

# THE AESTHETES

*A SOURCEBOOK*



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## Introduction

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Art for Art's sake! Hail, truest Lord of Hell!  
Hail Genius, Master of the Moral Will!  
'The filthiest of all paintings painted well  
Is mightier than the purest painted ill!  
Yes, mightier than the purest painted well,  
So prone are we toward the broad way to Hell.  
(Tennyson)

The Aesthetic movement, or Art for Art's Sake movement, which in England flourished from the late 1860s until the early 1890s, was one rooted in a series of paradoxes. The profoundest of these paradoxes involves the question whether it is indeed possible for art to exist for its own sake and thus whether the description 'Art for Art's Sake' finally has any real meaning. It was a question which most of the apologists of Aestheticism failed to answer properly and the conviction that the artist was responsible not simply to his art lay behind most of the hostile reactions to the movement.

The first problem though, for the literary critic, is to define historically the Aesthetic movement. Aestheticism pretended both a philosophy of life and a philosophy of art, and so the Aesthetic movement was both a literary and a social phenomenon. In his social guise the aesthete was – and still is – immediately recognisable. A series of fashions for extravagant dress, exaggerated poses, for the cultivation of the beautiful in so diverse a range of objects as wall-papers, flowers and blue china were the most immediately recognisable characteristics of a social cult. All these fashions were modelled upon the example of figures in the literary and artistic world of the 1870s and 1880s, and they created, particularly in London and Oxford, a readily identifiable social phenomenon that was a clearly defined and obvious target for the social satirists of the time. Aestheticism, in one way or another, figured as one of the butts of the precise satire of W. H. Mallock in *The New Republic* in 1877, of the waspish and caustic wit of George Du Maurier's cartoons a few years later in *Punch* and of the affable exaggerations of W. S. Gilbert's

libretto for *Patience* in 1881. And yet the literary movement which generated those absurd fashions for knee-breeches, peacocks' feathers, sunflowers and blue china stubbornly resists precise definition. The Aesthetic movement was in no way a school like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of like-minded artists, their unity publicly advertised by a manifesto and a common signature to their works; but contemporary critics failed to distinguish between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism, and even now, given the perspective of a hundred years, it is not easy to see what actually united so diverse a group of personalities as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Algernon Swinburne and James Abbott McNeill Whistler as a movement, far less what connected them to Pre-Raphaelitism. But to contemporaries the later movement appeared to be only a development of the former, and so Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites became included in generalisations about Aestheticism. And as the origins of Aestheticism are confused, so too is its demise. At some point in the early 1890s, as the cultivation of the beautiful experience for its own sake was replaced as an artistic credo by the cultivation of *any* experience for its own sake, Aestheticism modulated into that movement which we now call Decadence.

None the less, the one leading characteristic that did unify the work of all the main writers (and artists) associated with Aestheticism was their fixed determination to value art far more highly than Victorian literary and art-criticism had hitherto done. The primacy not only of the creation of art, but particularly of the experience of it was the affront to Victorian sensibility that Aestheticism perpetrated. The experience of art was held to be not only equal in value to the experiences of life, but in some cases even capable of transcending them. 'To experience life in the manner of art' was the definition of spiritual success in the terms of Aestheticism: and it is precisely this fundamental revaluation of the relationship between art and life which is the key concern of all Aesthetic criticism and which allows the modern reader a way of exploring the revolutionary nature of the movement.

The first serious claim during the course of the nineteenth century that aesthetics and ethics were entirely separable categories of thought, that art should suffer no incursions from the moral sphere, was made by the French poet and novelist Théophile Gautier in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in 1835. Gautier contrasted beauty with utility and declared unequivocally that beauty

