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Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Audiences of Aestheticism

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Abstract

By examining the process of production and reception of the works of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, this thesis explores the ways in which both conceptions of audience and actual audiences shaped these works. As proponents of "aestheticism," a philosophy which required the development of a highly specialised mode of perception and critical awareness, Pater and Wilde wrote with a fairly select audience in mind. Confronted, however, with actual readers who did not always meet the "aesthetic" criteria (even if they were supporters), they were forced to rethink their conceptions of audience. Pater's and Wilde's developing understandings of audience can be traced in their works, as they experiment with style and genre in an attempt to communicate effectively with their readers. Although at base Pater and Wilde advocated a similar "aesthetic" philosophy, their distinct conceptions of audience played a significant role in determining the nature of their particular versions of aestheticism.

Abrégé

En examinant les procédés dialectiques de production et reception des oeuvres de Walter Pater et Oscar Wilde, cette thèse explore la façon dont leur conception de l'auditoire, de même que l'auditoire réel, ont influencé leurs oeuvres. En tant que partisants de "l'esthéticisme," une philosophie requérant le developpement d'une mode de perception hautement spécialisée et un sens critique, Pater et Wilde ont écrit en ayant pour cible un auditoire choisi. Confrontés à des lecteurs n'étant pas nécessairement à l'hauteur de "l'esthéticisme," même dans le cas de partisans, ils furent contraints de reconsidérer leur conception de l'auditoire. On peut déceler la trace d'une compréhension croissante de l'auditoire chez Pater et Wilde, alors qu'ils expérimentent avec le style et le genre dans le but de communiquer efficacement avec leurs lecteurs. Quoiqu'au départ, Pater et Wilde prônaient une philosophie esthétique similaire, leur conception distincte de l'auditoire joua un rôle important dans la determination de la nature de leurs versions particulières d'esthéticisme.

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Introduction

"Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital." (Oscar Wilde, "Preface," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 17)

Wilde's comment about the significance of divergent critical interpretations of a work anticipates one of the primary claims of modern-day reception theorists like Hans Robert Jauss. In his delineation of an "aesthetic of reception" Jauss stresses the importance to literary history of works which challenge a given "horizon of expectations."[1] Jauss characterises the degree to which a work "satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes" expectations in terms of "aesthetic distance" (*Aesthetic of Reception* 25). A work which demands no horizonal change on the part of the audience is "culinary or entertainment art," because it satisfies preconceived norms (*Aesthetic of Reception* 25). A work which is aesthetically distant, however, "opposes the expectations of its first audience," resulting in either a "pleasing or alienating new perspective" (*Aesthetic of Reception* 25). Occasionally, audience reaction is split between those who are pleased at the challenge and accept it, and those who feel alienated and reject the new perspective.[2] Such was the case in the reception of two of the major works of British Aestheticism: Walter Pater's critical work, *Studies in*

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[1] A term used by Jauss to designate the presuppositions and shared assumptions of readers in a given historical period which are based on their "pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language" (*Aesthetic of Reception* 22). In a later essay, Jauss expands this definition to include a social as well as literary horizon of expectations, because

> [b]ehaviour towards the text . . . is both receptive and active at the same time. The reader can make the text 'speak to him' . . . only to the extent that he introduces his own pre-understanding of the lived world into the framework of textual expectations and those of the implied reader. That is, he can concretize the potential meaning of a text. His pre-understanding includes his concrete expectations arising from the horizon of his interests, desires, needs, and experiences. ("Theses on Transition" 141)

[2] In his discussion of this phenomenon, Jauss describes the reception of Baudelaire's "Spleen II."

the History of The Renaissance, and Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both of which generated a split critical reception, demonstrating the degree to which "diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital."

Under the guiding assumption that "[t]he work does not exist without its effect; its effect presupposes reception, and in turn the audience's judgment conditions the author's production" (Jauss, "Theses" 138),[3] I will examine the dialectical process of production and reception of some of the key works of Pater and Wilde in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of audience in shaping the works of these writers. Both Pater and Wilde wrote with a preconceived understanding of their audience. In Pater's case, this conception consisted of ideal readers,[4] or "aesthetic critics," while in Wilde's, it included both these and an implied audience of detracting readers. Faced with the conditions of their actual reception by a historically differentiated audience which did not always meet their expectations, Pater and Wilde altered the nature of their understanding of and communication with their audiences.

An examination of the works of Pater and Wilde in terms of a dialectical process of production and reception is particularly useful because, in being sensitive to the historical context within which their work was produced, it avoids the pitfalls of historical objectivism.[5] Studies of Aestheticism and Decadence and the figures

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[3] In a similar articulation of this concept Jauss defines the "history of literature" as a "process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity" (*Aesthetic of Reception* 21).

[4] I have chosen to use Gerald Prince's term "ideal reader" over Jauss's term "implied reader" (which he borrows from Iser) rather arbitrarily because I wish to emphasise the perfect comprehension these readers exhibit and "ideal" seems to express this more clearly than the term "implied."

[5] Jauss sees much of this kind of analysis as faulty because it often relies on "an organization of 'literary facts' that is established *post festum*," whereas his method focuses on the "preceding experience of the literary work by its readers" (*Aesthetic of Reception* 20).

associated with these movements (particularly Wilde) have been dominated by "spirit of the age" histories with catch-all phrases ("the 90's," "the yellow 90's," "the tragic generation,"[6] "art-for-art's sake") that conjure up a number of stereotypical images and interpretations. Equally reductive are those interpretations which tend to read these artists' (particularly the Decadents') works through their lives. This practice has been most damaging in the case of Wilde, because much of the critical work on him, whether favourable or derogatory, has, until quite recently, been largely concerned with the sensational aspects of his life--his downfall and the homosexual practices that led to his imprisonment.[7]

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[6] William Butler Yeats used this term to describe the Decadents in his *Autobiographies*, a work which has been responsible for the perpetuation of many myths about the Decadents.

[7] The misrepresentation or mythologisation of Wilde began early on with a number of unreliable biographies of Wilde's friends and foes, including those of Robert Harborough Sherard, Frank Harris and Lord Alfred Douglas. The perspectives on Wilde's life and art offered in these works have coloured critical interpretations by encouraging moralistic analyses and/or by diminishing the importance of his literary contribution. In an instance of the latter, George Woodcock is led to the conclusion that "Wilde was a greater personality than a writer" (236). In his survey of Wilde criticism, Ian Small suggests that these interpretations were a result of critics' inabilities "to reconcile literary approbation with the (at times) indignant moral disapproval attaching to certain aspects of the life" (*Wilde Revalued* 174). Though this tendency diminished in the 60's and 70's, Wilde's work was still often read psychologically. Hence Philip Cohen's assertion, in *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde*, that Wilde's work is indicative of a moral struggle between sin and salvation as a result of the guilt and anxiety over his sister's death. Most recently, in her book *Oscar Wilde: A Long and Lovely Suicide* (1994), Melissa Knox offers another psychobiographic study in which she reads Wilde in light of "his childhood experiences and the lifelong inner conflicts that resulted from them" (xv). Another notable example of this type of criticism is Christopher Nassar's *Into the Demon Universe* in which he characterises Wilde's post-1886 work (the year in which Wilde purportedly first engaged in homosexual activities) as evidence of "a new beginning, for he definitely regarded homosexual contact as evil and now wrote of a demonic impulse within himself" (xiii).

The critical tendency to moralise with respect to, or apologise for, Wilde's homosexuality has diminished considerably since the 1970's. Instead, there have been some excellent analyses of Wilde's homosexuality recently in the area of gay studies. See, for example, Ed Cohen's *Talk on the Wilde Side* which addresses the "social and

While these biases are generally avoided in studies of Pater, his critical reputation did suffer in the early twentieth century as a result of attacks by New Humanists such as Irving Babbitt, P. E. More, and perhaps most damagingly, T. S. Eliot[8] (Seiler 40). These men supported their assertion that Pater was a self-indulgent, inaccurate, and irresponsible critic by pointing to his influence on young Oxford men. Thus, More writes: "if we consider the fruit of his teaching in such men as Oscar Wilde, [we cannot] admit that his teaching was altogether without offence. His error was not that he inculcated the art of life at all seasons, but that his sense of values was finally wrong" (qtd. in Seiler 423). Although Pater's less than dramatic lifestyle has made his reputation somewhat easier to restore than Wilde's, the stereotype of Pater as an irresponsible teacher devalues his work, as well as the works of men such as Wilde who were influenced by him.

Concurrent with this stereotype are others which have to do with Wilde's relation to Pater. If Pater is teacher, then Wilde is cast either as the misunderstanding disciple or the plagiariser of his master's works. In his introduction to *Aesthetes and Decadents*, Karl Beckson adopt both these views at the same time: "Wilde never grasped [Pater's sense of hedonism], nor did he attempt to, for in the isolation of his own genius, he was concerned with the expansion of his public personality. His originality . . . lay in his clever manipulation of other men's ideas rather than in his personal vision and voice" (xxxii-xxxiii). How Wilde could at once

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sexual dynamics" of Wilde's trial that were left unaddressed by Montgomery Hyde in *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (2). Cohen argues that the issues that were raised during the Wilde trials were "central to how contemporary male sexualities have been (re)produced and (re)presented throughout the century since his conviction" (3). Similarly, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, examines the correlation between homosexuality and effeminacy that occurred after Wilde's trials, though his study also addresses these issues in Wilde's texts.

[8] Eliot contributed to the early-twentieth century denigration of Pater and his disciples by claiming that Pater was responsible for some "untidy lives" and by stating: "I do not believe that Pater, in this book [*The Renaissance*], has influenced a single first-rate mind of a later generation" ("Arnold and Pater," *Selected Essays* 392).

not understand and yet "cleverly manipulate" is not immediately apparent, but these kinds of broad generalisations appear frequently in scholarly studies. One of the aims of this thesis, in addition to its broader concern with Pater's and Wilde's engagement with audience, is to supersede such categories by providing a substantial evaluation of Wilde as an actual historically differentiated reader of Pater who becomes in turn a significant producer of aestheticism. In so doing, I deny Beckson's claim that Wilde "never grasped" Pater's ideas, while agreeing with his suggestion that Wilde is largely "concerned with the expansion of his public personality." It is this--Wilde's understanding of himself in relation to his audience--that determines the major distinction between the two men's presentations of aestheticism.

Despite the fact that Wilde presents his aestheticism quite differently from Pater, his initial conception of it is remarkably similar. For both Pater and Wilde, aestheticism begins not so much as a promotion of art-for-art's sake, or an assertion that art is superior to life, but rather, as its root meaning indicates, as a mode of perception, and it is in this sense that I first wish to define the term. This view of aestheticism has been adopted most recently by Carolyn Williams in her study of Pater, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (1989),[9] and by Jonathan Freedman in his chapter on Aestheticism in *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990). Freedman believes that the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde, following that of Alexander Baumgarten, focuses on the "perfection of the act of perception . . . wrought most frequently, but not exclusively, by a work of art" (10). In Pater's case this involves "know[ing] one's impression as it really is . . . discriminat[ing] it, [and] realis[ing] it distinctly," ("Preface," *Renaissance* xix), while in Wilde it amounts to "see[ing] the object as in itself it really is not" ("Critic as Artist," *Complete Works* 1030). As these quotations illustrate, the aesthetic attitude, or aestheticism, is a mode of awareness which is not

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[9] Williams writes: "Aestheticism, as the suffix implies, proposes itself as a systematic attitude of self-consciousness, a coherent stance or perspective on things, a method of attention" (26).

only sensual, but also, as Pater's statement makes clear, a mentally perceptive and critical state which these men's works attempt to impart to their readers.

