his criticism of her 1897 article).²⁵⁸ Lee's headnote to the anthologized version of "Beauty and Ugliness" explains that she no longer considers "organic and mimetic sensations" to be the primary explanation for "aesthetic form-preference"; while she still grants these sensations "secondary importance," her aesthetics now favors Lipps's notion of "formal-dynamic empathy...as a mere mental phenomenon" over Groos's idea of "Inner Mimicry" and (by association) Berenson's theory of tactile values.²⁵⁹ By 1912, as we can see in *Beauty & Ugliness*, she had largely abdicated her right to practice science, a prerogative that she now reserved for the "Experimental Psychologist."²⁶⁰ "My aesthetics," she remarks in the volume's general preface, "will always be those of the gallery and the studio, not the laboratory."²⁶¹ Only in some of her very late works—notably *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (1923) and *Music and its Lovers* (1932)—did she recommence publicizing her original psychological research.²⁶²

Despite her doubts about her credentials, however, Lee never abandoned the essential doctrine of "Beauty and Ugliness": that aesthetic pleasure was a vitalizing psychological experience, and, consequently, that the aesthetic sense afforded a better mode of being in the

²⁵⁸ Lee, "The Central Problem of Aesthetics," in *Beauty & Ugliness*, 78.

²⁵⁹ The version of "Beauty and Ugliness" that appears in the collection is interspersed throughout with new footnotes, most written by Lee, apologizing for the essay's inexact language and its unfounded claims about the discipline of psychology. Anstruther-Thomson did not appear to share Lee's misgivings: Lee, the sole author of the prefatory headnote, remarks that her "collaborator, on the contrary, adheres to our original point of view." Lee, "Prefatory Note to 'Beauty and Ugliness,'" in *Beauty & Ugliness*, 153-54.

²⁶⁰ Lee, "Prefatory Note to 'Beauty and Ugliness,'" 154; preface to *Beauty & Ugliness*, vii-viii.

²⁶¹ Lee, preface to *Beauty & Ugliness*, vii-viii.

²⁶² For more on the composition history, theoretical background, and methodology of these two works, see Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 210; Shafquat Towheed, "'Music is not merely for musicians': Vernon Lee's Musical Reading and Response," *Yearbook of English Studies* 40 (2010): 273-94; and Benjamin Morgan, "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies* 55 (2012): 44-52.

material universe.²⁶³ Her collection of travel essays *Genius Loci* (1899) makes no mention of either science or psychology, but its exploration of the “passion for places” rests on the theoretical foundations of her earlier work, particularly on the idea (which Lee forwarded in “Beauty and Ugliness”) that the aesthetic instinct evolved to guide organisms toward more healthful environments.²⁶⁴ In this vein, her term “genius loci” refers to the influence that particular landscapes exert on “our heart and mind”—their capacity for “charming us,...for raising our spirits, [and] for subduing our feelings into serenity and happiness”—and her vignettes speculate on the ways in which places, through the sum of their aesthetic effects, can regenerate the sensitive traveller.²⁶⁵

Take, for instance, Lee’s sketch of Genoa, then a popular destination for ailing tourists. She is struck, at first, by the “incongruity” of the place, which boasts “all this loveliness merely to die in, inch by inch.”²⁶⁶ But this “dreadful spasm of almost pagan superstition” soon gives way to an interval of “nobler paganism,” in which she rejoices at the fact that the “sea and the sky and the Hesperides’ vegetation...go on living and praising the goodness of life”: “would it not be wise,” she wonders, “if we, too, having bowed our head for a minute at the passage of Death, should recognise also that Death—others, or ours—passes indeed every minute, but passes only, while life abides and is eternal?”²⁶⁷ Lee’s aesthetic vision of Genoa, and specifically her ability to appreciate its distinctive collocation of loveliness and decay, allows her

²⁶³ Around the turn of the century, Lee’s career reached what Colby calls a “turning point.” In this period, Lee began to feel that she had “squandered her energies” in her attempts to be a polymath, and her friends and critics urged her to give up technical studies in favor of short fiction and travel essays. Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 174.

²⁶⁴ Lee, “The Lion of St. Mark’s and Admiral Morosini,” in *Genius Loci: Notes on Places* (London: Grant Richards, 1899), 109.

²⁶⁵ Lee, introduction to *Genius Loci*, 4-5.

²⁶⁶ Lee, “The South,” in *Genius Loci*, 198.

²⁶⁷ Lee, “The South,” 198.

to intuit a comforting (Berenson might say “life-enhancing”) sense of cosmic continuity. As in “Beauty and Ugliness,” it is the sensation of beauty that prompts the feeling of spiritual uplift, not vice versa. Many of her subsequent travel essays, though relatively indifferent to the intricacies of perception, remain captivated by the spiritual resonance of beautiful landscapes: she returns to the subject in *The Enchanted Woods* (1905), *The Golden Keys* (1925), and other collections, which later twentieth-century authors such as Edith Wharton and Aldous Huxley both admired and emulated.²⁶⁸

Lee also continued to address larger questions of art and evolutionary progress in the twentieth century. In essays such as “Higher Harmonies,” from *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (1909), she relinquishes technical jargon and reinvests in the evolutionary potency of what she calls, in remarkably Paterian phrasing, “the true, expanding, multiplying life of the spirit.”²⁶⁹ More poetic and less methodical than “Beauty and Ugliness,” “Higher Harmonies” characterizes the love of beauty as both a deep-seated appetite for fleshly comfort and an outward-looking impulse toward spiritual perfection. The aesthetic faculty, Lee explains, feeds our instinctual “craving” for “organic harmony,” a sense of wellbeing that consists in the “backward-forward, contraction-relaxation, taking-in-giving-out, diastole-systole” motion inherent in all life processes.²⁷⁰ At the same time, the aesthetic instinct also impels us to search for more reliable sources of this harmony “outside life,” since daily existence inevitably leaves most of these cravings “unsatisfied.” Addressing this unfulfilled desire for harmony, Lee argues, is the purpose of art. If the harmonies of form belong to the same order of phenomena as the

²⁶⁸ Penelope Vita-Finzi, “Italian Background: Edith Wharton’s Debt to Vernon Lee,” *Edith Wharton Review* 13 (1996): 16-18; Richard Cary, “Aldous Huxley, Vernon Lee and the Genius Loci,” *Colby Quarterly* 5, no. 6 (1960): 129-32.

²⁶⁹ Lee, “Higher Harmonies,” in *Laurus Nobilis*, 104.

²⁷⁰ Lee, “Higher Harmonies,” 84, 86.

periodic rhythms of biological life, she reasons, then the individual can repair the uncontrollable “defects of rhythm” in “real things” (defects that “tend to stoppage of life”) by courting instead “a harmony created on purpose in the things which he *can* control”—i.e., in the sights and sounds to which he intentionally exposes himself.²⁷¹ “In art,” she concludes, “the place of natural selection is taken by man’s selection,” and this selective process affects the “soul” through the internal workings of sensation: “every time we experience afresh the particular emotion associated with the quality *beautiful*, we are adding to that rhythm of life within ourselves,” and so long as the emotion endures, “the soul is more clean and vigorous, more fit for high thoughts and high decisions.”²⁷² The evolutionary idiom of “fit[ness],” though rooted in a notion of physical “vigor,” here transcends its associations with the Darwinian state of nature and denotes a distinctly moral, hierarchical judgment. Lee’s playfully loose diction, which freely hybridizes scientific and religious discourses, thus allows her to make broad moral arguments about the aesthetic sense without betraying the uncertainty of her early essays or falling back on the occasionally tortuous logic of “Beauty and Ugliness.” In some ways, Lee had proven to herself what she denied years ago in her assessment of Ruskin: aesthetics was a form of “moral selection,” because the experience of beauty subordinated, if only for a moment, the animalizing pressures of natural law to the triumphant, moral will of humankind.

Lee’s most resolute and succinct defense of these principles in the twentieth century appears in *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics*, a textbook that she published as part of the Cambridge University Press “Manuals of Science and Literature” series. I conclude this chapter with *The Beautiful* in part because this work demonstrates Lee’s ongoing

²⁷¹ Lee, “Higher Harmonies,” 86, 89.