in nature or in art could have no end other than itself. Two decades later those and similar sentiments had crossed the Channel and become crucial elements in Algernon Swinburne's poetry and criticism. In *Poems and Ballads* (1866) he took what had hitherto been forbidden topics as the subject for poetry: illicit kinds of love, blasphemy and indulgent sensuality figured prominently in Swinburne's lyrics. The events that followed the publication of the book formed a pattern that typified responses to the other allegedly scurrilous works produced under the influence of the leading ideas of Aestheticism. Press reviews accused Swinburne of sordidness and depravity and mention was persistently made of his allusions to sexual unnaturalness. *Punch* gave him licence to change his name to its proper form, 'Swineborne'. The immediate consequence was that the book was withdrawn by its original publishers, Edward Moxon, a distinguished house who numbered Tennyson among their authors. Swinburne succeeded in placing it with John Camden Hotten, a publisher with a rather compromised reputation and who quickly urged him to compose and publish a pamphlet, *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, as a defence against the chorus of condemnation that *Poems and Ballads* had encountered. Swinburne's essay was naturally highly polemical. Its concluding paragraphs contained the first sustained plea in English literature for the freedom of art from any limitations imposed by moral considerations. A more closely reasoned, deliberate and certainly more persuasive elaboration of Swinburne's account of what formed the proper relationship between art and morality followed soon afterwards in his study *William Blake*. Swinburne found in Blake, as he had in Gautier and Baudelaire, a precursor of Aestheticism and in his essay he maintained unequivocally that the morality of any work of art was an incidental effect and its formal accomplishment a central one. The argument that art reflected life in such a way as to allow the audience, reader or spectator to make observations about man's moral nature was of course firmly entrenched in Victorian culture: so much so that to call the validity of it into question was tantamount to uttering heresy. Indeed the dominant view in aesthetics, from Plato's *Republic* onwards, is that any experience of art is intrinsically involved with ethics. The prolonged and bitter criticism that Aestheticism was to encounter during the 1870s and 1880s was not directed so much against particular artifacts – although they were ridiculed – but against the basic formalism of the Aesthetic movement, the assertion

that art and literature could, in some way, be morally neutral.

The most sustained, profound, and – in terms of English literature – most influential Aesthetic critic to question prevailing Victorian critical orthodoxies was Walter Pater. Pater was a retiring Oxford don. He was elected to a fellowship at Brasenose College in the late 1860s and lived a life in London and Oxford that was marked by its quietness. Although he was almost painfully shy, his career was crowded with the acquaintance of eminent figures or men who were destined to achieve fame or notoriety. He taught Gerard Manley Hopkins, and, later, Oscar Wilde, over whom his influence was complete. He also taught Lionel Johnson and influenced Arthur Symonds, George Moore and W. B. Yeats. His most stimulating and certainly his most notorious work was his first, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Indeed the rest of his career can be seen as a deliberate elaboration and clarification of the propositions he advanced there. None the less, Pater's importance for the subsequent development of Aestheticism is difficult to overestimate for he was the first serious and forthright English critic to maintain that aesthetics, far from being implicated in cultural and moral issues, could, and should, exist freed from those contexts. This claim for the relative autonomy of aesthetics and ethics implied, on Pater's part, certain presuppositions about the nature of perception and strong convictions about the relative status and function of art and criticism, all of which were transmitted as aphorisms to the Aesthetic movement generally, and in particular to Oscar Wilde.

During the late 1850s and 1860s a group of British psychologists, amongst whom Herbert Spencer, Alexander Bain and James Sully were the most eminent, had conducted a systematic investigation into the nature of perception and cognition. Developing some leading eighteenth-century ideas, they proposed that the mind perceives the exterior world by a series of impressions of it. (The term 'impression' was one that reverberated through both psychological speculation and literary and art criticism until the turn of the century.) It was the nature of the individual mind to dwell upon the uniqueness of an impression, upon what differentiated it qualitatively from the multitudes preceding or following it. This same group of psychologists also attempted to analyse in what ways aesthetic responses would prove amenable to psychological investigation. They maintained that all human activities were capable of being divided into two broad categories: those that were fundamentally life-enhancing

and those that were undertaken for their own sake. It was in this latter category that they located man's prototypical aesthetic impulses. The extent of man's civilisation was determined by his ability to discriminate between the pleasures given by this sort of activity. Art represented simply the highest conceivable quality and quantity of human pleasure; it was vouchsafed to the spectator in terms of an impression and was therefore relative to the individual receiver of that impression. In the 1850s and 1860s, then, there was a body of new scientific opinion prepared to treat aesthetic response entirely in isolation from any other consideration – ethical or perceptual.

Now it seems that Pater was broadly aware of the extent and nature of this debate on the psychology of aesthetics simply because the closely related set of terms or jargon – *impression*, *discrimination*, *relative* and *pleasure* – that had been generated by it was appropriated in its entirety by him into his two most polemical early essays, the preface and the conclusion to *The Renaissance*. In his preface Pater began by revising Arnold's famous dictum (taken from his lecture, delivered in 1861, 'On Translating Homer') that the critic must 'see the object as in itself it really is'. Pater focused attention away from the object of contemplation and on to the contemplating mind. Arnold's injunction seemed to ignore the large and pertinent question of the nature of individual responses to a work of art – what Pater called the critic's 'impression' of it. The business of the aesthetic critic was therefore to discriminate his impressions of the object under contemplation. But as impressions were always relative to the individual spectator, so the ability to discriminate fully and finely his impressions of art defined the successful critic. As a consequence the practice of criticism moved away from the sphere of aesthetics – general or abstract questions about the nature of the beautiful – and became concerned with concrete and specific examples of beauty. Now Pater's thesis that a work of art can be perceived only by means of the individual impression of the spectator was pursued in the book's conclusion, which he had published as part of a long periodical essay on William Morris in 1868. Knowledge and experience of the world – perception generally, Pater maintained – are only a succession or series of impressions of it. The simple phenomenological proposition behind Pater's work is that the perceiver is certain of only his *own* impressions, and the individual, although celebrating his individuality, is consequently isolated in the