While aestheticism begins as an attempt to develop an affective state of mind in a projected ideal audience of "aesthetic critics," it does admittedly take on the more popular connotations referred to above (art-for-art's sake, art over life) as it comes up against an unaccepting audience. As it begins to resist this detracting audience (most particularly in the case of Wilde), aestheticism becomes a rather determined resistance against what this audience represents--the "Victorian values of utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress" (Gagnier 3).[10] While Gagnier reaches this view of aestheticism through a consideration of Wilde's audiences, her study is quite different from, though not incompatible with my own. Gagnier rejects reception theory in favour of a cultural materialist approach and as such she is more concerned with the "ideologies" of Wilde's middle-class and "homosexual" audiences, and the extent to which his "texts are embedded in other historical discourse" (4). My approach, on the other hand, will demonstrate the degree to which aestheticism is

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[10] Gagnier suggests that there were two views of aestheticism in the 1890's: the first was related to the aesthete's desire to treat life in the spirit of art, and the second was a mode of "heightened perception through the senses" (139). Gagnier sees both these types of aestheticism as reactions against Victorian materialism. In addition, Gagnier asserts a connection between aestheticism and homosexuality by suggesting that the "artificial and anti-utilitarian emphases of the art-for-art's-sake movement were embedded in what one might call a sex-for-sex's-sake movement--a movement that opposed itself to 'natural' sexuality and purposive reproduction" (5). While this aspect of aestheticism is only a part of Gagnier's argument, there are many other studies of the connections between aestheticism and sexuality. Richard Dellamora's book *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, for example, explores the treatment of homosexuality or "desire between men" in the works of nineteenth-century writers. Pater, who figures largely in Dellamora's study, is seen as a major proponent of male-male desire, a position he does not relinquish even in the wake of the negative reception of the scandalous "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. While Dellamora suggests that Pater's work is often "directly coded so as to 'miss' some of Pater's listeners while reaching men sympathetic to expressions of desire between men" (58), his interests lie not so much in audience and reception as in the formation of sexual-aesthetic discourses and anti-homophobic critique in an environment increasingly hostile towards male-male desire.

shaped in the ongoing process of production and reception (or, alternately, statement--reaction--counter-reaction), as Pater and Wilde respond to specific audiences (as opposed to Gagnier's "ideologies") in their expressions of an aesthetic philosophy.

In Chapter One, I examine Pater's engagement with audience in his critical writings, beginning with his projection of an ideal audience of "aesthetic critics" in *The Renaissance*. Focusing primarily on the "Preface" and "Conclusion," I demonstrate that Pater's interest in perception reflects his interest in developing his audience's aesthetic sensibility. In turning to the reception of *The Renaissance*, I consider the reactions of a portion of his actual audience who have split into detractors and disciples, both of whom interpret Pater's philosophy in a manner that he does not anticipate. As a result, Pater is led to re-examine, not so much his philosophy, as his ideas about audience, a claim which is supported by Pater's increasing demands upon and caution regarding his audience in subsequent works. In addition, Pater reconsiders the nature of his communication with his audience, a subject I take up in the second section of the chapter. In this section, I consider how Pater's disciples and detractors might have been led to their interpretations as a result of Pater's style. Pater's alteration of style after *The Renaissance* indicates a concern with audience and reception, reflecting his desire for a more effective communication of his philosophy.

In the second chapter, I backtrack somewhat in order to consider Pater's initial response to the reception of *The Renaissance*, which occurs, not in the realm of criticism, but in the realm of fiction, in his novel, *Marius the Epicurean*. Though fictional, *Marius* constitutes a substantial reformulation and clarification of Pater's critical ideas and aesthetic philosophy, largely motivated by the misunderstandings of his detractors and disciples. At the level of style, plot, and character, Pater addresses the objections to and misinterpretations of his previous work in a way that indicates a substantially different conception of audience. Pater's defensive stance in *Marius* gives way to the more resigned stance of *Imaginary Portraits*, a work I examine in the second part of Chapter Two. Though it is less directly concerned with audience

than any of Pater's other works, *Imaginary Portraits* represents the mature product of his reflection on the nature of interpretation and communication as a result of his experiences with audience. Finally, in the third section of the chapter, I examine the reception of these two works by three members of Pater's actual audience of disciples (George Moore, Arthur Symons, and Oscar Wilde) in an attempt to gauge the degree to which they understood Pater's recommunication of his philosophy. In addition, I briefly compare the concerns of their works in the 80's with those of Pater. I end this chapter by suggesting that Wilde, who has long been considered a misinterpreter of Pater, actually had a strong grasp of Pater's philosophy, and that it was this strong understanding that enabled him to manipulate it so well in his own works, a claim that I substantiate in the next two chapters of the thesis.

In addition to discussing Wilde's projection of and engagement with audience in his criticism, the chapters on Wilde are also concerned with his reading of Pater, and the way that his broader conception of audience affects his development of aestheticism. Wilde begins with a more sophisticated understanding of audience than Pater because, in addition to projecting an ideal audience of "aesthetic critics" (whom he will call the "cultivated"), he also anticipates detractors (whom he will eventually refer to as the "corrupt"). As in my chapter on Pater's criticism, I have divided Chapter Three into two sections, the first being an attempt to determine, through an examination of his critical writings (particularly his dialogues "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying"), the nature of Wilde's ideal "aesthetic critic." Although Wilde's ideal is essentially the same as Pater's, Wilde presents his ideas with a far more radical rhetoric, defining his aesthetic critic negatively, through opposition to an anticipated audience of detractors--the "public" or the "corrupt." In the second half of the chapter, I examine how Wilde's style alters the nature of aestheticism and affects the communication of his philosophy to his anticipated audiences of "corrupt" and "cultivated" readers.

In the final chapter, I turn to Wilde's fictional engagement with audience in three different genres (fairy tale, novel, and drama) as he attempts to create works which appeal to the public and yet are properly "aesthetic" in order that his cultivated

audience might enjoy them also. Beginning with an early work, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, I illustrate that although the fairy tales do not explicitly refer to Wilde's "corrupt" and "cultivated" audiences, they are designed to bear interpretation at two levels for general and more sophisticated audiences. For those who care to read more deeply, there are implicit treatments of aspects of aestheticism and the relation of the artist to his audience in these tales. Wilde continues his consideration of aestheticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a work that was also aimed at a broad audience, but which failed, despite Wilde's sophisticated conception of audience, in its attempt at universal appeal. The much discussed outcry against *Dorian Gray* forms the starting point for my consideration of how Wilde's style was largely responsible for the misinterpretations of many members of his "corrupt" audience. In addition, I suggest how the "cultivated" might have been expected to perceive the novel, based on Wilde's aesthetic philosophy as outlined in his criticism. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the final work I consider, Wilde demonstrates that he has been attentive to the public reception of his previous works by creating a popular and "aesthetic" success that addresses "the public's" objections to his previous works without compromising his philosophy. In my examination of the play, I demonstrate how Wilde's style, in this instance, forces "the public" to react "aesthetically" to the play, though not to the extent that it reflects the critical aestheticism of the ideal "cultivated" audience.

By examining the question of audience from the perspectives of both production and reception, I distinguish between Pater's and Wilde's expectations regarding the reception of their philosophies and the actual reception by their various audiences. This distinction is important given that the anticipated and real receptions did not always correspond. Such a discrepancy begs an analysis of the stylistic and generic aspects of these works that contributed to such divergent understandings of the nature of aestheticism. In undertaking this analysis, I hope to illustrate the significant role that projected and actual audiences played in shaping both the works of these two writers and the concept of aestheticism more generally.

Chapter 1

Aesthetic Perceptions: Ideal and Actual Audiences of Pater's Criticism

Although his experience with the negative reception of *The Renaissance* would greatly alter his understanding of his readership, Walter Pater initially had a fairly limited conception of audience, anticipating "a comparatively small section of readers" (*Letters WP* 10) whom he imagined to be scholarly types much like himself. As such, Pater assumed that the expression of his impressions would be received in the manner in which he intended. Because of his faith in the receptive powers of his audience, Pater is not overtly didactic in *The Renaissance*. Nonetheless, his continual emphasis on a distinct form of perception, which he outlines in the "Preface" and "Conclusion" and provides concrete demonstrations of in the critical essays, indicates a desire to fashion an audience that has the ability to achieve this mode of awareness--aesthetic perception.[1] While *The Renaissance* is not specifically concerned with issues of audience and reception, it does reveal, in its theoretical content and style, a great deal of information about Pater's ideal reader--the "aesthetic perceiver" or "aesthetic critic."[2] This ideal, however, was soon destroyed by the misinterpretation of the work by scholarly readers such as the dons and students at Oxford--those who seemed most likely to embody Pater's ideal. As a result, the development of Pater's thought after *The Renaissance* is largely determined by his greater awareness of the

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[1] Although "aesthetic perception" is not a term used by Pater, it is an appropriate term for the mode of vision he calls for. Jauss uses the term to indicate a heightened perception, in a description that bears an analogy with Pater's theory: "For as is well known, the poetic text as aesthetic object makes possible, in contrast to everyday perception that degenerates into a norm, a mode of perception at once more complex and meaningful, which as aesthetic pleasure is able to rejuvenate cognitive vision or visual recognition" ("The Poetic Text within the Change of Horizons of Reading: The Example of Baudelaire's 'Spleen II'," *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* 139).

[2] Pater uses the term "aesthetic critic" in the "Preface," but has no concrete term for the perceiving subject of the "Conclusion." I have offered "aesthetic perceiver" because I see this subject as distinct from the "aesthetic critic." The perception described in the "Conclusion" is a necessary but preliminary step in becoming the aesthetically *critical* subject of the "Preface."

limits of his *actual* audience. In subsequent theoretical essays and criticism, such as the essay on "Style" in *Appreciations* and "The Doctrine of Plato" from *Plato and Platonism*, Pater reconsiders the relationship between artist and audience. In addition, he examines and substantially alters, not his ideas, but his style--the means by which his ideas are communicated--in an attempt to transform his actual audience into the ideal "aesthetic critics" he projected in *The Renaissance*.

I

Considered chronologically, Pater's first sustained treatment of the kind of perception necessary for his projected ideal audience of aesthetic critics was the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, which formed the final section of his 1868 essay "Aesthetic Poetry," an essay on William Morris which appeared in the *Westminster Review*. In the "Conclusion," Pater addresses the issue of perception very generally, only suggesting its connection to the arts in the final section of the essay. Pater begins the essay by identifying a problem--modern thought--which affects the way individuals perceive. The first two paragraphs outline the perspectives of two forms of knowledge--scientific and philosophical[3]--which, despite the fact that they both aim at seeing the object of study more closely, actually undermine the notion that we can "see the object as in itself it really is" ("Preface," *Renaissance* xix). Both forms of analysis result not in heightened awareness, but in a conceptual dissolution of the objects under study, an effect which is disconcerting to the perceiving subject. Thus, scientific thought leads us to the realisation that what we see is merely an illusion of our own making: "That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours . . . a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it" (186-87).

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[3] Billie Andrew Inman suggests this way of reading the first two paragraphs: "The first half of the "Conclusion" . . . is not a continuous argument. It is two discourses, each with its beginning and end, the first derived from contemporary science and the second from sceptical philosophy. Anyone who approaches [them] as if they were one argument and begins a close analysis of its logic will soon discern a central inconsistency" ("Intellectual Context" 13).

Likewise, modern sceptical philosophy results in an equally unsettling discovery:

> those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. . . . It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, and sensations, that analysis leaves off--that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.[4] (188)

In these opening paragraphs, Pater suggests that these two forms of "modern" thought have a detrimental effect on the human psyche because although they claim to advance knowledge, they also demonstrate the subjectivity of knowledge, and subsequently the relative nature of truth.