²⁷² Lee, “Higher Harmonies,” 87, 106-107.

support for a quintessentially Victorian science of aesthetics—one that conceived of aesthetic sensation as an evolved instinct toward beneficial bodily and mental states. In the context of Lee’s post-Victorian legacy, *The Beautiful* is notable less for its ingenuity (after all, Lee intended it as a primer of existing knowledge) than for its continued allegiance to a progressive evolutionary aesthetics, even in the midst of modernist upheaval. As Kristin Mahoney points out, “conventional” assessments of modernism highlight “modernist dismissals of the fin de siècle”: Wyndham Lewis’s avant-garde magazine *BLAST* (1914-15), for instance, famously “BLAST[ed]” the “years 1837 to 1900.”²⁷³ Benjamin Morgan further reminds us that twentieth-century critics regarded Lee’s “kinaesthetics of literature” as “distasteful,” and pioneers of New Criticism in particular—including I. A. Richards and W. K. Wimsatt—presented their formalism as a corrective to the subjective and affective trends of Victorian aesthetics.²⁷⁴ But as both Mahoney and Morgan argue, and as we will see in the coda, the persistent relevance of Lee’s aesthetics in the early twentieth century challenges the narrative of rupture that so often dominates discussions of modernism’s relationship to the Victorian period.²⁷⁵ *The Beautiful*, because it extended evolutionary aestheticism into the era of modernism, provides a fitting segue into my concluding discussion of Lee’s influence on twentieth-century aesthetics.

The Beautiful, as Lee makes clear in the book’s “Preface and Apology,” seeks to “explain aesthetic preference” in “terms intelligible to the lay reader.”²⁷⁶ For this reason, she speaks not as an experimental psychologist to other specialists—as she did in “Beauty and Ugliness”—but

²⁷³ Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6; Wyndham Lewis, “Manifesto,” *BLAST* 1 (June 1914): 13.

²⁷⁴ Morgan, “Critical Empathy,” 31-32, 47.

²⁷⁵ Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, 5-7; Morgan, “Critical Empathy,” 47.

²⁷⁶ Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), v-vi.

as a well-versed authority to interested amateurs, as Berenson did in his surveys of Florentine and Venetian painting. In publishing her “little book,” Lee sees herself as embarking on the same aesthetic “mission” with which she charged Berenson, though she approaches her task from the perspective of psychology rather than connoisseurship.²⁷⁷ She begins by defining the term “beautiful,” which expresses the “contemplative satisfaction” that we derive from things (more accurately, certain “aspects” or impressions of things) apart from their uses.²⁷⁸ She further divides these pleasure-giving “aspects” into two classes. The first is “sensation,” which includes color and sound. These chemical phenomena render us passive by “invading and subjugating us with or without our consent,” and for this reason they cannot “afford the satisfaction connected with the word *beautiful*” in isolation.²⁷⁹ Color and sound are only beautiful, she continues, in combination with the second class of aesthetic experience, which she calls the “perception of relations” or “shape.”²⁸⁰ As Lee describes it here, shape perception relies in part on the mechanics of Berenson’s tactile values, since perception requires us to make “minute adjustments” in our muscles at the same time that we focus our mental attention on the object.²⁸¹ *The Beautiful* thus sustains Lee’s earlier declarations, dating to the 1890s, in favor of a subjective and embodied aesthetics: “the main fact of all psychological aesthetics,” she once again asserts, is “that the satisfaction or dissatisfaction which we get from shapes is satisfaction or dissatisfaction in what are, directly or indirectly, activities of our own.”²⁸²

²⁷⁷ Lee, *The Beautiful*, v.

²⁷⁸ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 4, 8, 18.

²⁷⁹ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 23, 30.

²⁸⁰ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 29.

²⁸¹ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 31-33.

²⁸² Lee, *The Beautiful*, 30.

This becomes especially clear in Lee's explication of empathy, to which she attributes "the bulk of whatever satisfaction we connect with the word Beautiful."²⁸³ To reiterate, Theodor Lipps and several other German philosophers argued that individuals projected their thoughts and feelings onto external objects via a process called *Einfühlung*, which Lee translates as both "empathy" and "infeeling."²⁸⁴ As an example, Lee asks her reader to consider the commonplace description of mountains as "rising." We say that the "mountain rises," Lee explains, not because the mountain itself is moving upward, but because we have transferred to the mountain both "the thought of the rising which is really being done by us at that moment" and, by association, the "*idea of rising as such*."²⁸⁵ In this moment of infeeling, which we achieve in the course of perceiving shapes, we briefly suspend the interests of self and the demands of "our scattered or hustled existence," even as we experience the "movement and energy [that] we feel as being life."²⁸⁶ It is this interval of restful and restorative activity (a notion reminiscent of Berenson's "tactile imagination") that makes beauty, for Lee, both "elevating and purifying."²⁸⁷ Moreover, by acknowledging the associational aspects of psychological aesthetics, Lee grants beauty the power to "irradiate" objects that are not, strictly speaking, beautiful—human "character[s]" or "bit[s] of machinery," for example, can be beautiful insofar as an observer can contemplate them with disinterested pleasure.²⁸⁸ Based on these psychological facts, she posits an inexact, but to her "undeniable," evolutionary rationale behind the "capacity for aesthetic

²⁸³ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 59.

²⁸⁴ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 59.

²⁸⁵ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 65.

²⁸⁶ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 74, 83.

²⁸⁷ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 149.

²⁸⁸ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 147.

satisfaction”: its “power for happiness and hence for spiritual refreshment,” coupled with its “tend[ency] to inhibit most of the instincts [that] can jeopardise individual and social existence,” must have accorded humankind a “mass of evolutionary advantages.”²⁸⁹

The Beautiful captures many of the major ideological trends and conflicts within evolutionary aestheticism as it took shape in the latter half of the nineteenth century. First, the contrast that Lee implicitly draws between the “life-corroborating” aesthetic encounter and the life-depleting pressures of survival has its roots in Darwin’s and Spencer’s mid-century theories of beauty.²⁹⁰ Regardless of how exactly they thought the aesthetic sense arose—whether through sexual selection, in the case of Darwin, Allen, and Wilde, or through a salutary instinct for rest, in the case of Spencer and, to a certain extent, Pater and Lee—all of the figures associated with evolutionary aestheticism believed that the aesthetic sense had evolved as a countermeasure against the fatigues of everyday existence. Secondly, like Pater and Clifford, Lee broadens the subject of aesthetics to include our relations with the entire sensate world, not just with artistic or even beautiful objects. So while she seeks to provide a more rigorous psychological account for what previous evolutionary aesthetes articulated in terms of temperament or worldview, her theorization of the “perception of relations” entails the same possibility of cultural renewal through aesthetic self-training. For Lee as well as her predecessors, the often unstated, but sometimes quite explicit, social purpose of aestheticism was to disseminate the tools for perceiving the material world in spiritually redemptive and socially generative ways.

Along these lines, *The Beautiful* also bears traces of a frustrating and yet productive tension that runs through nearly all theorizations of evolutionary aestheticism. On the one hand,

²⁸⁹ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 155.

²⁹⁰ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 149.

evolutionary aesthetes accepted scientific accounts that reduced aesthetic emotion to the solipsistic experience of apparently useless pleasure. For radicals such as Clifford, Allen, and Wilde, this theory seemed to underwrite an individualism that was both politically revolutionary and sexually subversive; even less politicized figures, such as Pater and Lee, discerned in the science of aesthetics a justification for their passionate relationships with art. On the other hand, many of these same aesthetes sought to develop an aesthetic theory that could convert the intrinsic personal value of art into widespread social benefit. As we have seen, Pater, Wilde, and others reconciled the hedonic and ethical facets of their aesthetics in various ways. In *The Beautiful*—specifically, its insistence that the pleasure of empathy comes from its “momentary abeyance of all thought of an ego”—we get a glimpse of Lee’s own strategy for balancing her inward-looking aestheticism with her pro-social ethics.²⁹¹

Finally, Lee in *The Beautiful* strikes the same progressive, anticipatory tone that many evolutionary aesthetes adopted in their own work, and which was perhaps the most striking peculiarity of the tradition. Pressed to identify the real purpose of aesthetic feeling, Lee speculates that its combination of physical perception (the “contemplation of beautiful shapes,” which “involves perceptive processes in themselves mentally invigorating and refining”) and the “play of empathic feelings” allows us to “realise the greatest desiderata of spiritual life, viz. intensity, purposefulness, and harmony.”²⁹² “Such perceptive and empathic activities,” she further elaborates, “cannot fail to raise the present level of existence and to leave behind them a higher standard for future experience.”²⁹³ Consequently, Lee declares, these flashes of heightened existence “can only be spiritually, organically, and in so far, morally beneficial,” both

²⁹¹ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 67.