'chamber' of his own mind, a victim of his own impressions of the world beyond. And to overcome this isolation, success in life became, in Pater's eyes, defined in terms of the heterogeneity of experience: of controlling one's life in such a way as to ensure as many pleasurable experiences as possible – in Pater's famous phrase, burning with a 'hard gem-like flame'. At this point the experience of art becomes of paramount importance because it is both more intense and more reliable than the day-to-day experiences of life. Experience of art thus transcends, or improves upon, the experiences of life.

In one of his autobiographies, *The Trembling of the Veil*, W. B. Yeats reported how on an evening soon after he had made Oscar Wilde's acquaintance, he saw Wilde conspicuously flourishing a copy of *The Renaissance*:<sup>1</sup>

'It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it, but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written.' 'But', said the dull man, 'would you not have given us time to read it?' 'O no,' was the retort, 'there would have been plenty of time afterwards – in either world.'

The view that Pater's work was amoral was quite a widely held one. He omitted the conclusion from the second edition of *The Renaissance* in 1877 because he 'conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall'. Indeed there is evidence that in the mid 1870s Pater acquired a reputation at Oxford as a teacher who was exerting a dubious influence upon undergraduates. He appeared as a thinly disguised character – Mr Rose – in W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), a broadly satirical book about Oxford in the 1870s which caricatured for the most part the more eminent figures of Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Benjamin Jowett and T. H. Huxley. The portrait of Mr Rose struck some contemporary reviewers as an unnecessarily caustic one and in places it is indeed unpleasant. But the image of Pater that the book offered was quite widespread – particularly in Oxford. Pater was denounced in a sermon by the Bishop of Oxford, passed over for a junior proctorship in the university in 1874, and when in 1876 he announced his candidature for the election of the Professor of Poetry his action was greeted with a chorus of either derision or bitter contempt. His critics and opponents maintained that *The Renaissance* was an

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (1955), 130.

unhealthy book and Pater quickly acquired a reputation as the prototypical aesthete. The hostility to his work culminated in a series of scornful attacks in *The Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduates' Journal* in 1877. As Pater had appeared to endorse the idea of experience for its own sake, so his work quickly acquired overtones of decadence. The reaction to *The Renaissance* repeated the equally hostile, but much more public, response to *Poems and Ballads* a few years earlier. Later in his life Pater confessed to the critic and poet Edmund Gosse that he disliked the name of 'hedonist' for it created 'such a bad effect on the minds of people who don't know Greek'. Pater was complaining about the way in which his scrupulously precise and rather moral epicureanism – epitomised, for example, by the ascetic hero of his novel, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) – had been taken as the theoretical justification for the excesses of Aestheticism. But the pejorative overtones of the term 'hedonist' were in a sense quite understandable, because as Pater had recommended art for art's sake and then experience for experience's sake, so his programme for individual aesthetic discrimination *could* modulate into a programme for decadence: experience for its own sake could very easily become (as in the case of Dorian Gray and his creator) *illicit* experience for its own sake.

Initially, however, what caught the public's imagination and then the eye of the famous cartoonist George Du Maurier was something much more harmless: the absurd, but finally inconsequential series of fads that those who professed Aestheticism seemed intent upon pursuing: the fashion for blue china that Dante Gabriel Rossetti and James Abbott McNeill Whistler had begun and Oscar Wilde had taken up; the knee-breeches that Wilde had popularised as an Aesthetic 'costume'; and in particular the inordinately high value placed upon the sunflower and the lily. Du Maurier's cartoons appeared in *Punch* in the late 1870s and the early 1880s and they probably did as much to familiarise a large readership with what was basically a metropolitan movement as any of its authentic products. But they would have been impossible without the very public figure of Wilde to focus upon. Indeed on several occasions he *appears* to be the specific target of Du Maurier's cartoons (although Du Maurier claimed to be caricaturing the type rather than the individual). In one cartoon which appeared in 1881 Maudle (which, with Postlethwaite, was Du Maurier's name for the archetypal aesthete) a figure with Wilde's heavy face, figure and flowing hair, is seen leaning

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with his head on his hands towards a Mrs Brown. In his caption Du Maurier gives Maudle Wilde-like epigrams:<sup>1</sup>

*Maudle.* 'How consummately lovely your son is, Mrs Brown!'