Ironically, Pater's solution for the subject who is perpetually "weaving and unweaving" involves an acceptance of the claims of modern thought. As Carolyn Williams suggests, "his aesthetic method of representing knowledge of an object is modeled as a cross between the methods offered by skeptical scientific empiricism and epistemological philosophy" (*Transfigured World* 32). Pater accepts the subjectivity of knowledge and the relativity of truth and makes a virtue of them in his aesthetic philosophy. Aesthetic perception is the answer to the question: "How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" (188). In passing from "point to point" the aesthetic perceiver avoids the tendency towards dissolution that is

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[4] In the original 1868 version, this last sentence was slightly different, presenting an even more apocalyptic image: "washed out beyond the bar in a sea at ebb, losing even his personality, as the elements of which he is composed pass into new combinations. Struggling, as he must, to save himself, it is himself that he loses at every moment." This passage was omitted by Pater, but it originally followed the second paragraph. It has been reprinted in Donald Hill's edition of The Renaissance (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) 273.

the result of modern thought by arresting objects at the point of sharpest focus, so that "[e]very moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,--for that moment only" (188). In this passage, Pater's use of the image "hand or face" echoes the earlier one of "face and limb" from the paragraph concerned with the negative effects of scientific thought. But while under scientific analysis "face and limb" were "but an image of ours" that would ultimately dissolve and vanish away, now *aesthetic* perception enables the perceiver to focus on moments of clarity or heightened awareness (even if they are only moments). Thus, ideal aesthetic perceivers do not lose themselves in the search for absolute truth because they accept the relative or "possible" truths of the moment.

While aesthetic perception accepts the claims of scientific and philosophical modern thought, it does not replicate the types of vision proposed by those schools. Instead, it models itself on the mode of awareness derived from "great passions" which "give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity,[5] disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us" (190); and for Pater, the greatest of the "great passions" is art, because it "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (190). This sudden turn to art might seem strange after such a focus on acts of general perception, but for Pater, art and perception are inextricably linked because "[a]rt . . . is . . . always striving . . . to become a matter of pure perception" ("The School of Giorgione,"[6]

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[5] In the 1873 version, Pater specifically distinguished "the various forms of enthusiastic activity" as "political or religious, or the 'enthusiasm of humanity'" (qtd. in Hill 274).

[6] Although "Giorgione" was not published until 1877 (in the *Fortnightly Review*) and was only included in the third edition of *The Renaissance*, Lawrence Evans believes that the similarity of the content of "Giorgione" and the "Preface" suggests that it was written for the first edition. He supports this claim by pointing to a letter in which Pater asks for an essay to be returned to him in order that he might "embody parts of it in the 'Preface'." Evans assumes that this essay was "Giorgione." See *Letters WP* 8n1.

Renaissance 108). The best art recreates that point of heightened awareness by taking an ordinary object and imbuing it with significance. Thus, the artists of the school of Giorgione present the viewer with

> a mere gesture, a look, a smile, perhaps--some brief and wholly concrete moment--into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and which seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present. . . . Such ideal instants the school of Giorgione selects . . . exquisite pauses in time, in which we seem to be spectators of all the fulness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life.[7] (*Renaissance* 118)

The aim, then, of Pater's aesthetic perceiver, is to recreate the type of vision enacted in great art works. Developing such a mode of perception is the first step in the process of becoming Pater's ideal "aesthetic critic," who is a more refined ideal perceiver.

In the "Preface" to *The Renaissance*, written five years after the "Conclusion," Pater indicates how the aesthetic perspective becomes a critical rather than merely sensual mode of perception, and thus, how the ideal aesthetic perceiver becomes an aesthetic critic. The aesthetic critic is endowed with "imaginative reason,"[8] a faculty which combines "sense" (the sense-perception of the ideal perceiver) and "intellect"

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[7] Another instance of Pater's comparison of art to an intensified form of perception occurs in the final lines of "Joachim Du Bellay," in which he compares the effects of the poetry of the Pleiad to distinct visual images: "A sudden light transfigures some trivial thing, a weather-vane, a wind-mill, a winnowing-fan, the dust in the barn door. A moment--and the thing has vanished, because it was pure effect; but it leaves a relish behind it, a longing that the accident may happen again" (*Renaissance* 40).

[8] The term "imaginative reason" was used first by Arnold in his 1864 essay, "Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment." Pater uses the phrase in "Giorgione" and again in "Wordsworth" and *Plato and Platonism*. He uses a similar term, "imaginative intellect," which is his own, in "Winckelmann." For details concerning Pater's use of these terms see Hill's critical edition of *The Renaissance*, 385-86.

(the intellect of the "critic") in the perception of objects ("Giorgione," *Renaissance* 102). Thus, after receiving the initial sense-impression the aesthetic critic evaluates the moment of heightened awareness by asking the following types of question: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence?" (*Renaissance* xix-xx). These questions differentiate the "aesthetic critic" from the "aesthetic perceiver" of the "Conclusion," for they constitute *analysis*, a feature of both objective scientific pursuits and subjective epistemological philosophy which, in that essay, led to dissolution. What is significant about the questions, however, is their double focus on both the object and the subject's perception of the object. The combination of objective and subjective analysis effected by the "imaginative reason" allows at least for "provisional objectivity" (Williams, *Transfigured World* 26),[9] or a relative truth which, according to Pater, is in itself a form of knowledge. To deny the Arnoldian aim of "seeing the object as in itself it really is" ("Preface," *Renaissance* xix) is not to despair of truly knowing anything. For Pater and his projected ideal readers, the ability to "know one's impression [of the object] as it really is" ("Preface," *Renaissance* xix) is valid because, in a world in which absolute truth seems unattainable, this ability constitutes a significant form of knowledge.

In the critical essays of *The Renaissance*, Pater, in his mediation between objective and subjective data in his analysis of artist figures, demonstrates the results of this form of "subjective" knowledge. His essays, then, serve as models for the type of perception and critical analysis required of his audience of aesthetically critical readers. In addition, Pater frequently uses the artists he is studying as models for his

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[9] Wolfgang Iser also describes Pater's mediation between objective and subjective knowledge. Iser says that Pater's use of the term "impression" is important in this respect. The "impression" provides an alternative mode of knowledge by combining "subjective perception with objective perceptibility" (36).

ideal aesthetic critic.[10] Thus, with reference to Botticelli's critical vision, he writes:

> But the genius of which Botticelli is the type, usurps the data before it as the exponent of ideas, moods, visions of its own; in this interest it plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some and isolating others, and always combining them anew. To him . . . the scene, the colour, the outward image or gesture, comes with all its incisive and importunate reality; but awakes in him, moreover, by some subtle law of his own structure, a mood which it awakes in no one else . . . . (*Renaissance* 42)

The latter half of this passage (beginning with "To him") describes Botticelli as the ideal perceiver as outlined in the "Conclusion": one who achieves a distinctive impression through the mediation of objective and subjective data. The former half, however, demonstrates a feature of perception that distinguishes the reflective "aesthetic critic" from the merely sensual "aesthetic perceiver." For Botticelli does not merely *absorb* visual data; rather, he "usurps," "plays fast and loose," "rejects," "isolates," and "combines" them in a critical way that amounts to more than just mediation. These activities alter the original object through the imposition of subjective impressions, helping to create a new form of knowledge or "insight" which takes the form of the "aesthetic object" created through this process.[11]

Although *The Renaissance* is not specifically concerned with issues of audience

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[10] That Pater's aesthetic critics are both appreciators of art and artists may help to explain why Pater's aesthetic objects include both the real--the subject of the artist (hence, "the face of one's friend," a "tone on the hills or sea," *Renaissance* 189, 188)--and the artistic--the subject of the critic (a "song or picture," *Renaissance* xix).

[11] Pater suggests that the harmony achieved by Botticelli is not as easily managed by Leonardo. Leonardo's mediation is compromised by the "struggle between the reason and its ideas, and the senses" which is caused by the conflicting aims of his "curiosity" and "the desire for beauty." These disparate aims (as Pater characterises them) "tended to make [Leonardo] go too far below that outside of things in which art really begins and ends." Hence, Leonardo's "problem was the transmutation of ideas into images" (*Renaissance* 88).

reception, the entire volume projects an ideal audience who will develop the aesthetic mode of awareness described. But in his naivete about audience, Pater overlooked the potentially negative consequences of giving validity to an individual's subjective impressions. Pater was, however, forced to face these consequences as his projected audience of like-minded souls, whom he believed would naturally understand the expression of his impressions, turned out, in actuality, to have their own very different subjective impressions of what Pater's intentions were. Thus, despite the fact that *The Renaissance* was largely concerned with the subjectivity of perception, Pater did not anticipate the kind of reception he received from some of the very people to whom it was addressed--his colleagues and students at Oxford.

While their reactions to what they perceived to be Pater's message were different (his colleagues generally expressing outrage, while the students were in a state of reverent awe), the (mis)interpretations of these two groups amounted to the same thing. Both believed that Pater's dictum, "[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end" ("Conclusion," *Renaissance* 188), was an appeal for physical, sensual experience, when for Pater it was for a mental experience. Thus, in a reproachful letter, John Wordsworth, Pater's colleague, offered the following interpretation of the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*: "[the] philosophy is an assertion, that no fixed principles either of religion or morality can be regarded as certain, that the only thing worth living for is momentary enjoyment . . ." (qtd. in *Letters WP* 13). Interestingly enough, Wordsworth did not object so much to Pater's holding such a philosophy as he did to Pater's very public expression of it. Wordsworth knew and did not mind that Pater had already published the "Conclusion" as part of his essay on William Morris. In that instance, however, as Wordsworth pointed out, the "article was anonymous, whereas this appears under your own name as a Fellow of Brasenose and as the mature result of your studies in an important period in history" (qtd. in *Letters WP* 13). Wordsworth felt that Pater's primary fault was his lack of consideration for his position with respect to his audience of young men and peers: "Could you . . . have known the dangers into

which you were likely to lead minds weaker than your own, you would, I believe, have paused. Could you have known the grief your words would be to many of your Oxford contemporaries you might even have found no ignoble pleasure in refraining from uttering them" (qtd. in *Letters WP* 13-14).

The reactions of his Oxford colleagues and the young men with "weak minds" who were led to adopt a dangerous philosophy disturbed Pater because they came from the scholars whom he projected as his ideal readers. As a result, Pater took Wordsworth's disapprobation to heart and removed the offending "Conclusion" for the second edition of *The Renaissance* (1877), acknowledging that he had perhaps neglected to consider the impact of his words on his audience. Although he restored the "Conclusion" in 1888, he did so only because he felt he had clarified his meaning in the intervening years:

> This brief "Conclusion" was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here, with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original meaning. I have dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested by it. (*Renaissance* 186n1)

Pater's restoration of the offending "Conclusion" after the publication of *Marius* demonstrates that while he recognised his part in contributing to his audience's misinterpretation, he nonetheless stood by his earlier philosophy, which he had been at pains to clarify in *Marius* and through the "slight changes" to the "Conclusion" for the third edition. Pater's reference to the "changes" indicates his feeling that to some extent the misinterpretation occurred as a result of his style--a subject which he treats more fully and with careful consideration of his audience in the introductory essay of his next volume of criticism, *Appreciations*, as well as in his essay "The Doctrine of Plato" from *Plato and Platonism*.[12]

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[12] The introductory essay of *Appreciations*, "Style," was initially published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1888, fifteen years after the first edition, and in the same year as

Pater's focus in "Style" on a specific type of "aesthetic critic"--the "literary artist"--represents a certain degree of reflection on his experience with the reception of *The Renaissance*. In his delineation of the function of literary artists (and here he includes writers not normally considered artists, such as, critics, historians, essayists, and philosophers), Pater describes a process of mediation similar to that undertaken by the aesthetic critic. Literary artists mediate between objective and subjective criteria because they are engaged in "the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of [their] sense of it" (*Appreciations* 6). In so doing, literary artists, like aesthetic critics, arrive at a form of "truth" or knowledge, which although "diverted somewhat from men's ordinary sense of it," is "truth" in its "absolute accordance of expression to idea [i.e. of the writer's personal sense of fact]" (*Appreciations* 32). In giving form to their impressions, however, literary artists are involved in a communicative act with an audience, and as such, the expression of their impressions should reflect an awareness of this fact: "In his self-criticism, he [the writer] supposes always the sort of reader who will [read] (full of eyes) warily, considerately" (*Appreciations* 8).