²⁹² Lee, *The Beautiful*, 149-50.

²⁹³ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 150.

for the individual in the short term and for humankind in the long term.²⁹⁴ The aspirational momentum built in to Lee's aesthetics here recalls the teleology of her 1881 essay "Ruskinism," in which the young Lee claimed that all of "nature, despite its inextricable evils, seem[ed] to crave and to struggle" for the "best."²⁹⁵ Although the minutiae of Lee's aesthetic philosophy had evolved many times since the early 1880s, *The Beautiful* attests to her continued confidence in the transformative and "purifying power" of beauty.²⁹⁶ Besides her theories of aesthetic empathy, it was the persistent optimism of her worldview—one premised on the connection between embodied aesthetic experiences and the organic development of the species—that would define her reputation in the twentieth century. A younger generation of aesthetic theorists, however, was already beginning to challenge Lee's positive vision of futurity, and it is through such challenges to Lee that I wish to delve into the twentieth-century afterlife of evolutionary aestheticism.

²⁹⁴ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 152.

²⁹⁵ Lee, "Ruskinism," 207-208.

²⁹⁶ Lee, *The Beautiful*, 152.

Coda

Evolutionary Aestheticism in the Twentieth Century

In a 1933 letter to the painter and art critic Roger Fry, Vernon Lee thanked him for his ringing endorsement of her book *Music and its Lovers*, which she had published the previous year. Lee's "empirical study" of aesthetic responses to music had evidently provoked some discussion among Fry's friends, many of whom belonged to the avant-garde collective that had become known as the Bloomsbury group. Fry praised *Music and its Lovers* to the painter Vanessa Bell, and Bell's sister, the novelist Virginia Woolf, in turn relayed his approval to the composer Ethel Smyth, who was a friend of Lee's. Smyth then encouraged Fry to write to Lee directly.¹ Fry's warm letter of appreciation, however, was a "delightful, astonishing surprise" to Lee, who confessed to him that she had not received the "recognition... which [she] should have liked when [she] was young, some forty or fifty years ago."² By the early 1930s, Lee further admitted that she feared "all [her] work on aesthetics [was] utterly wasted," and that her hard-won psychological theories had been completely overshadowed by both Freudian psychoanalysis and "Berensonian Connoisseurship"—her somewhat sardonic term for Bernard Berenson's flourishing profession as a consultant to wealthy art collectors.³ With the exception of Fry, it seemed to Lee, neither modern critics nor practitioners of the new psychology cared about the opinions of a Victorian "amateur and jack of all trades" such as herself.⁴

¹ Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 229, cited in Lee, "Selected Letters of Vernon Lee (1856-1935)," ed. Mandy Gagel (PhD diss, Boston University, 2008), 767.

² Vernon Lee to Roger Fry, 31 January 1933, in "Selected Letters," 767.

³ Lee to Fry, 31 January 1933, 768.

⁴ Lee to Fry, 31 January 1933, 769.

But Lee's painful sense of her own obsolescence, which she expressed so candidly to Fry, obscures the significant impact that her work had on twentieth-century aesthetics. As Katherine Mullin points out, most members of the Bloomsbury group had come of age in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and several hailed from the Victorian "intellectual aristocracy" to which Lee also belonged.⁵ Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell's father was Leslie Stephen, the prominent man of letters who had edited a posthumous collection of W. K. Clifford's essays: it was Stephen who, a decade later, welcomed Lee into Clifford's old circle. Consequently, the "posture of newness" (to quote Mullin) that characterized modernist writing both fed into and drew on an intense interest in the cultural legacy of the Victorians. Peter Nicholls, in his landmark book *Modernisms* (1995), adds that "much that has proved controversial about the literary forms of modernism has its origins in the writing of the nineteenth century."⁶ In order to conclude this dissertation, I will take a brief look at the reception of Lee's ideas in the early twentieth century, particularly among her readers in the Bloomsbury group and the New Critical movement, which emerged in contentious conversation with the formalism of Bloomsbury. The work of Fry, Woolf, Clive Bell, I. A. Richards, and other modernist critics attests to the continued authority of Lee's psychological aesthetics and, more broadly, the complicated post-Victorian legacy of evolutionary aestheticism. Accelerating to the present day, I will subsequently situate some of the fundamental ideas of evolutionary aestheticism in relation to the recent groundswell of interest in a politically engaged and ethically committed aesthetics.

Of the core members of the Bloomsbury group, Fry, Bell, and Woolf show the most interest in Lee's earlier theories of beauty and ugliness, in part because these writers engaged

⁵ Katherine Mullin, "Victorian Bloomsbury," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. Victoria Rosner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23.

⁶ Mullin, "Victorian Bloomsbury," 19; Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

seriously with the tradition of aesthetic scholarship that Walter Pater had launched in the 1870s. Fry in particular, who was nearly a generation older than his Bloomsbury colleagues, was steeped in nineteenth-century aesthetics.⁷ At Cambridge, Fry received a degree in the natural sciences and briefly considered continuing his scientific work before electing instead to attend art school. While he is most famous for organizing several Post-Impressionist exhibitions in the early 1910s—and thereby ushering in a new era in British visual art—Fry was originally an Italian Renaissance specialist who had spent much of the 1890s in Italy, honing his creative and critical skills by studying the Old Masters.⁸ His first book, *Giovanni Bellini* (1899), reflects this course of scientific and aesthetic training in several ways. First, the book conducts a distinctly Morellian survey of Bellini’s body of work, which Fry identifies by pinpointing “peculiar,” telltale details such as the arrangement of drapery or the composition of hands. In the book’s preface, Fry thanks Berenson—by now a recognized authority on Franco Morelli’s method—for his “generous encouragement and learned advice” throughout the project.⁹ Secondly, Fry’s tendency to explain Bellini’s art as a byproduct of the artist’s personality and the conditions of fifteenth-century Venice is reminiscent of both Lee’s and Pater’s historicism: the “happy serenity of Bellini’s art,” Fry writes, “spring[s] in part from the good fortune of his life,” and in part from the general “splendour” of Venetian customs.¹⁰ For Fry, as for Pater, Lee, and Berenson, a painting always bears traces of the artist’s temperament as well as the prevailing zeitgeist of its epoch, and it is the role of the art critic to tease out and disambiguate these sources.

⁷ Laura Marcus, “Bloomsbury Aesthetics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bloomsbury Group*, 162.

⁸ Marcus, “Bloomsbury Aesthetics,” 162.

⁹ Roger Fry, *Giovanni Bellini* (London: Unicorn Press, 1899), 19, i.

¹⁰ Fry, *Giovanni Bellini*, 1, 3.

In his later criticism, Fry postulates a more recognizably modernist aesthetics that both challenges and sustains elements of nineteenth-century evolutionary aestheticism. His influential volume *Vision and Design* (1920)—a collection of essays and lectures spanning from 1900 to 1920—illustrates how he forged modernist aesthetic principles from Victorian precedents. Although Fry’s writing generally lacks Lee’s experimental ambition, it nonetheless demonstrates his continued interest in the physiology and psychology of aesthetics: he explains, for instance, that the immediate attraction of Post-Impressionism is its more “scientific evaluation of color.”¹¹ Like many of his aesthetic forebears, moreover, Fry’s grounding in natural science leads him to make a “great distinction” between “actual life” (the realm of activity, morality, and ethics) and the contemplative, “imaginative life” (the realm of aesthetic emotion).¹² “Actual life,” in Fry’s explicitly Darwinian understanding, subjects individuals to the coercive pressures of basic survival: the “processes of natural selection,” he writes in “An Essay in Aesthetics” (1909), have instilled in us various “nervous mechanisms” that, in turn, compel us to take an appropriate “responsive action.”¹³ The “imaginative life,” by contrast, consists in psychic experiences that do not result in any concomitant reaction. In our imaginative life, he explains, “the whole consciousness may be focussed [*sic*] upon the perceptive and emotional aspects of the experience,” and we consequently “become true spectators” of the world around us.¹⁴ For Fry, art both captures and stimulates these intervals of pleasurable passivity by “present[ing] a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence.”¹⁵ Fry thus arrives at a counter-

¹¹ Roger Fry, “Retrospect,” in *Vision and Design*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 201.