*Mrs Brown (a Philistine from the country).* 'What? He's a nice, manly boy, if you mean that, Mr Maudle. He has just left school, you know, and wishes to be an artist.'

*Maudle.* 'Why should he be an artist?'

*Mrs Brown.* 'Well, he must be something!'

*Maudle.* 'Why should he be anything? Why not let him remain for ever content to exist beautifully?'

[*Mrs Brown determines that at all events her Son shall not study Art under Maudle.*]

Late in the preceding year Du Maurier had drawn attention to another characteristic of Aestheticism: its propensity to exclusiveness and élitism. The object of satire on this occasion was the reverence for flowers. In *Punch*, Postlethwaite was made to recite a Christmas story, 'Fleur des Alpes', in which his admiration for the edelweiss above the sunflower and lily conferred upon him social distinction.<sup>2</sup>

The Aesthetic Young Man rose languidly from his seat, and leaning against a bookcase, with the Lily in his hand, and the Peacock's Feather in his hair, he read aloud . . .

'You have never heard of MAUDLE and Mrs CIMABUE BROWN? I dare say not. To know them is a Joy, and the privilege of a select and chosen few; for they are simply Perfect. Yet in their respective perfection, they differentiate from each other with a quite ineffably subtle exquisiteness.

For *She* is Supremely Consummate – whereas *He* is Consummately Supreme. I constantly tell them so, and they agree with me.

I also make a point of telling everybody else.

My modesty prevents me from revealing to you all they tell me (and everybody else) about myself, beyond the mere fact that they consider me alone to combine, in my own mind and person, Supreme Consummateness with Consummate Supremacy – and I agree with them. We get on uncommonly well together, I can tell you.'

The exclusiveness that the Aesthetes professed was maintained by a jargon, an exclusive language, which formed the subject of many of

<sup>1</sup> George Du Maurier, 'Maudle on the Choice of a Profession' *Punch*, vol. LXXX, 12 February 1881. See plate no. 6.

<sup>2</sup> George Du Maurier, 'Fleur des Alpes', *Punch*, vol. LXXIX, 25 December 1880. See p. 174 below.

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Du Maurier's jokes about them, especially their excessive use of superlatives. 'Consummate', 'blessed', 'precious' and in particular, 'utter' are the characteristic exclamations of his Aesthetes. The use of a precious and archaic diction, that basic Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic literary furniture, was another target for Du Maurier:<sup>1</sup>

Glad lady mine, that glitterest,  
In shimmah of summah athwart the lawn,  
Canst tell me which is bitterest,  
The glammah of Eve, or the glimmah of dawn?

In fact preciousness and élitism were not by any means charges restricted to Aestheticism. They had been levelled in the early 1860s against the intellectual culture that Matthew Arnold had advocated and against some of the tendencies of Pre-Raphaelitism. But when the accusation was made against Aestheticism it was related to that other charge of amorality. The Aesthetic movement seemed not only to court exclusiveness and obscurity but actually to claim that they were positive virtues.

It was an issue that once again Pater was deeply involved in as a source. The obscurity of art, above all of some modern English poetry, was a topical subject in the 1880s. To some members of the late Victorian reading public the achievement of their major poets, particularly Robert Browning and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was compromised by the apparent obscurity of some passages in their work. To some of their critics obscurity in poetry seemed to deny what they took to be one of the central functions of language – that of communication. Their argument can be summarised by a quotation from Benjamin Jowett, the liberal theologian, enormously influential Master of Balliol College, Oxford and reputedly one of Pater's sternest critics. Jowett compared the apparently *necessary* obscurity of dead languages – in some Greek poetry, for instance – with what he saw as the *avoidable* obscurity of some recent English Poetry:<sup>2</sup>

There are many passages in some of our greatest modern poets which are far too obscure; in which there is no proportion between style and subject; in which any half-expressed figure, any harsh construction, any distorted collocation of words, any remote sequence of ideas is admitted [. . .] The obscurities of early Greek poets arose

<sup>1</sup> George Du Maurier, 'Vers de Société', *Punch*, vol. LXXII, 13 January 1877.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Jowett, *The Republic of Plato* (1876), 1.

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necessarily out of the state of language and logic which existed in their age [...] For us the use of language ought in every generation to become clearer and clearer.