In this admission of a certain degree of accountability on the part of the artist towards his audience, Pater addresses his detractors' concerns that he consider the effect of his writing on a susceptible audience. Pater, however, is unwilling to place the full burden of responsibility on the artist, and therefore, he delineates a writer-reader contract in "Style" which demands certain things of the reader as well:

> His [the writer's] appeal . . . is to the scholar, who has great experience in literature . . . . Hence a contention, a sense of self-restraint and renunciation, having for the susceptible reader the effect

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the third edition (with the restored "Conclusion") of *The Renaissance*. It was published the following year (1889) in *Appreciations*. *Plato and Platonism* was published in 1893. Given the length of time between *The Renaissance* and these works, they can hardly be said to be a direct response to the scandal provoked by *The Renaissance*. However, they do demonstrate that Pater was led, in the interim, to consider issues of audience and reception.

> of a challenge for minute consideration; the attention of the writer, in every minutest detail, being a pledge that it is worth the reader's while to be attentive too, that the writer is dealing scrupulously with his instrument, and therefore, indirectly with the reader himself also . . . (10)

Pater expects his audience to be as aesthetically critical as the literary artists he discusses, and as such, he anticipates "scholarly" (13) readers with "intelligence" (13) and "great experience in literature" (10), who are "sensitive," (28) "wary" (8), and "attentive" (10).[13] Because these readers accept the modern condition that suggests that knowledge is subjective and truth is relative, they maintain a state of receptivity and open-mindedness, as Pater establishes in "The Doctrine of Plato:" "Such condition of suspended judgment indeed . . . is but the expectation, the receptivity, of the faithful scholar, determined not to foreclose what is still a question--the 'philosophic temper,' in short, for which a survival of query will be still the salt of truth, even in the most ascertained knowledge" (*Plato* 196).

Despite his disappointment with the reception of *The Renaissance* by two of his most important audiences, Pater's expectations of audience still appear somewhat idealistic. Nonetheless, his specific delineation of criteria for the ideal reader means that he does not make the same kinds of assumptions about audience as he did in writing *The Renaissance*. Where Pater previously anticipated a certain type of audience, he now attempts to fashion that audience--to turn his actual readers into the

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[13] In addition, Pater's ideal readers are, most likely, men. In writing of the literary artist Pater speaks of the necessity of having a "male conscience." It is this type of reader who reads "(full of eyes), warily, considerately," as opposed to the "female conscience" which "traverses . . . lightly [and] amiably" (8) over material. Pater, however, does qualify his gender-biased stance by pointing out that the system of education is such that "real scholarship" is limited to men (8). As such, I will suppose that, given a sufficient degree of scholarship, Pater's ideal reader could be a woman. In fact, Pater did have women friends and regarded at least one of them (Mrs. Mark Pattison) highly enough to change the title of *The Renaissance* from *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* based on her comment that the title was misleading. For her review of *The Renaissance* see Seiler 71-73.

ideal ones he at first envisioned. In "Style" and "The Doctrine of Plato," Pater clearly delineates the duties and characteristics of his projected ideal audience partly in order to encourage the young men who may have been misled by his earlier work to read more closely, and partly to defend himself from the accusations of his detractors. Having fulfilled his end of the contract by exercising "self-restraint and renunciation" (*Appreciations* 10) in the expression of his ideas, Pater expects his readers to bear some of the burden of responsibility for their interpretations.

Because of his experience with his disciples' and detractors' (mis)interpretations of his philosophy, Pater is led to acknowledge the negative consequences of his own philosophy, which admits to the relative nature of truth and encourages subjective analysis on the part of the perceiver. Thus, in "The Doctrine of Plato" he writes: "truth . . . because it resembles some high kind of relationship of persons to persons, depends a good deal on the receiver; and must be, in that degree, elusive, provisional, contingent, a matter of various approximation. . . . it is partly a subjective attitude of mind" (*Plato* 187). Although an artist may expect that his audience's impressions of his work bear an "approximate" resemblance to his own, complete control is not possible:

> The receiver may add the falsities of his own nature to the truth he receives. The proposition which embodies it very imperfectly, may not look to him, in those dark chambers of his individuality, of himself, into which none but he can ever get, to test the matter, what it looks like to me, or to you. . . . Misuse . . . is of course possible in a method which admits of no objective sanction or standard. (*Plato* 189-90)

Despite such potentially negative consequences, Pater does not feel that one should give up trying to communicate. Rather, he suggests that one must continue to communicate "with a view to the central need of a select few, those 'men of finer thread' who have formed and maintain the literary ideal . . ." (*Appreciations* 14-15), in the hope that the work will put at least the "select few" into a "duly receptive attitude towards such possible truth, discovery, or revelation [as is presented by the

writer]" (*Plato* 188).

Pater's sense, then, of the possibility of acquiring an audience of intimates endowed with the temperament of the aesthetic critic did not substantially change between the writing of *The Renaissance* and his later works, despite the disappointment he must have felt at the misinterpretation of his philosophy by both his peers and disciples. What did change as a result of this disappointment, however, was his attitude towards this audience. No longer assuming a perfect affinity between himself and an ideal audience, Pater carefully articulates what is required of that audience. As we have seen in the discussion of his later essays "Style" and "The Doctrine of Plato," Pater began to make clearer demands on his audience than he did in his more subtly suggestive essays in *The Renaissance*, demands that carried over into his fictional work, *Marius the Epicurean*, as well.

At the same time as he was demanding the scrupulous attention of his audiences in their interpretations of his work, however, he himself was taking particular care in the communication of his ideas. These ideas did not substantially change between the 1873 publication of *The Renaissance* and his death in 1894: rather, his expression of them did, as a result of his increased awareness of the nature of his audience. Following *The Renaissance*, Pater not only clarified his expectations of audience, he also experimented with style as part of an attempt to correct the misunderstandings of both his detractors, such as John Wordsworth, and, more importantly, his disciples, the "young men" who stood to carry his ideas into the nineties.[14]

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[14] Pater's sense of responsibility to those of his peers who objected to *The Renaissance* is perhaps reflected in *Marius the Epicurean* when Marius develops a sense that he is part of a community. This realisation demands of Marius,

> not so much a change of *practice*, as of *sympathy*--a new departure, an expansion of sympathy. It involved certainly some curtailment of his liberty, in concession to the actual manner, the distinctions, the enactments of that great crowd of admirable spirits, who have elected so, and not otherwise, in their conduct of life, and are not here to give one, so to it, an 'indulgence'. But then, under the supposition of their disapproval, no roses would ever seem worth plucking again. (emphasis added--156)

II

In examining the degree to which Pater's style of writing may have influenced his audience's misinterpretation of *The Renaissance*, I will begin with a consideration of Pater's use of the essay form as a medium of expression.[15] Pater's use of this form has direct implications for his relationship with his audience, and he himself commented upon the aptness of the essay for the expression of his ideas in "The Doctrine of Plato." His choice of the essay, one of the more flexible of written forms, is not surprising given his desire to mediate between objective and subjective forms of knowledge. After all, the essay form is suited equally well to the presentation of factual information and personal impressions. But Pater's particular combination of the factual and the personal in *The Renaissance* constituted a dissolution of generic boundaries that "disturbed his Victorian audience, who distinguished between the historical essay and the personal essay according to a strict generic contract that they expected to be straightforwardly filled not subverted in this complex and subtle way" (Williams, *Transfigured World* 147).[16] Mrs. Pattison's opinion is a prime example of the confusion that arose as a result of Pater's blending

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If Marius's feelings are any indications of Pater's own, Pater did take heed of Wordsworth's appeal to Pater to consider the *effects* of his ideas. In so doing, Pater, like Marius, changed not so much his practice, as his sympathy, in his consideration of his projected audiences of both peers and disciples.

[15] This might seem a moot point, in that Pater's ideas seem logically suited to the essay form, but Pater's switch, after the poor reception of *The Renaissance*, to the novel and imaginative portrait, in which he puts forth the same ideas, suggests that the choice is not as obvious as it might at first seem.

[16] Ian Fletcher also comments on Pater's mixture of forms. He writes: "His work seems to lie in a twilight of categories between art and literary criticism, *belles lettres*, classical scholarship, the *journal intime* and the philosophical novel" (5). Fletcher, however, does not comment on the discomfort this might have provoked in Victorian readers. Rather, he suggests that this combination makes the modern critic uncomfortable, while Williams believes that the modern reader "may be more appreciative of . . . the play of genres" (*Transfigured World* 147). There is, of course, a thirty year gap separating these two comments which may explain the shift in critical perspective.

of genres. Although she praised Pater's personal style and his ability to convey sentiments--"[Pater's choice of words] is often so brilliantly accurate that they gleam upon the page with the radiance of jewels" (qtd. in Seiler 72)--his subjective treatment of history struck her as inappropriate: "Mr. Pater writes of the Renaissance as if it were a kind of sentimental revolution having no relation to the conditions of the actual world" (qtd. in Seiler 72). Pater's subjective style, which had as its aim the depiction of "relative truths," undermined the "truth" that Victorian readers expected from historical studies.

In *Plato and Platonism*, however, Pater regards the essay as the perfect vehicle for the "relative or 'modern' spirit" (174-75)[17] who wishes to explore possible truths rather than discover absolute truth: "[the essay is] the literary form necessary to a mind for which truth itself is but a possibility, realisable not as a general conclusion, but rather as the elusive effect of a particular personal experience" (*Plato* 175). True to its etymological origin, the essay, in Pater's hands, is an "attempt": or, as Williams suggests, "a principle of investigation and suspended judgment, designed to fulfil the needs of the modernist discipline . . . [whereby Pater's] words, in their sensuous succession, embody the process of speculation, the movement of interpenetrating image and idea, not the attainment of positive formulation" ("Pater in the 1880's" 41-2). The essay, then, by this definition, reflects Pater's concept of aesthetic perception because its dialectic form, the interpenetration of "question and answer" in the search for "possible truth" (*Plato* 188), resembles the process of aesthetic perception in which objective and subjective data are mediated, leading eventually to a moment of heightened awareness.

Because of the elusive and provisional quality of the "possible truths" that are

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[17] This phrase is repeated from Pater's essay, "Coleridge," in *Appreciations*. In that essay he defines the "relative spirit" in the following way:

> Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the 'relative' spirit in place of the 'absolute'. Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula . . . To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions. (65)

revealed in moments of heightened awareness they may seem unsatisfactory goals for the aesthetic critic. Pater, however, sees this state of continual reflection and uncertainty as the ultimate goal, and his style of writing reflects his desire to recreate the dialectic process which leads to such an end in the minds of his audience--in other words to put his readers into "a duly receptive attitude" (*Plato* 168). Pater's initial conception, in *The Renaissance*, of criticism as a means of involving his audience in a process of aesthetic perception, led to the creation of a unique personal style that distinguished him from the two foremost critics of his time--John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. Although Pater differed significantly from these critics, they did, to a certain extent, prepare the way for the themes and form of Pater's criticism. Like Arnold, Pater "felt that it was necessary to redress the balance in Christianity away from the Hebraic, moralistic emphasis towards the Hellenic ideals of beauty, order, clarity," although their ideas about Hellenism were quite different (Fraser 220).[18] His debt to Ruskin, on the other hand, consisted of his highly subjective style of criticism and his belief that art, in its "combination of emotion, intellect, and imagination [represented] the expression of the noblest human spirit" (Fraser 186).

Where Pater differed from these two men was in his ideas about the social function of art with respect to morality. The criticism of Arnold and Ruskin demonstrated their belief that art has a profound moral influence on culture. While by no means immoral, Pater was unwilling to "forgo any area of human experience through the necessary limitations incurred under an absolute moral system" (Fraser 187).[19] In addition, Pater seems to have lacked an inherent faith in the idea of

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[18] See David DeLaura's *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* for a thorough account of the humanistic visions of Arnold and Pater as descendants of Newman. DeLaura focuses mainly on the similarities between Pater and Arnold in an effort to demonstrate the development of aestheticism as a response to the problems posed by religious scepticism.