¹² Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” in *Vision and Design*, 13.

¹³ Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” 13.

¹⁴ Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” 13, 14.

¹⁵ Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics,” 15.

natural, amoral, and escapist aesthetics by way of the same scientific logic that led many Victorian critics—including Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Grant Allen, and Vernon Lee herself—to aestheticism. This logic also attracts Fry to the egalitarian economic ideals of his predecessors: while he stops short of endorsing socialism, he postulates (in an unmistakable gesture toward the politics of Wilde and William Morris) that a socialist “Great State” might free talented individuals to pursue their art without regard to its market value.¹⁶

Since Fry readily accepted the same scientific facts upon which Pater, Wilde, Lee, and others premised their aestheticism, he largely agreed with their beliefs in the sacrosanct and special nature of aesthetic feeling. To Fry, however, the separation between art and “actual life” complicated attempts to assign any social, moral, or evolutionary value to beauty beyond its capacity to stimulate the individual imagination. For the evolutionary aesthetes of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, the diffuse generational advantages of aesthetic feeling arose from its status as an evolved instinct without short-term survival value. In a departure from this line of thinking, Fry hesitated to extend the liberating effects of solitary aesthetic experience to society or the species as a whole, in part because he deemphasized the physiological aspects of aesthetic encounter. “All art,” he remarks in the introduction to an exhibit he organized in 1912, “depends upon cutting off the practical responses to sensations of ordinary life, thereby setting free a pure and as it were *disembodied* functioning of the spirit.”¹⁷ Unlike Allen, Lee, and Berenson, who connected the spiritual benefits of beauty to the corporeal processes of sensation, Fry posited an aesthetics that allowed observers to transcend their bodies entirely: an aesthetics in which the end goal was not bodily harmony or health, but an almost ascetic disregard for bodily existence

¹⁶ Not long after he first published his essay on “Art and Socialism,” Fry founded the Omega Workshop: a design firm, in the tradition of Morris & Co., which sought to produce beautiful and useful home furnishings. Fry, “Art and Socialism” (1912), in *Vision and Design*, 54; Marcus, “Bloomsbury Aesthetics,” 173.

¹⁷ Fry, “The French Post-Impressionists,” in *Vision and Design*, 169. Emphasis mine.

altogether. More important, the rarefied and intensely personal nature of Fry's aesthetics—"it seems to be as remote from actual life and its practical utilities as the most useless mathematical theory," he remarks in the conclusion to *Vision and Design*—dissuaded him from aligning the discrete history of art with the greater evolutionary history of humankind, as his Victorian predecessors had done.¹⁸ Aesthetic emotion, for Fry, was simply too "elusive" and "uncommon" to produce change on an evolutionary scale.¹⁹ His rejection of the Eurocentric "tyranny of the Graeco-Roman tradition" and his corresponding enthusiasm for ancient American and African art also speak to his skepticism about the progressive narratives that defined evolutionary aestheticism.²⁰ Laura Marcus, in her helpful summation of Bloomsbury aesthetics, thus characterizes Fry's work as "transitional, . . . situated between the 'empathic' and 'physiological' aesthetics of the late nineteenth century . . . and the 'autonomy aesthetics' of Modernism."²¹

We can detect a similar ambivalence toward late Victorian aesthetics in the work of art critic Clive Bell, Fry's younger Bloomsbury colleague. Bell's seminal book on aesthetics, *Art* (1914)—which emerged from his experience of Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibits—is a case in point.²² In *Art*, Bell delves into many of the questions about perception and emotional response that guided Victorian inquiries into aesthetics. Furthermore, his attempt to pinpoint the essential element common to all visual art—what he termed "significant form," or the "moving combinations and arrangements" of line and color that constitute the unique appeal of artistic objects—certainly recalls the sweeping theoretical ambitions of the Victorian "science of

¹⁸ Fry, "Retrospect," 211.

¹⁹ Fry, "Retrospect," 211.

²⁰ Fry, "Ancient American Art," in *Vision and Design* 76.

²¹ Marcus, "Bloomsbury Aesthetics," 165.

²² Marcus, "Bloomsbury Aesthetics," 169.

aesthetics.”²³ Bell’s formalism also broadly echoes many of the central tenets of nineteenth-century aestheticism, including its juxtaposition of art against a brutal and unsightly natural world (“art transports us,” he declares, “from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation”), its consequent fascination with decorative and nonrepresentational art, its eschewal of moralism, and its simultaneous insistence on the intrinsic ethical value of aesthetic experience (Bell, building on the ethics of philosopher G. E. Moore, claims that art is “above morals, or rather, all art is moral because...works of art are immediate means to good”).²⁴ Although Bell had reached intellectual maturity in the early twentieth century, the subjective nature of his aesthetics looks back to the early work of Pater and his heirs: Bell allows that he is “making aesthetics a purely subjective business,” because “we have no other means of recognizing a work of art than our feelings for it.”²⁵ His consequent definition of good criticism—the role of the critic, for Bell, is not to instruct the artist, but to train the tastes of an audience by “making [them] see” significant form—also bears similarities to Wilde’s, Lee’s, and Berenson’s respective notions of ethical, pro-social criticism.²⁶

At the same time, Bell distanced himself from the Paterian tradition in several striking ways. Most apparently, he had little regard for the aesthetic worth of Renaissance art, which he considered overly invested in representational detail and “technical swagger.”²⁷ More significant for the legacy of evolutionary aestheticism, his distaste for the period extended to the scholarly methods that some evolutionary aesthetes applied to Renaissance studies. “To criticise a work of

²³ Clive Bell, “What is Art?,” in *Art*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 11.

²⁴ Bell, “What is Art?,” 25, 20.

²⁵ Bell, “What is Art?,” 8-9.

²⁶ Bell, “What is Art?,” 9.

²⁷ Bell, “What is Art?,” 23.

art historically is to play the science-besotted fool,” he remarks in *Art*: “no more disastrous theory ever issued from the brain of a charlatan than that of evolution in art. Giotto did not creep, a grub, that Titian might flaunt, a butterfly.”²⁸ To Bell, the Renaissance was “nothing more than a big kink” in the long decline from the vital art of early Christianity to the scientifically accurate, but spiritually impoverished, art of the Victorian period.²⁹ He thus calls into question both aestheticism’s valorization of Renaissance humanism—which he repeatedly describes as a decadent, “disease[d]” materialism—and the teleological tendencies that pervaded much of Victorian scientific and literary culture.³⁰ (His caricature of extant scholarship on Giotto and Titian pointedly targets John Addington Symonds and perhaps also Allen, both of whom used explicitly “evolutionary” paradigms in their art historical work.³¹) Bell’s conspicuous admiration for “primitive” art, which he felt conveyed significant form to observers more directly and efficiently than modern art, further compounds his rejection of evolutionary aestheticism and its progressive conceptions of history.³²

²⁸ Bell, “Art and Life,” in *Art*, 102.

²⁹ Bell here uses “kink” in its most obvious sense: the Renaissance is a “twist” or “curl” in the otherwise uniform downward slope of post-Byzantine art history. Curiously, his usage also seems to suggest the figurative definition of “kink” as a personal quirk or whim, often resulting from physical or mental illness. While the modern-day understanding of “kink” as a deviant sexual proclivity postdates *Art*, Bell undoubtedly draws on contemporary pathological connotations when he applies the term to the Renaissance, especially given the fact that he elsewhere associates the period with decay and disease. Bell, “The Christian Slope,” in *Art*, 160; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “kink, n.1,” accessed 17 January 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/103561?rskey=7mpJjM&result=1>.