What Jowett was taking to be the pre-eminent characteristic of language was its social function. But to Pater the obscurity of both Browning and Rossetti had a further dimension, one involving artistic integrity. Pater emphasised the very centrality of obscurity or complexity in any modern work because those qualities became a necessary consequence of the problems involved in artistic creation. It was in precisely these terms that Pater described Rossetti's work:<sup>1</sup>

His own meaning was always personal, and even recondite, in a certain sense measured and casuistical, sometimes complex and obscure; but the term was always, one could see, deliberately chosen from many competitors as the *just* transcript of that peculiar phase of soul, which he alone knew, precisely as he alone knew it.

In Pater's eyes, that is, a poem quite simply expresses the poet, and therefore obscurity (for the potential reader) is an almost inevitable consequence of the artist's fidelity to his own feelings and becomes evidence of the difference that exists between his sensibility and that of ordinary humanity. The assertion that the soul or sensibility of the artist is, by definition, of a different kind from that of most of his audience was broadly a late Romantic commonplace, and one that was central to the 1890s – and in particular to W. B. Yeats's – conception of what it meant to be an artist. (Indeed the image of the estranged, alienated artist is one of the traditions of the nineteenth century most freely drawn upon by the twentieth.) For Pater, though, there was a further and equally important point. The measure of an artist's fidelity to felt experience was to be found in his style, and style in art or literature or music became the signature of the *man* in his work. Now Pater's concept of style was in fact one which in critical terms turns out to be both restricted and unhelpful. It ignored, for example, the idea of a style based upon the common features of an age, of a nationality, or of a school. Rigorously and consistently employed, that is, his usage precludes the important senses of the term that are alluded to in names like *baroque*, *eighteenth-century* or *Impressionist*. Style was, in Pater's eyes, despite his reservations, above all else a hallmark of individuality.

But – to return to his example of Rossetti's verse – Pater's advocacy

1 Walter Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti' in *Appreciations* (1889), 207.

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of a poet's right to create an individual style, if only as a consequence of the uniqueness of his sensibility, courted those very dangers of obscurity and élitism that Du Maurier had dwelt upon in his *Punch* cartoons. It was tantamount to constructing a *private* language. Moreover as the only morality which Aesthetic writers claimed to observe was that involved in the processes of creating art (that is the perfection of a work of art within its own terms), so their artistic conscience was aroused by the differences that existed not between moral and immoral art but between well-executed and ill-executed art. Within the terms of the expressive aesthetic that Pater had claimed for the modern poet, the formal characteristics of art, because they stood as a sign of the artist's individuality, became paramount. And in its expressive and formal qualities it was music, in Pater's famous definition, which became the model of all the other arts because in that art form the division between content and form can have no meaning.

— However Pater had cleverly – and presumably quite deliberately – all but avoided a key issue, that of the way in which works of literature are received by the reader. (The topic is in fact briefly alluded to in the last paragraph of his essay 'Style'.) Contemporary critics had of course objected – and quite correctly so – that an expressive aesthetic such as Pater (and, later, Wilde and Whistler) had proposed, failed to account for the fact that art also has a public dimension: that is, that art has an audience. This expressive aesthetic seemed to explain perfectly the motives of an artist like Rossetti, who was reluctant to exhibit his pictures. However, some of the artists more closely associated with Aestheticism were of an altogether different disposition. Indeed of all the famous figures associated with the movement, Pater was probably the most retiring and least self-assured, in no sense a public figure. But most of the famous writers who were identified with the Aesthetic movement took great pains not only to address an audience but actually to exist in the public gaze. A figure like Wilde, for example, seemed to *need* a public response, to live as a celebrity – and finally as a scapegoat: all of which, of course, was quite inconsistent with a purely Aesthetic point of view because it made the argument that art was above all else personal, expressive and private impossible to sustain with any plausibility.

The two most public figures involved with the Aesthetic movement were James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde. Although to a contemporary public they were represented as



proclaiming the same views about art, Whistler's actual commitment to Aesthetic doctrines was in fact rather limited. It would be much more accurate to describe the aims revealed in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890) as having their origins in Impressionism. Historically, however, the relationship between Aestheticism and Impressionism is a very complicated one. The history of the early reception in England of Impressionist work and Impressionist aspirations for art is extremely involved, mainly because of the partiality of its propagandists. What is certain, however, is that to contemporary eyes Impressionism became confused with Aestheticism, for their aims were broadly comparable and the 'impression' was a concept central to both movements. None the less Whistler was important for Aestheticism for two reasons. In the first place his case for libel against Ruskin was a confrontation between naturalism or realism (other terms particularly difficult to define accurately during this period) and Whistler's argument that art works by compositional values that have nothing to do with what is 'represented' was a proposition broadly in sympathy with Aesthetic ideas. In 1877 Whistler had exhibited at the first Grosvenor Gallery Exhibition, and John Ruskin, perhaps the most influential English art-critic and art historian of the nineteenth century, his reputation at this time undiminished, berated him as a 'coxcomb' who had 'flung a pot of paint into the public's face'. Whistler sued Ruskin for libel in 1878. The resulting case was a confrontation of a series of issues: newness in art confronting authority; the foreign – French models for art – confronting English traditions; but most significantly, realism, and thus artistic conscientiousness, confronting the dilettantism of art for art's sake. Whistler won the case, but only nominally, for he was awarded only a farthing damages. The moral victory belonged to Ruskin.