[19] Pater endorsed a morality that was aligned with sympathy, and thus he says of Botticelli, "His morality is all sympathy" (*Renaissance* 43). While less evident in *The Renaissance*, Pater's "morality" becomes clearer in *Marius the Epicurean*. Pater's unorthodox morality meant that he was against the anachronistic imposition of nineteenth-

cultural reformation, a trait which distinguishes him from both Ruskin and Arnold. Commenting on the difference between Pater and Arnold in this respect, DeLaura writes:

> Pater . . . *despaired* of changing society as the mature Arnold never did. . . . For Arnold's disinterestedness envisaged nothing less than the reshaping and elevating of the Victorian mind, whereas Pater's renunciation and indifference seek to retain an inherited fullness of 'experience,' in detachment from the vulgar actualities of Victorian life, for a small band of elite 'Oxonian' souls. (229-30)

The differing views that Arnold and Pater held regarding society had a great effect on the way in which they conceived of, and communicated with, their respective audiences. Arnold's ultimate faith in society as a whole implies a conception, on his part, of a fairly large readership, while Pater's lack of such faith reflects his sense of a select audience.

Arnold's frequent use of "I," in contrast with the glaring absence of this personal pronoun in Pater, might lead one to think that Arnold is a more intimate and personal writer than Pater. Take, for example, the openings of two of his essays in *Essays in Criticism*: "I read the other day in the *Dublin Review* . . ." ("Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment" 194); and "I will not presume to say that I now know the French language well . . ." ("Maurice de Guérin" 80). In these two examples, the "I" functions to create a conversational and familiar tone, but it also has an assertive force behind it that indicates a certain confidence. This confidence is maintained throughout Arnold's essays, which are not, as in the case of Pater, processes of inquiry, but rather assertions of a man who, as a critic of culture, sets himself the task of improving Victorian society. As such, the familiarity of the "I"

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century Victorian moral codes on the past, because such an act limited one's ability to appreciate past cultures. Leonardo's inability to live up to the moral standards of the Victorian gentleman, for example, should not detract from the greatness of his art. Ruskin, however, did impose such moral judgments on the past, and this led him to discount the "pestilent art of the Renaissance" in *Stones of Venice* (*Genius* 150).

soon gives way to the creation of a distinction between Arnold and the reader--the "I," as writer and discourser, as opposed to "you," reader and pupil.

The inequality of the relationship between writer and reader is even more pronounced in Ruskin, whose rhetoric, says Harold Bloom, is "full, prophetic," and "overwhelming" ("Introduction" 8), demonstrating the authoritative stance that Ruskin takes towards his readers. By contrast, Pater's rhetoric, writes Bloom, is "partial, hesitant," and "insinuating" ("Introduction" 8). Pater's more reticent stance occurs because Pater does not conceive of himself as a master in a dogmatic sense. His qualities of voice are representative of the dialectical style of his essays. His is the voice of inquiry, of question and answer, not merely answer. Pater shows his reader how one *might* view art, not, as do Arnold and Ruskin, how one *must* view it.

In order to see how Pater's quality of voice, despite his avoidance of the first person, creates an intimacy that distinguishes his criticism from that of Ruskin and Arnold, consider the following passage on Botticelli's Madonnas from *The Renaissance*:

> Perhaps you have sometimes wondered why those peevish-looking Madonnas, conformed to no acknowledged or obvious type of beauty, attract you more and more, and often come back to you when the Sistine Madonna and the Virgins of Fra Angelico are forgotten. At first, contrasting them with those, you may have thought that there was something in them mean or abject even, for the abstract lines of the face have little nobleness, and the colour is wan. For with Botticelli she too, though she holds in her hands the 'Desire of all nations,' is one of those who are neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies; and her choice is on her face. . . . Her trouble is in the very caress of the mysterious child, whose gaze is always far from her, and who has already that sweet look of devotion which men have never been able altogether to love, and which still makes the born saint an object almost

of suspicion to his earthly brethren.[20] (44)

Pater involves his audience intimately in his process of thought by attributing his own thoughts to "you," the reader. Pater's "insinuation," then, consists not merely of hinting at certain interpretations of art, but also of recreating his act of perception as aesthetic critic in the mind of the reader. While this method may seem liable to lead to the invasion and control of others' thoughts, it avoids such a charge by eschewing dogmatic assertions and final conclusions. Rather, in his use of tentative phrasings like, "perhaps you have sometimes wondered," or "you may have thought," Pater establishes the succeeding passage as a vague rumination, an interpretation for his audience's consideration, not an assertive declaration. In addition, his use of qualification leads his readers to consider a number of possibilities. For example, by describing the Madonnas as "mean" *or* "abject," they can decide between one interpretation or the other, or indeed, choose both.[21]

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[20] One runs the risk, in quoting his purple passages, of misrepresenting Pater by demonstrating effect rather than process. Taken out of context, these highly subjective passages may seem overwrought, but within context they have been led up to through a careful consideration and evaluation of the artist and his milieu--Pater's "data" or his objective component. Thus, as R.V. Johnson points out, the suggestion that the Madonna is "neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies" has been prepared for by Pater's examination of Botticelli's life and surrounding influences (28).

[21] Perhaps the best example of Pater's use of qualification to inundate the reader with multiple possibilities of interpretation occurs in his passage on *La Gioconda*:

> All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there . . . the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age . . . the return of the pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks on which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen days about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary . . . (*Renaissance* 98-99)

The qualifications layer image upon image, and with each new image, the reader's attention is directed further and further away from the initial object that initiated the reverie--namely, the *Mona Lisa*. Of this distancing effect, Iser says, "[i]nstead of an analysis, Pater offers a sequence of impressions that leave the original subject far behind.

Ultimately, Pater's process establishes a much different relationship between writer and reader from that which is achieved in Ruskin and Arnold. Pater's intimate and non-assertive tone makes his reader his equal, rather than making him master to a group of disciples. Although he implicates his audience in his process of thought, it is at least a process of *inquiry*, of question and answer, which encourages his readers "to be forever curiously testing" in the formulation of their own opinions, "never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or [even of] *our own*" (emphasis added--*Renaissance* 189).[22] Pater's theory, then, with its promotion of subjective perception, actually allows the reader a great deal of freedom by insisting that "one . . . realise . . . primary data for one's self, or not at all" (*Renaissance* xx).

Ironically, Pater's style undermined his desire to keep his readers "forever curiously testing" and, as a result, he was misread by both followers and detractors alike. In embodying the qualities of "artistic genius" that he outlines in "Winckelmann"--"the power of conceiving humanity in a new and striking way, of putting a happy world of its own creation in place of the meaner world of our common days, generating around itself an atmosphere with a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect" (*Renaissance* 170)--Pater is all too convincing. But what he convinces his audience of is the absolute truth of what are to him

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The metaphors do not in any way build up a complete picture, but leap surprisingly from one sphere to another" (58).

[22] To commit absolutely to anything is, as far as Pater is concerned, thoroughly undesirable. Pater's interest is always in the grey, in-between areas, the transitional, and the liminal, and he finds the artists who fall into these categories the most interesting to treat. He sees Botticelli as just such a type, for Botticelli, like his Madonna, "accepts . . . that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, and decide no great causes, and make great refusals. . . . His interest is neither in the untempered goodness of Angelico's saints, nor the untempered evil of Orcagna's *Inferno*" (*Renaissance* 43). Pater's preference for remaining in a transitional limbo is compatible with his dialectic method. Perhaps one of the reasons Pater objected to his disciples, was that they took his ideas to their logical conclusion, whereas Pater wanted them to remain in the impartial, transitional world that he inhabited.

possible truths. The effect of Pater's language overrides his attempt to encourage his readers to maintain the state of "suspended judgment" (*Plato* 196) that is a condition of the aesthetic critic's "philosophic temper" (*Plato* 196).

Although Pater's style was, for him, an attempt to induce an aesthetically critical mode of awareness, his detractors felt that his style rendered the susceptible reader passive and unthinking. Thus, one contemporary reviewer writes: "The reader runs . . . some danger of being carried far away by an alluring imagination and by a singularly seductive diction" (qtd. in Seiler 21). In addition, his detractors felt that aesthetic perception was an artistic, but certainly not critical, perspective. Thus, W. J. Stillman, a reviewer for the *Nation,* said of him: "[Pater] is too much of an artist to be a good critic, and hardly attempts to disguise the fact that he is more interested in the perfection of his style than in the mysteries of the art on which his studies are based" (qtd. in Seiler 82). Although these reviewers, in their critical stance, avoid being swept away by Pater's alluring style, they are as guilty of misinterpreting Pater as those who passively accept his impressions as "truth," for they too fail to understand that Pater is attempting to induce his audience into a state of critical awareness of "possible truths" rather than blind faith in seductive suggestions.

The "possible truths" that Pater evoked in *the Renaissance*--his interpretations of Botticelli's Venus and Madonnas, and of Leonardo's *La Gioconda*, among others--were so provocative that they were taken as gospel by some of his young readers, rather than as demonstrations of how the aesthetic critic *might* perceive. Thus, rather than creating a generation of independent aesthetic critics, *The Renaissance* created a band of worshipping young aesthetes who would stand in front of *La Gioconda* at the Louvre, reciting Pater's provocative description.[23] These young aesthetes, who

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[23] In Wilde's "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert says:

> Who . . . cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Mona Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been the slave of some archaic smile as some have fancied, but whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre, and stand before that strange figure . . . I murmur to myself, 'She is older than the rocks among which she sits . . .'

became important figures in the 80's and 90's, included Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and George Moore.[24] Wilde's and Symons's descriptions of the effect of Pater's *Renaissance* on them is indicative of the kind of worshipful response of which Pater was wary:[25]

> It is my golden book! I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have been sounded the moment it was written. (Wilde; qtd. in Yeats 130)
>
> It is the most beautiful book of prose in our literature. It is a book to be read . . . 'with shouts of delight'; or perhaps rather with a delight silent and continuous, for it is all finished and perfect, and it rings everywhere flawless as a bell. (Symons; qtd. in Seiler 177)

The reverence that these young men had for *The Renaissance* indicates that Pater's desire to have his audience think critically had somehow backfired. The religious imagery used by these men to describe Pater's writing establishes Pater as something

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> And so the picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret, of which, in truth, it knows nothing. (*Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* 1028-29)

Although this is a fictional, not an actual occurrence, it is an appropriate example of the kind of reverence that Pater generated from his young disciples.

[24] Moore and Wilde, who were twenty-one and nineteen respectively at the time of the publication of the first edition of *The Renaissance*, definitely qualified as the "young men" referred to in the footnote of the third edition of the "Conclusion." Though Symons was only an eight year old child in 1873, he counts as a disciple by virtue of his reverent attitude towards Pater and *The Renaissance*. Symons was first exposed to Pater in 1882 at the age of seventeen and, judging from his own comments, *The Renaissance* was probably the first of Pater's works that he read: "it was from reading Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, in its first edition on ribbed paper (I have the feel of it still in my fingers), that I realised that prose also could be a fine art" (Introduction to the Modern Library edition of *The Renaissance* xv).

[25] Moore did not publicly comment on *The Renaissance*. His comment on *Marius the Epicurean*, however, suggests that he held Pater in as much reverence as do Wilde and Symons. In *Confessions of a Young Man*, he referred to *Marius* as "the book to which I owe the last temple in my soul" (165).

of a high priest, with Wilde, Symons, and Moore as disciples. But this was not the type of relationship that Pater intended to create through the style of *The Renaissance*. In that work, he was speaking intimately, as an equal to readers like himself, in what might amount to a "priestly brotherhood,"[26] with Pater as a fellow member, not a leader. Pater's followers made him a god, and his word divine, by revering as "ultimate truth" what Pater merely presented as "possible truth." While his disciples rightly recognised Pater's criticism as art, they wrongly valorised the expression of Pater's reflection, rather than the process that it was intended to demonstrate. Thus, *La Gioconda* was, to them, all that Pater said she was. They did not use his reflection as an example of how to interpret their own data for themselves, as the aesthetic critic is meant to. Overwhelmed by style, Pater's disciples overlooked his message.