³⁰ Bell, “The Christian Slope,” 155.

³¹ See John Addington Symonds, “On the Application of Evolutionary Principles to Art and Literature” (1890) and Grant Allen, “Evolution in Early Italian Art” (1895).

³² Bell’s assessment of primitive art, however positive, is fully in line with twentieth-century colonialist attitudes. As Marianne Torgovnick argues, modern writings about the primitive are more often “reactions to the present” than genuine attempts at ethnographic understanding. In this context, Bell’s and Fry’s celebrations of African drawing and Aztec design are also calculated rejections of Victorian painting; troublingly, Torgovnick further reminds us, their praise for primitive aesthetics perpetuates insidious stereotypes of indigenous people as childlike and somehow more authentic. Bell, “What is Art?,” 23; Marianne Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8, 99.

In a subtler, but no less important way, Bell undercut much of the utopian power of Victorian aesthetics by shifting his attention away from “beauty” and toward significant form. As Marcus explains, Bell “insiste[d] on the radical autonomy of the aesthetic sphere and aesthetic response” more strenuously than either Fry or anyone in Fry’s nineteenth-century milieu.³³ Bell thus considered “Beauty” too loose and general a term to describe the special quality that belonged exclusively to good art: for Bell, the emotional response that most “beautiful” objects (including “birds and flowers and the wings of butterflies”) elicit is “very different” from “that which [we] feel for pictures, pots, temples and statues.”³⁴ While his dismissal of nature as unaesthetic aligns with the general principles of aestheticism, his hard-and-fast distinction between the beauty of “birds and flowers” and the significant form of art contradicts the sexual selective account of aesthetics that formed the basis of evolutionary aestheticism. For progressive aesthetes such as Allen, Wilde, and Lee, the fact that a complex, nuanced aesthetic sense had evolved from the taste for ornament in mates proved that aesthetic discrimination had powerfully shaped the species for the better; the dissemination of an ideal aesthetic temperament, they believed, promised further improvement in the future. But in order for self-cultivation to contribute to the development of the species, all aesthetic experiences—whether the object of admiration was a landscape, a beautiful body, a painting, or a set of blue china—had to activate the same basic, salutary biological processes. By divorcing everyday experiences of the beautiful from aesthetic responses to artistic form, Bell cut off the pathway through which aesthetic self-culture could create long-term evolutionary change. So while Bell claims that art can precipitate a morally valuable sense of “spiritual exaltation,” this experience

³³ Marcus, “Bloomsbury Aesthetics,” 171.

³⁴ Bell, “What is Art?,” 13.

is an isolated good, limited to the individual who enjoys this exaltation: for this reason, Bell admits that he is only “tempted to believe that art might prove the world’s salvation” in his “giddier moments.”³⁵

Virginia Woolf, perhaps the most famous member of the Bloomsbury group, likewise revised and adapted nineteenth-century scientific aesthetics as she formulated her own theories about beauty and art. Lee’s work was especially influential in this regard. As Dennis Denisoff, Kirsty Martin, and others have argued, Woolf’s vexed sense of personal and intellectual affinity for the older writer palpably influenced both her novels and her nonfiction.³⁶ On the one hand, Woolf was (to use Christa Zorn’s words) a “pungent critic of Lee’s prose style,” which Woolf considered obscure, overwrought, and idiosyncratic.³⁷ Moreover, Woolf believed that this prose style entailed serious consequences for Lee’s capacity as an aesthetic critic. In a review of Lee’s essay collection *Laurus Nobilis* (1909), Woolf claims that Lee lacks the “divine impersonality” required to purify subjective impressions into clear-sighted assessments of the world as it truly exists.³⁸ For Woolf, Lee’s entire worldview belonged to a type of late nineteenth-century rationalism that Woolf associates, in her unfinished retrospective “A Sketch of the Past” (1940), with her father’s cohort and its now-quaint “reverence” for “eccentric” and polymathic geniuses.³⁹ On the other hand, Woolf clearly respected Lee’s erudition as well as her genuine

³⁵ Bell, “What is Art?,” 35.

³⁶ Dennis Denisoff, “The Forest beyond the Frame: Picturing Women’s Desires in Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf,” in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 252; Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy: Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 82.

³⁷ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 10.

³⁸ Qtd. in Zorn, *Vernon Lee*, 14.

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), 136.

devotion to the beautiful. In her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf includes Lee in a list of exemplary women experts, alongside the classicist Jane Harrison and the Middle East scholar Gertrude Bell.⁴⁰ In a later untitled and unpublished sketch, Woolf's fictionalized narrator reflects on her connection to the writer whose name had become almost synonymous with the "spirit" of Italy: "Yes, I knew Vernon Lee...I'm one of those people who want beauty, if it's only a stone, or a pot...I never spoke to [Lee]. But in a sense, the true sense, I who love beauty always feel, I knew Vernon Lee."⁴¹ Most tellingly, Woolf's Hogarth Press—the modernist institution that she founded with her spouse, the critic and political theorist Leonard Woolf—published Lee's treatise *The Poet's Eye* in 1926. In the essay, Lee argues that poetic meter "elicit[s] a degree of imitative activity" in the reader and thus makes its audience feel "stronger, freer, more purposeful": we recognize in her statement both the theoretical framework and the optimistic tenor of psychological aesthetics.⁴² That Woolf published the piece suggests that she valued, if not fully accepted, Lee's psychological explanation for the appeal of verse.

Woolf's artistic responses to contemporary philosophy also indicate her more substantive agreements both with Lee and, more broadly, with nineteenth-century evolutionary aestheticism. As Ann Banfield points out, Woolf was familiar with the "new philosophical Realism" of mathematicians such as Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, who drew on their scientific backgrounds in order to theorize an epistemology that reduced the "common-sense world" into "sense-data" and atomized "perspectives."⁴³ Banfield consequently argues that

⁴⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ed. Shari Watling (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001), 94.

⁴¹ Woolf, "[Portrait 7]," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick, 2nd ed. (Orlando: Harcourt, 1989), 247-46.

⁴² Lee, *The Poet's Eye* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926), 11.

⁴³ Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

many of Woolf's most distinctive formal practices—including her experiments in stream-of-consciousness and non-linear storytelling, her use of multiple narrators, her elegiac posture, and her luminous descriptions of physical objects—were responses to “the world revealed by science.”⁴⁴ Like Lee and her nineteenth-century predecessors, then, Woolf derived her concern for form in part from scientific propositions about the nature of perception, its basis in cognitive processes, and its alignment (or misalignment) with external reality. Following the logic of the evolutionary aesthetes, Woolf further discerned the ethicality of art in its ability to redress or compensate for the troubling perplexities of the world, at least as science understood it. In *A Room of One's Own*, for instance, she concludes that literature must give its readers renewed access to a “reality” that modern philosophy had proved to be “erratic” and “undependable”: the “business” of the writer, she asserts, is to “find,” “collect,” and “communicate [this reality] to the rest of us,” thereby granting us intervals of “intenser...invigorating life.”⁴⁵

Where Woolf departs from Lee, Berenson, and other writers in the evolutionary aesthetic tradition is in her conception of how, precisely, art “invigorates” life. In *A Room of One's Own* and several of her other writings on aesthetics, Woolf maintains that art must always seek to depict an underlying material “reality.” For the evolutionary aesthetes, reality consisted in the demoralizing natural conditions of struggle and violence that all humans should rightly reject; furthermore, the peculiar physiological and psychological properties of sensation meant that aesthetic experiences (and culture at large) could serve as both bulwarks against this reality and aids in the creation of alternative conditions for living. Woolf, on the contrary, thought of objective reality—in the form of raw, unprocessed sense-data—as an escape from the constraints

⁴⁴ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 3.