The second reason for Whistler's importance to the Aesthetic movement was really epitomised by the Ruskin case. Whistler's evidence was basically a public performance. He existed – thrived – in the public gaze, as a carefully stylised personality. The idea of a cultivated and artificial public personality was a quality of which he was very aware. In *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* he reported how he met both George Du Maurier and Oscar Wilde at the first exhibition of his Venice etchings, 'brought them face to face, and taking each by the arm, enquired, "I say, which one of you two invented the other, eh?"' And Whistler's most famous literary work, his

'Ten O'Clock' lecture, delivered first in 1885, is both studiously theatrical and provocatively witty. It sets out the case for the freedom of the artist from any moral or social responsibilities by a series of quite deliberately hyperbolic and epigrammatic statements, the effect of which was to present a histrionically artificial and provocative pose. This cultivation of an artificial, public persona or mask, was perfectly consistent with some of the leading ideas of Aestheticism, particularly as they had been developed by Wilde.

Oscar Wilde is the most famous, although certainly not the most original, writer associated with Aestheticism. Indeed, as even contemporary historians like Walter Hamilton pointed out, without the figure of Wilde to act as a focus for public attention, the Aesthetic movement would have been an altogether more low-key affair. Wilde came from Trinity College, Dublin, to Oxford where he encountered the leading critical voices of the last half of the century – John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and, most importantly, Walter Pater. After leaving Oxford Wilde settled in London. His flamboyance, paradoxical wit and audacious dress soon turned him into a celebrity, a process hastened by Du Maurier and W. S. Gilbert. His first book of verse, *Poems* (1881), published at his own expense, and his lengthy lecture tours of both the USA and England settled him even more firmly as a public figure. He edited *Woman's World* for a short period and in the last half of the 1880s wrote the plays, a novel (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)) and the critical essays – collected as *Intentions* in 1891 – that won him more substantial fame.

Initially Wilde was content in his critical work to follow Pater's example. His leading ideas, phrases, and even Pater's pronounced verbal mannerisms all found their way into Wilde's early work. But Wilde was a public and controversial Pater. As *The Renaissance* had proposed that the experience of art presented experience in its most intense, and thus most valuable, moments, so Wilde translated this notion into a cult of artificiality. For Wilde the first requirement in life was to be 'as artificial as possible'. Truth – Pater's invocation of truth to a 'personal sense of fact' in his 'Style' essay – Wilde replaced with lies and masks. And so, because aesthetics and ethics in Wilde's works are proposed as completely independent modes of thought, art, by cultivating the artificial, becomes removed from experience and therefore characterised by its unreality. The main paradox that most of Wilde's critical writing poses, then, is that art is not concerned with imitating the phenomena of life, but of improving upon

life by providing a superior model for it. And so art has no use: its function therefore is to offer a momentary, unreal perfection amid the banal or sordid experiences of life. Indeed life can in consequence appear as an inferior, and so less satisfying, version of artistic experience. For example, Wilde could claim quite seriously – although, of course, paradoxically – that a landscape in nature ‘is a second-rate Turner, with all the artist’s faults exaggerated’. Consequently (as Gautier half a century beforehand had claimed), art finds its own perfection within itself; and as Gilbert in ‘The Critic as Artist’ in *Intentions* argues ‘through Art, and through Art only, can we shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence’. Here the careful reader immediately encounters one of the many difficulties inherent in Wilde’s case. To claim, as Whistler had done, that a picture, for example, is *no more* than simply an arrangement of colours or shapes is to assert that the art-object has an ontological status finally no different from that of the other objects of the world. But Wilde’s argument was not as simply formalist as this. To propose that there is a relationship between a landscape in nature and a landscape in art – even an inverted one – is to endorse the proposition that there is a difference between the status of art-objects and other objects. What is confusing among Aesthetic writers is that both arguments are freely drawn upon. But for the practising critic the most important implication of a total inversion of the assumed relationship between art and life was simple but dramatic. Criticism could become analogous with creation for it was a creative process that took its material from art instead of life. So by emphasising the subjectivity of criticism in actively *constructing* the aesthetic experience, Wilde all but exonerated the critic from the need to say anything about the work of art allegedly under discussion. The critic merely took that work as a starting point for a second creation – his own.