Pater served, for these men of the 80's and 90's, as a spokesman for their more extreme brand of aestheticism. Enamoured of the effects of Pater's language, they created a prose style that valued form above content, a tendency which Pater, at the end of "Style," suggested did not make for "great art." Encouraged by Pater's freeing of art criticism from moral judgments in his consideration of "strange souls" who led "lives of strange sins and exquisite amusements" ("Leonardo," *Renaissance* 78, 85-6), his disciples felt free to valorise evil and perversity in their own works. By giving priority to these aspects of Pater's works, Pater's disciples developed a decadent aestheticism. And while their interpretations of Pater were, in a sense, a natural outgrowth of his aesthetic philosophy, from Pater's perspective these disciples were guilty of misinterpretation.

Although Pater would not become aware of the full extent of his disciples' misinterpretations of *The Renaissance* until they embarked on their own careers in the eighties, he nonetheless toned down his highly subjective style considerably in his critical writing after *The Renaissance* in order to conform more closely to Victorian

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[26] Linda Dowling uses this term to describe Pater's readers in her book, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986) 138.

expectations. While he continued to publish criticism in journals, he did not publish another book of criticism until 1889, sixteen years after *The Renaissance*, just as the lengths to which his disciples had taken his philosophy were becoming known to him. *Appreciations*, a collection comprised of essays written mostly between the initial publication of *The Renaissance* (1873) and 1888,[27] was very different from *The Renaissance* in form, style, and emphasis. In *Appreciations*, Pater does not aim for the cohesive unity of form that characterised *The Renaissance*. In that work, Pater established a sense of continuity between the artists he discussed, culminating in an endorsement of the Renaissance spirit, which integrated the best aspects of Hellenism and Christianity. In *Appreciations*, however, the essays are ordered with no such emphasis: rather, they appear as random selections, arbitrarily arranged. The effect such an arrangement has on the reader is significantly different from the experience of reading *The Renaissance*. In reading *Appreciations*, the audience is directed towards mere "appreciation" of the subject at hand. Each essay exists as a distinct unit, not as part of a "mythic cycle of birth, death and rebirth," as was the case with *The Renaissance* (Keefe 84).

Stylistically, *Appreciations* also conducts itself quite differently from *The Renaissance*. Gone is the flowery metaphorical language of the previous work, replaced with an ascetic, masculine prose which Pater endorses in "Style," the introductory essay to the volume. While, as Robert and Janice Keefe point out, "[Pater's] prose remains syntactically dense, and for that matter grows more consciously difficult as he grows older, none of his later criticism possesses the luxuriance of interwoven metaphors that had characterized his early masterpiece" (85). But Pater may well have thought that his use of metaphoric language was a

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[27] Only two of the essays in the volume were written prior to the publication of *The Renaissance* in 1873--("Coleridge" and "Aesthetic Poetry"). Pater eventually withdrew "Aesthetic Poetry" because, like the "Conclusion," it had caused offence. His Coleridge essay, which was written in 1866, well before Pater had developed the style he uses in *The Renaissance*, is in keeping with the more traditional critical style of the volume.

fault of his critical work, something to be restrained and tempered, for in "Style" he writes:

> Parallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden:--[the writer] knows the narcotic force of these upon the *negligent intelligence* to which any *diversion*, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject. Jealous . . . of all that does not hold directly to that, of the facile, the otiose, he will never depart from the strictly pedestrian process, unless he gains a ponderable something thereby. (emphasis added--*Appreciations* 16)

The suggestion, here, is that the writer's restraint is desirable, not only in itself, but because of the potential effect on the "negligent intelligence"--perhaps yet another allusion to the young men that Pater felt had misinterpreted *The Renaissance*.

Another noticeably different aspect of *Appreciations*, in contrast with *The Renaissance*, is Pater's emphasis on ethics. Eager to demonstrate to both his detractors and disciples that his philosophy of art and life was not and never had been immoral, he selected essays that focused on the good, as opposed to the merely pleasurable, that could be derived from the writers considered in the volume. In "Wordsworth," for example, he writes: "The office of the poet is not that of the moralist, and the first aim of Wordsworth's poetry is to give the reader a peculiar kind of pleasure. But through his poetry, and through his pleasure in it, he does actually convey to the reader an extraordinary wisdom in the things of practice" (58-9). In addition, Pater managed to clarify and defend his own sense of morality, a morality that was part of his philosophy as early as the 1860's when he first published the essay on Coleridge. This morality was that of the "relative spirit" which by "breaking through . . . rough and brutal classifications, and giving elasticity to inflexible principles, begets an intellectual *finesse* of which the ethical result is a delicate and tender justice in the criticism of human life" (*Appreciations* 105).

In *Appreciations*, Pater demonstrates his mastery of the qualifications of good writing as he sets them out in "Style." Purged of the supposed faults of *The Renaissance*, *Appreciations* did not risk misinterpretation by his readers, and no one could accuse Pater of being "too much of an artist to be a good critic" (qtd. in Seiler 82), as W. J. Stillman had said of *The Renaissance*. That Pater was successful in curbing his stylistic extravagances in *Appreciations* is confirmed by the contemporary reviews, nearly all of which acknowledged the change in Pater's writing style. The reviewer for the *Spectator*, for example, wrote: "Not only is his diction less exuberant, but his criticism is riper, sounder, and more manly" (qtd. in Seiler 209). Equally impressed with Pater's "manly" style was William Watson, who wrote:

> There was a time when some of Mr. Pater's qualities of style almost threatened to crystallise into mannerisms . . . he was capable of relapsing into the mere honeyed effeminacy that made readers with virile tastes turn away from Florian Deleal. He . . . [is] to be congratulated upon his having left all this behind him and chastened his style into something which, while for fastidiousness it is perhaps unparalleled, is also full of real, though very quiet, strength--strength that is not combative but prehensile, the strength of a steady grasp, never of a blow. (qtd. in Seiler 206)

Although Pater's work was now acceptable to mainstream reviewers, it did not lose its appeal for his disciples. Though remarking that there was perhaps "something lost," namely, a certain "sensuousness" in Pater's new, "severer" style, Symons nonetheless praised *Appreciations* (Seiler 204). What Symons and Wilde both noted in their reviews, however, was the absence of particularly Paterean passages, like his passage on *La Gioconda*. Thus, Wilde was led to remark upon the inherently unquotable nature of much of *Appreciations*: "From the present volume it is difficult to select any one passage in preference to another as specially characteristic of Mr. Pater's treatment" (qtd. in Seiler 236). When Wilde did quote from the work, it was merely to remark upon its "usefulness" for the contemporary age; even Pater's

disciples were hard-pressed to find a Paterean purple passage in the later criticism.

In his extensive theoretical commentary on the obligations of writer and reader to the material at hand, and in his determination to curb the extravagant tendencies of his earlier criticism in *Appreciations*, Pater demonstrated the degree to which he was concerned with his critical reception. Although his initiation of a new style of critical writing in *The Renaissance* established a distinctive relationship with his audience, it was not the kind of relationship that Pater anticipated. Failing to achieve the desired results from this first attempt, Pater, in his subsequent criticism, altered his tone substantially. But it was not to criticism that Pater initially turned in his attempt to clarify his intentions, and before he altered his style, he experimented with a new medium. After the negative reception of *The Renaissance*, Pater first brought his stylistic experimentation to fiction, and it is in this medium that Pater initially responded to the "young men" and peers who had misinterpreted his philosophy.

Chapter 2

A "Duty" and Something Much "Pleasanter": *Marius the Epicurean*, *Imaginary Portraits*, and a New Understanding of Audience

Twelve years separated the publication of the first edition of *The Renaissance* and Pater's next book, *Marius the Epicurean*. In the interim, while continuing to write essays for magazines, Pater developed and subsequently abandoned plans for two books: one on Shakespeare, the other a series of essays on Greek mythology, Venetian painting, and English literature.[1] In 1878, Pater wrote "The Child in the House," a story which he claimed was "the germinating, original, source, specimen, of all my *imaginative* work" (qtd. in Evans xxix). Pater's emphasis on the term "imaginative" points to the fictional rather than critical nature of the work. "The Child in the House" gave him a form for his future "imaginary portraits," including his novel *Marius the Epicurean*.[2] Fiction offered an ideal medium by which Pater, who in *The Renaissance* strongly voiced his opposition to "abstract" theory in favour of "concrete" definitions, could give his "abstract" philosophy "concrete" form by presenting to his misinterpreting detractors and disciples a character who successfully embodied his philosophy.

Rather than retract the views expressed in the "Conclusion," as one might expect given his withdrawal of that section from the second edition of the *Renaissance*, Pater subtly defends his earlier position in his new book.[3] As Richard

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[1] For a more detailed account of Pater's activities during these years see Evans's introduction to the *Letters of Walter Pater* xxvii-xxviii.

[2] In a letter to Violet Paget in 1883, two years before the publication of *Marius*, Pater referred to the story as "an Imaginary Portrait of a peculiar type of mind in the time of Marcus Aurelius" (*Letters WP* 79).

[3] The degree to which Pater changed his theoretical position after the response to the "Conclusion" of *The Renaissance* is a major issue among Pater scholars. Some critics, such as Laurel Brake, see Pater's subsequent work as a denial of his earlier position. Others, such as David DeLaura, take the middle ground, suggesting a slight change in thought. While DeLaura suggests that Pater's position is altered somewhat through his "realization that self-cultivation is incomplete in isolation from others" (179-

Crinkley notes: "Pater wrote [*Marius*] not so much to indicate a change in his philosophy--as to cast that philosophy in a mode more acceptable to his contemporaries" (138). These "contemporaries" included both his detractors and the "weaker minds" mentioned by Wordsworth in his letter to Pater, who became the "young men" in the footnote to the reinstatement of the "Conclusion" for the third edition. That *Marius* was a clarification rather than a retraction of his earlier views is supported by this re-institution of the "Conclusion," with the aforementioned qualifying footnote directing the reader (offended, misled or otherwise) to *Marius the Epicurean* for a fuller treatment of "the thoughts suggested by it" (186n1). This fuller treatment consisted of an emphasis on the contemplative rather than active nature of an ideal aestheticism, as well as on its intrinsically ethical nature. Judging from his shock at the outcry against the "Conclusion," Pater seems to have felt that these elements were implicit in his expression of his aesthetic philosophy from the outset.[4] *Marius*, then, does not so much represent a change of ideas on Pater's part: rather, it represents a re-contextualisation of them, as Pater, having come to realise the limits of his actual audience, presents his aesthetic ideas in a more palatable form for his detractors and a less sensational form for his apparently susceptible young disciples. As Billie Andrew Inman notes: "The key to the differences in the styles of the

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80), he also suggests that in *Marius*, "Pater was at once retreating from the antinomianism of the *Renaissance* volume while almost delightedly re-exhibiting his Hellenic ideal in sacerdotal robes" (282). Billie Andrew Inman and Richard Crinkley both see a continuity in Pater's thinking and suggest that *Marius* is a careful restatement of his philosophy. In "Pater's Appeal to his Readers," Inman writes: "I see no difference between the 'completeness of life' attractive to Marius, 'a life of various yet select sensation' and the life recommended in the Conclusion, where one "catches at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers and curious odours, or the work of an artist's hands, or the face of one's friend'" (655).

[4] See Inman's essay "Pater's Appeal to his Readers," which argues that although the hedonistic emphasis of the "Conclusion" ignores humanistic elements that appear in Pater's later philosophy, this humanistic side *is*, in fact, a part of his earlier philosophy and is evident in other essays of the 1860's--"Diaphaneitè," "Coleridge," and "Winckelmann."

Conclusion and "Animula Vagula" [in *Marius*] is not a change in Pater's attitude toward the ideas expressed; it is a change in his conception of his reader" ("Pater's Appeal" 657). In *Marius*, aspects of narrative style, character, and plot consistently refer back to Pater's earlier work as he attempts to clarify and re-communicate his initial philosophy to the audience that had misunderstood his intentions.