⁴⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 129-30.

of subjective perception. Hence Woolf's pioneering interest in film: as Marcus explains in her study of modernist film criticism, Woolf's engagements with the genre were more substantial than those of her Bloomsbury contemporaries.⁴⁶ Woolf's essay "The Cinema" (1926), for instance, hails the new medium for its intimations of "life as it is when we have no part in it," and "beauty [that] will continue to be beautiful whether we behold it or not."⁴⁷ Importantly, Woolf affirms that film can only achieve artistic expression because of its ability to draw its audience into this "different reality," one abstracted from the bounded and singular perspectives through which individuals typically see the world.⁴⁸ Since film, Woolf continues, can briefly surmount "the pettiness of actual existence"—a pettiness closely tied to our sensory limitations—she anticipates that the medium will eventually mature into an art form uniquely capable of conveying the transcendent "continuity of human life."⁴⁹ The motion picture camera, as Woolf understands it, thus has the tantalizing potential to overturn nineteenth-century aesthetics by circumventing the psychological subjectivity upon which this aesthetics was based.⁵⁰

In her own writing, Woolf aspires toward similar forms of perspective-less representation: or, in Banfield's words, "the abolition of the subject but not of its object."⁵¹ The results of this aesthetics of disembodiment are perhaps most clearly audible in Woolf's

⁴⁶ Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 99.

⁴⁷ Woolf, "The Cinema," *Arts* (June 1926), 314.

⁴⁸ Woolf, "The Cinema," 314.

⁴⁹ Woolf, "The Cinema," 314, 316.

⁵⁰ It is perhaps for this reason that film, as Marcus points out, "did not figure on [Lee's] conceptual horizon": although Lee lived long enough to witness the nascence of filmmaking as an art, and her aesthetics of empathy helped guide early film critics such as Victor Freeburg and Hugo Münsterberg, she herself never discussed cinema at length. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 216.

⁵¹ Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 53.

experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), which recounts the interconnected lives of its central characters through a series of first-person soliloquies and stylized dialogues. Over the course of the novel, six childhood friends discuss major events (including marriages, love affairs, and the untimely death of one of their own) in veiled and imagistic language that tends to elide, rather than differentiate, their identities. Late in *The Waves*, the sensitive Bernard—the closest the novel has to a focal character—observes that he is “not one person” but “many people,” and he consequently does not know “how to distinguish [his] life” from that of his five friends.⁵² The novel’s ultimate ambition is to render this continuity as faithfully as possible: to capture a holistic vision of these characters’ fragmented and intertwined subjectivities by “describ[ing],” as Bernard further reflects, “the world seen without a self.”⁵³ To do so, Woolf eschews many of the formal conventions of novelistic storytelling, particularly the depiction of character as logical, self-contained, and consistent over time.

The formal heterodoxy of *The Waves*, I suggest, speaks to Woolf’s most fundamental break with Lee’s intellectual tradition. In the context of her writings about her father as well as her critiques of Lee’s lack of “impersonality,” Woolf’s narration “without a self” strikes a small, but pointed, blow to the individualism at the center of the Aesthetic Movement. Pater’s practice of relentless introspection, Wilde’s strident insistence on the autonomy of the critic, and Lee’s analyses of physiological responses to art were all rooted in the assumption that individual impressions were paramount, and that the perceiving subject was necessarily the arbiter of taste and meaning. To Woolf, however, these ideas betokened simplistic views of selfhood that overestimated the coherence of individuals and, in doing so, often had the unintended effect of

⁵² Woolf, *The Waves* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959), 276.

⁵³ Woolf, *The Waves*, 287.

reducing real people to mere objects. For instance, at the conclusion of her biography *Roger Fry* (1940), Woolf decisively proclaims that “human beings are not works of art.”⁵⁴ Her comment, nominally about the difficulties of biographical writing, also subtly reproaches Pater’s aestheticism: although she admired Pater’s masterful prose and keen eye for beauty, her refusal to aestheticize Fry’s life repudiates Pater’s tendency to subject the “engaging personality” to the same aesthetic scrutiny as a “song or picture.”⁵⁵ The purpose of art, for Woolf, was not to indulge the observer’s longing for self-realization or self-determination—possibly at the expense of other people—but to penetrate the semblance of individuality in order to free the observer, if only for a few moments, from the encumbrance of subjectivity itself.

Around the same time that members of the Bloomsbury group were giving full expression to their artistic and political concerns, several academics from a slightly younger generation—including I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden, who, like many of the Bloomsbury men, attended Cambridge—were beginning to formulate alternative approaches to literary interpretation. Both Richards’s and Ogden’s formalist theories, which would lay the foundations for the New Criticism, differed in many ways from the aesthetics of Bloomsbury, but they were similarly indebted to the psychological aesthetics of the previous century. Modern-day scholars such as Benjamin Morgan and Jesse Cordes Selbin have recently identified connections between Victorian reading practices and the methods of the New Criticism. Selbin, for instance, argues that the “populist pedagogy” of John Ruskin and other Victorian reformers “anticipated certain protocols of New Critical close reading,” particularly Richards’s attempts to “democratize literary study” by recasting criticism as a set of portable skills that any reader might apply to a

⁵⁴ Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 294.

⁵⁵ Walter Pater, preface to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), xix-xx.

work of literature, regardless of her historical knowledge of the text.⁵⁶ In a slightly different way, Morgan traces some of the aspects of the New Criticism directly to Lee's theory of empathy, which she applied in her later career to literature as well as visual art.⁵⁷ Morgan argues that Lee preempted the New Criticism by promoting empathy as a "critical mode" for confronting all of the arts: her "physiological formalism," he adds, proved threatening to Richards and his colleagues, because critical empathy "promised to reconcile Victorian physiological aesthetics" with emerging New Critical practices.⁵⁸

Like the Bloomsbury writers, then, twentieth-century critics such as Richards, Ogden, W. K. Wimsatt, and René Wellek often conspicuously (and, as Morgan claims, strategically) dismissed Lee's theory of empathy as excessively intimate and emotional, even as they relied on the psychological aesthetics that she and other evolutionary aesthetes had developed in previous decades. In their early books *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1922) and *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), Richards and Ogden (joined by their *Foundations* co-author, James Wood) set out to resolve "the chaos in aesthetics" by classifying existing accounts of beauty into three categories: unsystematic theories that treat beauty as an "unanalysable" quality; instrumentalist theories that equate beauty with truth, representational fidelity, or social good; and, finally, psychological theories that offer rational explanations for beauty.⁵⁹ In *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, Richards, Ogden, and Wood attribute these "psychological views" to the Victorian

⁵⁶ Jesse Cordes Selbin, "'Read with Attention': John Cassell, John Ruskin, and the History of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies* 58 (2016): 495.

⁵⁷ Benjamin Morgan, "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies* 55 (2012): 34.

⁵⁸ Morgan, "Critical Empathy," 47.

⁵⁹ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1927), xix; Ogden, Richards, and James Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), 24.

evolutionists and, more precisely, to Herbert Spencer's theory of play, which gave rise to a prominent non-utilitarian aesthetics of pleasure that they call the "English aesthetic."⁶⁰ In Spencer's psychological tradition, the authors include the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana as well as Allen (whose *Physiological Aesthetics*, they observe, was widely read on the Continent), Fry, Bell, and Lee.

Certainly, Richards and his co-authors dedicate several pages to their critiques of psychological aesthetics—especially empathy, which they describe as a "vaguer" and "more limited" form of Allen's and Santayana's respective hedonisms.⁶¹ At the same time, the authors append to these psychological theories their own of conception of "synaesthesia": their term for the "evanescent" experience of "both equilibrium and harmony" that beautiful objects stimulate within individuals.⁶² Insofar as "synaesthesia" describes dynamic states of equilibrium, in which certain sensory and emotional "impulses" counterbalance one another, Richards, Ogden, and Wood seem to refine, rather than reject, the Spencerian premises of Victorian aesthetics.⁶³ Significantly, this idea of synaesthesia also hints encouragingly, if indistinctly, toward methods of social amelioration through aesthetic experience. The "educative value of art," the authors further explain, derives from the capacity for synaesthesia to facilitate "contact with other minds than our own" and, simultaneously, to induce "disinterested" mental states that allow us to "become more ourselves" by freeing us from the stifling pressures of daily life.⁶⁴ The authors' descriptions of synaesthesia as a process for both "individualisation" and "sympathetic

⁶⁰ Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 50.

⁶¹ Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 69.

⁶² Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 75-76.

⁶³ Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 72.