Now for Wilde’s *oeuvre* and career there were two vital consequences of this elevation of the function of the critic. One was the resulting emphasis upon the critic’s sensibility. As art is a refuge from the banality of life, what distinguishes the artist-critic from the world that he inhabits is the quality of his feelings. Wilde’s critical dialogue, ‘The Critic as Artist’, establishes the primacy of sensibility in the contemplation of the work of art. In two other works by Wilde this idea is also central. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the histrionic aesthete, the character who treats life in the spirit of art by the

cultivation of the fine nuances of feeling, is Lord Henry Wotton: partly a mask, one feels, for Wilde himself. Lord Henry defines what distinguishes him from the ordinary society of men in terms of the quality of his sensibility, for it alone provides the justification for the artist-critic to experience everything. Ultimately, therefore, it also defines his alienation from society in terms of ordinary, received morality. The topic had been broached earlier by Wilde in ‘The Critic as Artist’:<sup>1</sup>

The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always. To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, 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, the soul being an entity so divine that it is able to transform into elements of a richer experience, or a finer susceptibility, or a newer mode of thought, acts or passions that with the common would be commonplace, or with the uneducated ignoble, or with the shameful vile. Is this dangerous? Yes; it is dangerous – all ideas, as I told you, are so.

The inherent dangers of Gilbert’s arguments are translated into actuality in the fate of two of Wilde’s characters. Dorian Gray, in his search for newer and more bizarre experiences, becomes a criminal. So does Thomas Wainewright, who is the subject of the second of Wilde’s essays in *Intentions*, ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’. Wainewright is both an artist and a poisoner, there being, as Wilde observed, ‘no essential incongruity between crime and culture’. In fact his study demonstrates there is every reason why the two should happily

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’. See pp. 98–9 below.

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co-exist within the same personality, for it was Wilde's case that the conflict between the artist's sensibility and that of the received moral values of the world leads inevitably to his challenging his society. In Wilde's own career this challenge became more flagrant, finally criminal and ended in his imprisonment. So the artist-critic, existing in a sphere removed from ordinary ethical choices, is of a type which only finds its full expression in criminality – in the type of the sinful man.

The fictional career, then, of most of Wilde's main characters, and indeed his own career, leads ineluctably back to the main paradox of Aestheticism. Aesthetics and ethics could not be the distinct philosophical categories that Wilde had proclaimed them to be. Finally for Wilde art is an ambiguous quantity, for by his own testimony it is implicated in criminality. That is, in Wilde's eyes it can never be moral in its effects, but it can certainly be immoral. Art is therefore dangerous, for it is radically subversive of a society.

All of this, of course, was but dimly discernible in the early 1880s, when Wilde was provoking a wide but basically amused reaction in the press. There is nothing at all sinister, for example, in the activities of Bunthorne in *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan's wildly popular comic opera of 1881. He was a character modelled upon the popular image of the Aesthete: the dress, the mannerisms, the regard for flowers were all precisely rendered. But Bunthorne is above all else grossly self-deceived; his Aestheticism is a fad, a passport to social, and particularly to sexual success. What was being lampooned in the opera was not the inherent immorality of Aestheticism but the extravagance and precious, mannered behaviour that it seemed not only to sanction but to encourage. There was, however, in the early 1880s another more sceptical observer – the dauntingly intelligent Violet Paget, who, under the pseudonym of Vernon Lee, published during the decade a series of books on aesthetics and one juvenile and embarrassingly transparent, if highly topical, novel, *Miss Brown* (1884).

Vernon Lee had recently arrived in England from Italy and in the early 1880s had mixed freely with the artistic and literary celebrities of London society where she won respect, if not exactly admiration, for her caustic wit and intellectual brilliance. That society was depicted with biting accuracy and frankness in her novel when Walter Hamlin, an Aesthetic poet and painter (who, perhaps unfortunately, was strikingly reminiscent of the recently dead Dante

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Gabriel Rossetti), brings Anne Brown, an earnest and (by the standards of Aestheticism) startlingly beautiful servant from Italy to England in order to educate her. Anne, like her creator, soon meets London literary society and behind the most transparent of fictional disguises, Vernon Lee represented Rossetti, Swinburne, Burne-Jones, Oscar Wilde and what she elsewhere called his 'lyrico-sarcastic maudlin cultschah'. In the novel these figures were implicated in a corrupting and sinful world in which prostitution, effeminacy and the abuse of both alcohol and drugs are the specified, and so the least sordid and harmful vices. To his considerable embarrassment the novel was dedicated to Henry James: he found it 'without delicacy', formless and too overtly moral in its tone. Walter Pater, who was also mentioned by name in the novel maintained a tactful silence after receiving a complimentary copy of it. Elsewhere, though, the response was less polite. Indeed the novel aroused considerable hostility in some quarters, for William Rossetti, Wilde, Edmund Gosse and the Morris all openly avoided Vernon Lee's company: predictably enough, perhaps, in the light of the novel's final contemptuous dismissal of them as belonging to a 'demoralised school of literature which glorified in moral indifference'.