I

One simple explanation for the change in style between *Marius and The Renaissance* is the shift in genre. This explanation is not sufficient in the case of a writer such as Pater, whose fiction (particularly Marius) engages so strongly with the theoretical and philosophical interests that he treats in his criticism. And although Pater's style changes in his expression of his ideas, his philosophy is nonetheless consistent. Recognising that his style had contributed to the misunderstandings of his detractors and disciples, Pater recasts his philosophy, demonstrating a hope that he might still be able to fashion an ideal audience of aesthetically critical readers from his actual audiences. In *Marius*, Pater's style becomes more persuasive but less intimate, as his aim is to argue a point rather than "to put [his reader] into a duly receptive attitude towards . . . possible truth[s]" (*Plato* 188). This more authoritative tone is indicative of Pater's understanding of his audience. No longer conceiving his reader as an intimate, another self, Pater writes to convince, not seduce. Gone is the "partial, hesitant, insinuating" rhetoric that Bloom sees as characteristic of Pater's style. And although it is not perhaps the "full, prophetic, overwhelming" voice that Bloom attributes to Ruskin, Pater's narrative stance in *Marius* is nonetheless authoritative, as the opening sentences of the novel indicate:

> As in the triumph of Christianity, the old religion lingered latest in the country, and died out at last as but paganism--the religion of the villagers, before the advance of the Christian Church; so, in an earlier century, it was in places remote from town-life that the older and purer forms of paganism itself had survived the longest. (3)

The tone of these lines is not suggestive of the voice of inquiry, of question and answer, that characterised his earlier work. This narrative voice is pan-historic in perspective, drawing explicit parallels between different cultures and eras. Although narrating the events in the life of a man in second-century A.D. Rome, the nineteenth-century narrator, with a full knowledge of Western cultural history, refers to all ages in between as well as those preceding the Roman setting.

In addition to this historical omniscience on a macrocosmic level, the narrator of *Marius* is also omniscient at the microcosmic level, establishing what Buckler calls "dual omniscience" (*Walter Pater* 264). Through the narrator, the reader is made aware of the innermost thoughts of Marius. Thus, while the first chapter begins with the pan-historical perspective, it ends with the narrator's description of Marius's point of view:

> [Marius] thought of the sort of protection which that day's ceremonies assured. To procure an agreement with the gods--*Pacem deorum exposcere*: that was the meaning of what they had all day been busy upon. In a faith, sincere but half-suspicious, he would fain have those powers at least not against him. His own nearer household gods were all around his bed. The spell of his religion as a part of the very essence of home, its intimacy, its dignity and security, was forcible at that moment; only, it seemed to involve certain heavy demands upon him. (8)

In place of the intimate one-to-one relationship between author and reader in Pater's early criticism, this passage demonstrates a more complex configuration involving author, narrator, Marius, and reader. The narrator's intimacy with Marius stands between the author's direct connection with the reader; the author's intimacy with the reader is replaced by the authoritative stance of the narrator towards the reader. Although the narrator's penetration of Marius's thoughts sometimes gives the impression that Marius is speaking directly and intimately to us, the mediation always makes itself apparent. Pater's audience is not left to reach its own conclusions. Instead, readers are carefully guided by the authoritative, omniscient narrator,

whether it be towards making historical analogies between different cultures and eras, or towards recognising Marius's increasing dissatisfaction with his own culture as he searches for alternatives.[5] As Williams suggests, "[e]vents come to the reader already interpreted . . . presented as they will later be seen--both by Marius and by the nineteenth-century narrator--to be significant" (*Transfigured World* 205). Pater's use of a controlling narrative voice indicates his desire to make sure that, in this work, his meaning is clearly understood by detractors and disciples alike. Lacking the confidence that his audience will interpret the novel with the skill of the true aesthetic critic, Pater develops a style that directs readers to the right interpretation.

One aspect of Pater's narrative style in *Marius* that is reminiscent of the *Renaissance* is his elaborate use of qualification, although in the novel it takes a different form and serves different ends. Consider, for example, the following passage which is, amazingly enough, only one sentence:

> To be absolutely virgin towards such experience, by ridding ourselves of such abstractions as are but the ghosts of bygone impressions--to be rid of the notions we have made for ourselves, and that so often only misrepresent the experience of which they profess to be the representation--*idola*, idols, false appearances, as Bacon calls them later--to neutralize the distorting influence of metaphysical system by an all-accomplished metaphysic skill: it is this bold, hard, sober recognition, under a very 'dry light', of its own proper aim, in union with a habit of feeling which on the practical side may perhaps open a

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[5] In *Conditions for Criticism*, Ian Small comes to a similar conclusion about the authoritative nature of *Marius*, although he bases it on a different argument. Small's claim is that Pater's allusions to and his citations and quotations from other texts (including his own), often without acknowledgement, function in such a way as to challenge traditional notions of authority, replacing them with the authority of the individual. Referring to both *Marius* and *Plato and Platonism*, Small writes: "The rightness of any specific judgment resides not in textual nor historical evidence, nor in the corroborative support of a disciplined knowledge, but in Pater's own presence . . . In *Marius the Epicurean* and *Plato and Platonism* he was trying to write works in which and for which authority existed in the author alone" (111).

> wide doorway to human weakness, that gives to the Cyrenaic doctrine, to reproductions of this doctrine in the time of Marius or in our own, their gravity and importance. (81)

Unlike his descriptions of Botticelli's *Madonna* and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Pater does not use qualification in this passage, or indeed in *Marius* as a whole, in order to evoke myriad images and interpretations.[6] In *Marius*, qualification aims at creating a more precise single image or idea. Although the baffling length of the above-quoted sentence may seem to suggest otherwise, upon close examination it reveals itself to be a fully coherent sentence executed with remarkable artistry, what Pater calls in "Style," "the long-contending, victoriously intricate sentence" (*Appreciations* 19). Without ever losing hold of his central idea, Pater draws analogies among four ages of history (17th century [reference to Bacon], 5th century BC [reference to Cyrenaic school founded at this time], 2nd century AD [reference to Marius], and 19th century [narrator's reference to "our own" age]), and at least three systems of thought (Baconian philosophy and second and nineteenth-century versions of the Cyrenaic philosophy).

Qualifications of this kind serve, in *Marius*, as building blocks which ultimately create a "structurally complete" image "with all the accumulating effect of secondary shades of meaning" ("Style" *Appreciations* 21), often only achieving full coherency at the end of the sentence. This effect keeps the reader focused on meaning while at the same time highlighting stylistic effect. Thus, in the above-quoted passage, the reader is given three conditions (the three clauses beginning with "to") but is left in suspense until the end of the sentence as to the doctrine they refer to. Each qualification, although deferring the moment of full comprehension, functions as an integral part of the effect of the final image. According to Buckler, this results in a "sincere" style because "it carefully avoids interposing between the truth with which it deals and the reader's . . . consciousness any factitious

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[6] For my interpretation of Pater's use of qualification in *The Renaissance*, see Chapter One, 28.

heightening and distraction" (*Walter Pater* 248). The reader of this kind of prose, rather than being lost in a reverie of multiple images, is led to attend to the gradual construction of a unified image.

The more "sincere" and serious style of *Marius* was recognised by contemporary critics, such as the reviewer from the *Pall Mall Gazette*, who applauded the transformation:

> These persons [who detected "undue elaboration" in Pater's earlier style] ought to be reassured by the style of *Marius the Epicurean*, just as others who were alarmed by Mr. Pater's apolausticism (to use university slang) will be reassured also. With a beauty of phrase hardly inferior at all, to that of the famous . . . passage on Monna [sic] Lisa . . . there is in *Marius the Epicurean*, a gravity of thought and tone which almost amounts to severity. (qtd. in Seiler 118)

In his suggestion that both those who objected to the style and those who objected to the hedonistic philosophy (his "apolausticism") of his earlier work will be reassured by *Marius*, the reviewer demonstrates how important the change in Pater's style was in re-communicating his message to his detractors. Although his ideas do not change significantly (his philosophy never was as hedonistic as his shocked or delighted readers imagined), his new style conveys a seriousness that seemed to have been absent in *The Renaissance*, making his philosophy more respectable in the eyes of his detractors.

Pater's increased attention to style as a conveyer or obscurer of meaning reached its peak in the writing and rewriting of *Marius*. For although Pater had always exhibited a high degree of scrupulousness with regard to his style, none of the revisions to other works were "comparable to the total rewriting that *Marius* was subjected to" (Chandler 10). In his study of the extensive revisions of *Marius*, Edmund Chandler discovers that of the over six thousand emendations, only thirty-

three of them affect meaning. The changes were nearly all stylistic.[7] But Pater's obsessive attention to small stylistic matters in *Marius is* related to meaning. Pater's perfection of style is an effort to find an exact expression of his ideas, for, as he later says in "Style," "there is . . . for those elements of man, for every lineament of the vision within, the one word, the one acceptable word, recognisable by the sensitive, by others 'who have intelligence' in the matter . . ." (*Appreciations* 34). In his writing of *Marius*, Pater sought the one perfect word or expression that would render his meaning crystal clear, or at least as clear as "anything can be in the evanescent and delicate region of human language" (*Appreciations* 34). Pater's need to find the exact word takes on added significance if we understand *Marius* as an attempt to clarify his meaning in consideration of his actual audiences, rather than as an alteration of Pater's philosophy of the "Conclusion."

One of the most important features of Pater's response to his detractors and overzealous disciples is the concrete embodiment of his philosophy in the character of Marius. Marius is, as Crinkley notes, "the personification of the reader of *The Renaissance*" (133). Through his narration of Marius's life, Pater responds to his detractors and disciples alike, by providing a concrete answer to the question posed in the "Conclusion": "How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" (*Renaissance* 188). As the ideal embodiment of the "aesthetic critic" in his perceptive and critical abilities, Marius could serve as a model for Pater's

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[7] The painstaking nature of Chandler's task can be attested to by the comments of Richard Le Gallienne who, in a review of the third edition, commented on his own attempt to chart Pater's revisions:

> I proposed to myself the task of collating the two versions; but that is a task for leisure, and my leisure has not been equal to it, nor, I must add, my austerity. For the task soon began to resemble the numbering of the golden hairs on a beloved head. One kept continually forgetting the collation to luxuriate in the pleasure of mere reading. . . .
>
> And so far as I have examined, the majority of Mr. Pater's emendations are merely matters of prosody and punctuation, though such as they are, they are numberless. (qtd. in Seiler 157-58)

disciples who had acknowledged only the negatively hedonistic aspects of Pater's philosophy, and as proof for his moralistic detractors that the aesthetic philosophy was ethically oriented. The moral element of Pater's aesthetic--that element which in the "Conclusion" he had failed to address adequately--is clearly stated in *Marius*, as the audience is made privy to the "sensations and ideas" of the protagonist.

From the beginning, the reader is led to recognise the superior qualities of Marius with respect to those around him. The early home life of Marius and his experience of the religion of Numa contribute to the development of an "instinctive seriousness" (9) and a "sympathy for all creatures" (13). Marius spends his childhood in "speculative activity" (6)-- so much so that, even as a boy, he is "more given to contemplation than to action" (15). Thus, while other boys are occupied with "their limited boyish race, and its transitory prizes, [Marius is] already entertaining himself, very pleasurably meditative, with the tiny drama in action before him, as but the mimic, preliminary exercise for a larger contest, and already with an implicit epicureanism" (27-8). Marius is a "spectator" (27), standing apart from others, viewing everything with the critical awareness of the aesthetic critic. His stance as a spectator, his distance from others, and his heightened awareness are forms of the "quickened, multiplied consciousness" (*Renaissance* 190) that characterise the ideal aesthetic perceiver of the "Conclusion." His consciousness is so acute that he senses forces of historical change at work. Marius frequently experiences the opposite of *déjà-vu*: "a feeling . . . not reminiscent but prescient of the future . . . It was as if he detected there the process of actual change to a wholly undreamed-of and renewed condition of human body and soul: as if he saw the heavy yet decrepit old Roman architecture about him rebuilding on an intrinsically better pattern" (64-5).

Because of his heightened awareness, Marius is able to rise above and see beyond the conditions of his own age, much like many of the artist figures Pater treats in *The Renaissance*.[8] Marius does not make the mistake of "form[ing] habits"

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[8] A case in point is Leonardo's ability to capture, in his painting of Mona Lisa, the "symbol of the modern idea" (*Renaissance* 99).