⁶⁴ Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 75, 79.

understanding” (terms that remind us of those cornerstones of Spencerian progress, differentiation and integration) culminate in the surprisingly life-affirming conclusion of *Foundations*: “the ultimate value of equilibrium,” they write, “is that it is better to be fully than partially alive.”⁶⁵

In Richards’s most influential work, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), the ethical and democratic implications of synaesthesia give rise to a philanthropic vision of criticism that seeks—in the manner of Wilde, Berenson, and Lee—to transform the individual benefits of aesthetic encounter into widespread social good. Early in *Principles*, Richards allows that experimental psychology has revealed the aesthetic functions of “obscure processes” such as “empathy” and “muscular imagery,” and he endorses a rational and “psychological” (rather than “ethical” or “metaphysical”) method for assessing aesthetic value.⁶⁶ Beauty, Richards reiterates, is the term we append to qualities that foster equilibrium among our many physical and psychological impulses. Importantly, Richards insists that these impulses are active in every aspect of life, and he consequently reasons that exposure to beauty can refine these impulses in ways that affect one’s general conduct. “No life can be excellent,” he asserts, “in which the elementary responses are disorganised and confused”; “bad taste and crude responses,” he adds, are “actually a root evil from which other defects follow.”⁶⁷ Richards thus urges the critic to engage directly with the “wider social and moral aspects of the arts”: in doing so, the critic can both “bridge the gulf” between the populace and the cultured elite and “protect the arts against the crude moralities of Puritans and perverts.”⁶⁸ The model of critical outreach that he describes

⁶⁵ Ogden, Richards, and Wood, *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, 80, 91.

⁶⁶ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 8, 9, 23.

⁶⁷ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 62.

⁶⁸ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 36-37.

here, in which the cultural elite make a concerted effort to disseminate good art and train the popular taste, is in keeping with the forms of ethical criticism and connoisseurship that emerged from evolutionary aestheticism in the late nineteenth century. So while Richards explicitly rejects “art for art’s sake” and its “myth of the ‘contemplative’ or ‘aesthetic’ attitude,” he nonetheless counts Pater among the most famous expounders of the “‘moral’ theory of art” upon which Richards founds his critical system.⁶⁹ For Richards, as for the evolutionary aesthetes, the moral and social benefits of art, such as they were, lay in the psychological states that artistic form induces in sufficiently sensitive observers; an artwork’s subject matter and historical provenance, while not trivial, were secondary to the aesthetic effects the artwork produced.

In its earliest form, then, the New Criticism retained some of the core principles of evolutionary aestheticism, including its credence in psychological accounts of aesthetic sensation, its elevation of artistic form over content (which was both an elitist and a democratic idea), its investment in the social benefits of good taste, and its consequent celebration of the critic. At the same time, the New Criticism, after Richards, discarded evolutionary aestheticism’s most original philosophical insights: namely, its revulsion at the violence of Darwinian nature, its attendant desire to extricate art from the worst conditions of “life,” and its interest in the individual as the locus of nonviolent evolutionary development. Stripped of its evolutionary motivation, the image of aestheticism that persisted into the twentieth century—in the work of the Bloomsbury group and the New Critics—lost much of its radical, utopian character. In later twentieth-century debates about the New Criticism, “aestheticism” thus often appears as an accusation of political quietism, a disparaging byword for aristocratic indifference to art’s ideological baggage. Wellek, in a 1978 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, responds with

⁶⁹ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 71, 79.

indignation to just such a charge. Detractors of the New Criticism, Wellek observes, often equate it with an “‘esoteric aestheticism,’ a revival of ‘art for art’s sake,’ uninterested in the human meaning, the social function and effect of literature.”⁷⁰ He dismisses the accusation as “baseless”: while aesthetes and New Critics agree that the “aesthetic experience is set off from immediate practical concerns,” the New Criticism (so Wellek argues) belongs to an older tradition of historically conscious aesthetics stretching back to Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and developed in the twentieth century by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot (not, Wellek implies, by scholars such as Vernon Lee, who Eliot derisively references in a draft of *The Waste Land*).⁷¹ In protest against those who would denigrate the New Criticism as aloof and irrelevant, Wellek gestures, albeit vaguely, to the cultural and social advantages of criticism: “the role of criticism is great for the health of poetry, of the language, and ultimately of society.”⁷²

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s—a period coinciding with the rise of feminist theory, postcolonial theory, the New Historicism, and other critical approaches—these tailored critiques of aestheticism and the New Criticism fed into larger debates about the political efficacy of aesthetics in general. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), for instance, the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton offers a jaded view of aesthetic philosophy and its role in the perpetuation of capitalist ideologies. On the one hand, Eagleton argues, the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities,” which in turn furnishes a humanistic foundation for “revolutionary opposition to

⁷⁰ René Wellek, “New Criticism: Pro and Contra,” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978): 611.

⁷¹ Wellek, “New Criticism: Pro and Contra,” 611, 616; Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell, introduction to *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, ed. Pulham and Maxwell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

⁷² Wellek, “New Criticism: Pro and Contra,” 616.

bourgeois utility.”⁷³ In this way, aesthetics discloses both a “liberatory concern” for the autonomous individual and a “utopian image of reconciliation” across social, geopolitical, and cultural divides.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Eagleton sees the aesthetic as complicit in the entrenchment of capitalist values, in part because the liberal “idea of autonomy” that emerges from aesthetic discourse “provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations.”⁷⁵ Although Eagleton, by his own admission, largely ignores British aesthetics in favor of the German tradition, we can readily extend his assessment to Victorian aestheticism: according to his logic, the very forms of individualism that made the Aesthetic Movement politically potent in its time also insidiously reinforced the ideal of the self-determining consumer that underpins capitalist society.⁷⁶

More recently, however, many scholars (including several specialists in nineteenth-century British literature and culture) have responded to Eagleton’s critique by attempting to recover modes of aesthetic engagement that might challenge, rather than fortify, the status quo. Regenia Gagnier, as we have seen, disputes what she sees as “reified notions of ‘the Aesthetic’” (such as Eagleton’s) by examining the “plurality of aesthetics in Victorian Britain.”⁷⁷ While Gagnier recognizes the ways in which aestheticism, through its model of the “pleasured body,” helped enshrine modern consumerism, she situates the pleasured body among several other “competing models” of aesthetic experience in the period and thereby provides a more fine-

⁷³ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 9.

⁷⁴ Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 9.

⁷⁵ Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 9.

⁷⁶ Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 11.

⁷⁷ Regenia Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 141, 143, note 14, 131.

grained explication of Victorian history.⁷⁸ She also credits Pater, Wilde, and other aesthetes for both conceding “their own implication within consumer, or commodity, culture” and attempting to address their involvement in capitalist ideologies through their creative work.⁷⁹ In doing so, Gagnier opens up nineteenth-century aesthetic, economic, and scientific discourses to Marxist analysis while acknowledging the nuanced political allegiances of the writers—many of them fiercely skeptical of free markets—who participated in these discourses.

By comparison, Isobel Armstrong in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) advances a more comprehensive critique of both Eagleton and the anti-aesthetic theoretical trends that he helped promote. Put concisely, Armstrong builds on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of play as well as the modernist criticism of Theodor Adorno in order to envision an aesthetic “grounded in an experience that happens to everybody.”⁸⁰ That the sense of beauty is “embedded” in universal “processes...of consciousness” poses, for Armstrong, the radically democratic potential of the aesthetic.⁸¹ Expanding on Armstrong’s theoretical intervention, the Romanticist Simon Malpas joins Shakespeare scholar John J. Joughin in proposing a critical approach that they term “the New Aestheticism”: the phrase also serves as the title of a 2003 anthology, curated by Joughin and Malpas, of exemplary essays that apply the theory to particular texts.⁸² While contributors to *The New Aestheticism* represent a diverse array of scholarly specializations, they all share a concern for the aesthetic experience of art and, crucially, a desire

⁷⁸ Gagnier, “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure,” 136, 141.

⁷⁹ Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.

⁸⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 58.

⁸¹ Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic*, 2.