However what artistic merit *Miss Brown* possesses – and it amounts to very little – derives from precisely those qualities which made it appear so without delicacy or taste to its contemporary readership. It contrasts the moral earnestness of Anne Brown and her cousin Richard with the moral ambivalence of the Aesthetic movement. Hamlin defends his morbid and indecorous love-poetry by asserting – as Swinburne had already done and as Wilde and Whistler were later to do – that all of life is the proper subject for art and that consequently in matters of art the charge of immorality has no meaning. Anne Brown – partly Vernon Lee's portrait of herself – refuses to free art from morality and at one point exclaims to a group of affronted and amazed Aesthetes, 'Is there nothing higher than taste in the world?' And within the novel's terms, of course, Anne's expostulation is quite justified, for the amoral art of Aestheticism is implicated in a host of nameless vices, all hinted at in the sordid depravity of Edmund Lewis, Hamlin's dark angel, who at one point tries to proposition Anne, rather unbelievably, by offering her a copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. But if, as a novelist, Vernon Lee was far too deeply involved in the moral choices presented in her fiction, as a writer on aesthetics it was this very quality which lent her work



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authority. In a volume of essays entitled *Juvenilia* (1887) she made substantially the same case as she had intended in *Miss Brown*:<sup>1</sup>

Little by little we begin to perceive that there are ugly things in the world, apathy, selfishness, vice, want, and a terrible wicked logic that binds them together in thousands of vicious meshes. And perceiving the ugly things in the world, we perceive for the first time, perhaps, the ugly things within ourselves: for of each there is somewhat in each of us. Then comes the moment of choice: we have learned, or guessed, that in continuing to live only for and with the beautiful serenities of art, we are passively abetting, leaving unfought, untouched, the dreadful, messy, irritating, loathsomeness of life; and, on the contrary, in trying to tackle even the smallest of these manifold evils, we are bringing into our existence ugliness and unrest.

It was a theme to which Vernon Lee was to return insistently during the next decade and it is one of the strangest coincidences of the history of the Aesthetic movement that the two voices that dwelt longest upon the darker implications of Aestheticism were those of the basically amoral Oscar Wilde and of the ardently moralistic young art-critic from Italy.

In spite of the fact that Aestheticism assigned such a position of pre-eminence to art in its hierarchy of human values and in spite of the revolutionary nature of much of its critical practice, it can be fairly claimed that Aesthetic writers actually produced few works of real literary significance. The lyrics that comprised *Poems and Ballads* were certainly among the most impassioned and valuable of Swinburne's prolific output. But apart from Swinburne's work and the occasionally really successful poem by Wilde or Lionel Johnson, no writer involved with Aestheticism produced verse that is more than merely proficient. However the fiction that the movement produced was undoubtedly more interesting and certainly Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are among the most distinguished fictions produced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There are sound reasons why this should be the case. The lyrics of the 1880s, taking as their subject fine nuances of sensibility and mood could quite easily become merely capricious by dwelling upon moments too fine to be other than inconsequential. The fiction of Wilde and Pater, however, at its deepest levels, amply proves that ethics and

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aesthetics are profoundly connected. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the dilettantism of both Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian himself compares unfavourably with the artistic (and moral) conscience of Basil Hallward, the painter: and the death of Pater's hero Marius, despite his epicureanism, is in 'the nature of a martyrdom . . . a kind of sacrament with plenary grace'. Morality, as it were, had refused to be banished.

And so, finally, what significance did the Aesthetic movement have? Its critics, then as much as now, have found it a decadent retreat into a private world of fantasy. Of course, for many of the followers of Aesthetic fashions – Max Beerbohm's 'upper ten thousand' – it was precisely that: a frivolous self-indulgence by a cultural and economic élite that because of its very extravagance could never be justified. But the real achievement of Aestheticism as a literary movement is not diminished by this qualification, for it was instrumental in bringing about a significant and permanent change in the status of criticism and in forming many of the attitudes of early Modernist writers. Indeed the movement was fundamentally a reaction to the Victorian assertion that art was concerned with moral education, and probably its greatest merit lies in its sustained attempt to re-establish art as a central part of human experience.

<sup>1</sup> Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia* (1887) I, 10.