⁸² John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, introduction to *The New Aestheticism*, ed. Joughin and Malpas (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

to analyze these experiences in their own right, without “rush[ing] to diagnose art’s contamination by politics and culture.”⁸³ Joughin, Malpas, and their colleagues address the criticisms leveled at aestheticism and its theoretical legacy by professing the “transformative cognitive potential of the aesthetic”—more precisely, of aesthetic “encounter”—and the “world-disclosing capacity” of aesthetic criticism.⁸⁴ Beyond the field of nineteenth-century studies, both Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) and Peter De Bolla’s *Art Matters* (2001) make important contributions to this ongoing effort in cultural criticism to reevaluate and recuperate the aesthetic response to art.

The complex intersections of aesthetics and politics have also generated interest in disciplines besides English, particularly in modern-day philosophy.⁸⁵ Most intriguingly, one of the key utopian features of evolutionary aestheticism—that is, its innovative claims for the revolutionary power of taste—reemerges in the work of radical British philosopher, feminist critic, and peace activist Kate Soper. Any ideological through line from the Victorian aesthetes to Soper, an important figure in the British New Left, might appear improbable in light of aestheticism’s historically hostile reception among leftist academics. Soper’s writings on anti-consumerist aesthetics, however, reveal some remarkable parallels with the more political iterations of evolutionary aestheticism. In much of her recent work, she proposes that we combat the ecological and socioeconomic devastation of consumer capitalism by fostering an ethic of “new” or “alternative hedonism,” which will encourage affluent consumers to attach aesthetic

⁸³ Joughin and Malpas, introduction to *The New Aestheticism*, 1.

⁸⁴ Joughin and Malpas, introduction to *The New Aestheticism*, 12, 14.

⁸⁵ Gary Iseminger, for example, defends a version of aestheticism in *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (2004); while Iseminger’s “new aestheticism” is quite distinct from either Victorian aestheticism or its more recent resurrection in literary criticism, his willingness to explore the psychological and biological aspects of aesthetic appreciation demonstrates the continued traction of certain evolutionary aesthetic ideas in modern thought. Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5, 25-26.

value to sustainability rather than mere accumulation.⁸⁶ The aim of alternative hedonism, Soper writes in *Troubled Pleasures* (1990),

is not deprivation but a different balance of gratification...Community, friendship, sexual love, conviviality, wild space, music, theater, reading and conversation, fresh air and uncontaminated land and water: it is with these attractions we should be cultivating desire and pandering to the senses, rather than with images of improving shares, the flight to the Bahamas and the second car. We should aspire to a new eroticism of consumption, an altered aesthetic of needs: one which makes the senses recoil from commodities which waste the land, throw up ugly environments, pollute the atmosphere, absorb large quantities of energy and leave a debris of junk in their wake.⁸⁷

While Soper never refers to either Wilde or Allen—surprising given their important articulations of “New Hedonism” in the 1890s—her mission of social change through the training of erotic appetites recalls these aesthetes’ earlier writings. Consider Wilde’s dialogic essay “The Critic as Artist” (1890, revised 1891), in which the aesthete Gilbert speculates about the spiritual and moral ramifications of cultural refinement: those who achieve “true culture,” Gilbert reasons, also attain “the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make the renunciations of the ascetic, but because they...can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm.”⁸⁸ For Soper, as for Wilde, Allen, and many of their fellow aesthetes, the careful cultivation of tastes can channel one’s desires toward more ethical sources of pleasure.

Of course, Soper’s repeated calls for an “aesthetic revisioning” are motivated by the existential crises of our own time, including accelerating climate change and rising economic inequality.⁸⁹ But in its expansive and urgent invocations of the future—one spearheaded by a

⁸⁶ Kate Soper, *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender, and Hedonism* (London: Verso, 1990), 21; “Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning,” *Cultural Studies* 22 (Sept. 2008): 567.

⁸⁷ Soper, *Troubled Pleasures*, 33-34.

⁸⁸ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in *Criticism, Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205.

⁸⁹ Soper, “Alternative Hedonism,” 581.

cosmopolitan, cultured avant-garde—her alternative hedonism both echoes and amplifies her Victorian predecessors. The cultural changes that Soper anticipates, while not explicitly evolutionary, nonetheless require a “gestalt shift of optic and hedonist perception” that will occur over the course of generations.⁹⁰ Heartened, she observes that this shift is already gaining momentum among “affluent global elites,” for whom experiences such as slow food, downsizing, and ecotourism have begun to supplant older, primarily American tokens of the “good life.”⁹¹ She further predicts that, by sensitizing more and more people to the joy (and not just the necessity) of green living, this “anti-consumerist aesthetic” will gradually realign human self-interest with the long-term ecological health of the planet.⁹² At stake, for Soper as well as the evolutionary aesthetes, is nothing less than the continued existence of the human species: she consequently celebrates the “interstitial and emerging” possibilities of culture, even at the “risk” of becoming “too utopian.”⁹³ In Soper’s articulation of alternative hedonism, more explicitly than in either Armstrong’s or Malpas’s respective literary critiques, the return to aesthetics precipitates a careful, clear-eyed optimism about the potential for culture to revolutionize the ways in which we see and interact with our world.

How can we explain this resurgence of critical and philosophical interest, not merely in the notion of aesthetic experience but also in its power to reshape society? At the very least, this strain of utopian aesthetics testifies to the enduring appeal of evolutionary aestheticism’s central aims, despite the near-complete erosion of its scientific authority. In the eighty-five years since Lee expressed to Fry her despair over the declining cachet of her aesthetics, the psychological

⁹⁰ Soper, “Alternative Hedonism,” 579.

⁹¹ Soper, “Alternative Hedonism,” 571.

⁹² Soper, “Alternative Hedonism,” 571.

⁹³ Soper, “Alternative Hedonism,” 578.

and biological claims of evolutionary aestheticism have all but disappeared from scientific writing. In the realm of popular science, speculations about human development, which Victorian writers such as Clifford, Allen, and Wilde directed toward provocative, progressive, and future-oriented social critiques, now more often serve to explain and thus naturalize the status quo.⁹⁴ Victorian evolutionary accounts of the sense of beauty have also lost traction in the twenty-first-century science of aesthetics: next to the sophisticated experiments and cutting-edge imaging of modern neuropsychology, Allen's hypotheses about sexual selection and Lee's gallery observations must appear amateurish and imprecise.⁹⁵ What has survived, however, in both philosophical and literary critical discourse, is evolutionary aestheticism's innovative melding of generous philanthropic vision with a serious commitment to the rights of self-expression, dissident thought, and aesthetic play. That the independent actions of individuals, each pursuing their own pleasures, might somehow yield a more cohesive, harmonious, and ethical society remains as alluring an idea today as it was in the late nineteenth century. Whether or not they take their cues directly from the evolutionary aesthetes, modern-day philosophers and critics continue these aesthetes' work as they search for ways to create a better world without

⁹⁴ A few recent headlines in *Popular Science*—"How Your Spit Evolved," "Are People Getting Dumber? One Geneticist Thinks So"—capture the descriptive mode that seems to characterize modern popular science writing. Kate Baggaley, "How Your Spit Evolved," *Popular Science*, last modified 26 August 2016, <http://www.popsci.com/how-your-spit-evolved>; Rebecca Boyle, "Are People Getting Dumber? One Geneticist Thinks So," *Popular Science*, last modified 19 November 2012, <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2012-11/are-people-getting-dumber-one-geneticist-thinks-so>.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Arthur P. Shimamura and Stephen E. Palmer's recent edited volume *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience* (2012). Several essays refer to theories associated with the evolutionary aesthetes: film scholar Murray Smith discusses Theodor Lipps's idea of empathy, while the neuropsychologist Shimamura includes Bell in his historical overview of aesthetic philosophy. However, not once does a contributor cite Spencer, Pater, Allen, or Lee. Murray Smith, "Triangulating Aesthetic Experience," in *Aesthetic Science: Connecting Minds, Brains, and Experience*, ed. Arthur P. Shimamura and Stephen E. Palmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93; Shimamura, "Toward a Science of Aesthetics: Issues and Ideas," in *Aesthetic Science*, 10.

sacrificing our inborn longing for beauty: that elusive quality which makes life not merely tolerable, but also—to quote Wilde one last time—“lovely and wonderful.”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 205.

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