(*Renaissance* 189), nor does he "sacrifice . . . any part of . . . experience . . . [for] what is only conventional" (*Renaissance* 189). To those who had misinterpreted the *Renaissance*, this flouting of convention was understood as an endorsement of immoral acts of hedonism. What Pater demonstrates in *Marius*, however, is that going against convention does not necessarily imply immorality. It is true that the aesthetic philosophy might cause one to break occasionally "beyond the limits of the actual moral order" (*Marius* 86); after all, the philosophy begins with "a general term, comprehensive enough to cover pleasures so different in their quality, in their causes and effects, as the pleasures of wine and love, of art and science, of religious enthusiasm and political enterprise, and of that taste or curiosity which satisfied itself with long days of serious study" (87). But it is not the philosophy that causes immorality; the influence of the philosophy is determined by "the natural taste . . . and the acquired judgment" (83) of the individual. Its effect, then, is only "'pernicious for those who have any natural tendency to impiety or vice'"(86).[9] For Marius, whose "blood" and "heart" "were still pure" (86), the philosophy does not hold such dangers. Implicit in Marius's nature is a moral principle that guides his understanding of pleasure. By providing access to the "ideas and sensations" of an ideal aesthetic critic, Pater demonstrates to both his audiences the degree to which they have failed to meet his criteria, while at the same time offering a positive and concrete example of the type of ethical aesthetic philosophy that he himself stands for.

In fact, Pater demonstrates how the aesthetic philosophy might indeed represent a "higher morality" by contrasting Marius with the emperor Marcus Aurelius in the chapter "Manly Amusement."[10] In this chapter, Marius is present at

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[9] Pater borrows this quote from Pascal, who is referring to the possible effects of the otherwise "kindly and temperate wisdom of Montaigne" (86).

[10] In an interesting essay, Sharon Bassett demonstrates, among other things, how the characterisation of Marcus Aurelius is yet another example of Pater responding to Arnold. An essay on Marcus Aurelius was printed in Arnold's 1865 *Essays in Criticism*. In it, Arnold upholds Marcus Aurelius as "perhaps the most beautiful figure in history" based on his "goodness" (qtd in Bassett 58). Bassett remarks that Pater proposes an

a gladiatorial and animal show, in which animals, and possibly even a human being, will be sacrificed. Although not an active and eager participant in the games ("For the most part . . . the emperor had . . . averted his eyes from the show, reading or writing on matters of public business . . ." [137]), Marcus Aurelius tolerates them for the sake of Lucius Verus, his co-emperor, and others who enjoy such spectacles. The emperor's indifference to the bloodshed before him causes Marius to see Marcus Aurelius as his "inferior . . . on the question of righteousness" (138). As a result of the spectacle, Marius is forced to re-evaluate his philosophy to deal with the evil he sees before him: "Surely evil was a real thing, and the wise man [Marcus Aurelius] wanting in the sense of it, where, not to have been, by instinctive election, on the right side, was to have *failed in life*" (emphasis added--139). The phrase "failed in life" immediately recalls the "Conclusion" and its definition of what constitutes a "success in life" (189). Immediately after this phrase in the "Conclusion," Pater tells us what it is to have failed in life--"our failure is to form habits" (189). For all Marcus Aurelius's 'wisdom,' he cannot prevent his eye from becoming accustomed to the social conventions of his day. Marius, on the other hand, with the detachment and perceptive abilities of the aesthetic critic, sees beyond his age, beyond "habit" and custom. Marius achieves this sympathy as a result of the "instinctive" feeling which informs his philosophy, and not by the wisdom or reason of Stoicism that fails Marcus Aurelius. Pater's treatment of Marius's ethical nature is entirely consistent with the aesthetic philosophy of the "Conclusion" because it is based on the ability to perceive in a fashion that leads to heightened awareness, rather than a passive acceptance of the dictates of convention and conventional perspectives.

That Pater wants his audience to recall the outlining of his philosophy in the

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alternate view:

> Far from being Arnold's 'consoling and hope inspiring mark,' Marius' Marcus Aurelius is, for all his serenity and philosophic calm, a figure to inspire considerable anxiety, one whose capacity for sympathetic identification with those who suffer is strikingly absent. In Pater's portrait the emperor lacks the very sense of righteousness that is an essential feature of the Arnoldian cultural hero. (58)

"Conclusion" is indicated by more than the careful selection of words and phrases. Pater means to defend his philosophy not merely in the context of pre-Christian Rome, but in his own age as well, for in this chapter the narrator shifts to the bird's-eye historical perspective in order to warn his readers against the "self-complacency" (138) of feeling themselves above the barbarisms described:

> it might seem well to ask ourselves--it is always well to do so, when we read of the slave-trade, for instance, or of great religious persecutions on this side or that . . . not merely, what germs of feeling we may entertain which, under fitting circumstances, would induce us to the like; but even more practically, what thoughts, what sort of considerations, may be actually present to our minds, such as might have furnished us, living in another age and in the midst of those legal crimes, with plausible excuses for them: each age in turn, perhaps having its own peculiar point of blindness, with its consequent peculiar sin--the touchstone of an unfailing conscience in the select few. (138)

This passage, and indeed the whole chapter, is addressed to those of Pater's readers who saw his philosophy as flawed and, more particularly, immoral. Pater offers a concrete demonstration of how a philosophy based on feeling and experience can succeed where one based on abstract philosophical ideas fails. But, as Sharon Bassett points out, by Victorian standards this view was fairly unorthodox. The movement that Marius makes from "'quickened sympathies' to the 'ethical standpoint' was, for Victorians concerned with the development of the moral will, a movement in the wrong direction" (56).[11] Pater uses the gladiatorial episode to illustrate the moral superiority of his philosophy in contrast with an abstract philosophy. By

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[11] The quoted material in the citation from Bassett refers to terms from a review by Mary Arnold Ward that she has just quoted. While I think Bassett's point is valid, her use of Ward's commentary confuses the issue a little. Ward's review was, on this point and most others, favourable. Although Ward and Pater disagreed on some points of faith, Ward does not stand for the orthodox position that Bassett attributes to her. For Ward's full review, see Seiler 127-38.

demonstrating Marcus Aurelius's indifference to suffering, Pater shows how "[p]ure will without sensual capacity creates . . . a socially sanctioned ethical monster" (Bassett 57). While not asking his readers to ignore the dictates of conventional morality, Pater is at least asking them to be wary.

Pater's desire to demonstrate the implicit morality of his aesthetic philosophy was not merely an attempt to appease his detractors; it also served as a corrective to his disciples who, in the name of Pater's philosophy, pursued the more superficial pleasures that could be justified by the aesthetic doctrine. In responding to these disciples, Pater contrasts Marius with Flavian, a second-century incarnation of the nineteenth-century Decadent, the kind of young man who might have been misled by Pater's "Conclusion." The chapter in which Flavian first appears is appropriately titled "The Tree of Knowledge." Flavian and the world he represents, a world of "fleeting beauty" (28) that is "real, with nothing less than the reality of seeing and hearing" (29), pose a temptation to the young and impressionable Marius. In contrast with these new attractions, the seriousness of his early life and influences strike him as "old, staid, conservative," and "vague, shadowy, [and] problematical" (29). Like Marius, Flavian is, in many respects, the embodiment of the ideal aesthetic critic. He, too, stands apart from others, distinguished by his "reserve of gravity" (29), "his quickness in reckoning" (29), and his "intellectual power" (30). In addition, Flavian is a paragon of physical beauty. Yet despite these qualities, Flavian represents a false ideal. Though superficially Flavian is perfect, Marius eventually comes to realise that his nature is corrupt: "To Marius, at a later time, he counted for as it were an epitome of the whole pagan world, the depth of its corruption, and its perfection of form" (31). And while Marius is momentarily distracted by the temptations of the "real world" in all its sensuous embodiment, he does not altogether lose the "visionary idealism" (31) that is an innate part of his character. Flavian represents a false ideal because there is a discrepancy, in Marius's eyes, between an inner vision and the outward embodiment. The "fullness" of Flavian's life is compromised by a moral taint of ugliness. In his striving for superficial beauties, Flavian has given himself to a "theory or idea or system which requires . . . the sacrifice of [a] part of

[the aesthetic] experience" (*Renaissance* 189)--thus he does not truly represent the ideal of Pater's aesthetic philosophy. He does not "burn . . . with [the] hard gem-like flame" in a manner that constitutes "success in life" (*Renaissance* 189).

Flavian's modern representatives are, of course, "those young men," Pater's audience of disciples who had been misled by the "Conclusion." While Marius serves as the guide to set these young men back on the right course, Flavian stands as an example of the path not to follow. The discrepancy that Marius perceives in Flavian, between an inner vision and the outward embodiment, is representative of feelings that Pater might have had regarding his audience of disciples. But Pater's sense that his disciples had the potential to develop into ideal aesthetic critics is also represented in Flavian. Flavian is not a purely negative example because he represents what is good about Euphuism--an ornate literary style that in its most positive manifestation represents an "awaken[ing] to forgotten duties towards language" (*Marius* 56). Flavian's Euphuism is inspired by his reading of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, a "golden book" which makes him eager "to find the means of making visible to others that which was vividly apparent, delightful, of lively interest to himself, to the exclusion of all that was but middling, tame, or only half-true even to him,--this scrupulousness of literary art actually awoke in Flavian, for the first time, a sort of chivalrous conscience" (55). Through his demonstration that Flavian's love of art represents a potential for good, Pater suggests that the aesthetic temperament can be roused in one whose nature seems at first incompatible with such a temperament. A "chivalrous conscience" is awakened in Flavian as a result of his experience with a book: "A book, like a person, has its fortunes with one; is lucky or unlucky in the precise moment of its falling in our way, and often by some happy accident counts with us for something more than its independent value" (53-4). One can hardly help but think that this statement is Pater's comment on his disciples' reception of *The Renaissance*, and that once again Pater is absolving himself and his book from blame

for readers being led astray.[12] At the same time, however, he seems to want to believe that his work might influence young men in the way that Apuleius influences Flavian. His writing of *Marius*, and his attentiveness to disciples such as Moore, Symons, and Wilde at the beginnings of their careers in the 80's, are indications of a desire to be the kind of person or write the kind of book that creates "happy accidents" under favourable or "lucky" conditions of reception: in other words, to have a positive influence in shaping young minds to the point of creating an generation of ideal aesthetic critics.

In the hope of exerting a positive influence on his disciples, Pater demonstrates, through Marius, what it really means "to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions" (*Renaissance* 189). In Marius's case, this testing takes the form of a constant weighing of philosophy against experience, not the sensuous hedonism that it suggested to Pater's detractors and "susceptible" young readers. Although both forms of behaviour are consistent with a philosophy that advocates change, the latter is only superficially so. The search for sensual pleasures, various as those pleasures may be, is limited, representing an adherence to one idea which requires the sacrifice of others. Only those who are receptive to change in the form of other types of ideas and experience, as Marius is, live up to the aesthetic ideal. Thus, when Marius's philosophy comes up wanting as a result of new experience, he modifies it accordingly. Marius's receptivity to the "possible truths" that experience and philosophy present him with is indicative of the dialectic nature of his aesthetic quest. Out of the clashes between thesis and antithesis that result in

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[12] In "Pater's Appeal to His Readers," Inman points out that during the composition of *Marius*, Pater must have been very aware of the name that his disciples were giving to Aestheticism. When Pater began writing *Marius* he was living in London in the midst of the "aesthetic craze" with Wilde as its most prominent representative. Inman suggests that Pater must have feared "that even if he proved himself to be serious and temperate by making Marius so, he would be held partially responsible for the 'follies and extravagances' of Oscar Wilde and other aesthetes. . . . [Thus,] Pater made *Marius*, in part, an argument against the idea that one man's ideas can cause another man's follies" (664).

points of heightened awareness for Marius, he effects a synthesis. Marius's life is a sequence of such experiences, "each of which is absorbed into its successor without being destroyed, or even transcended" (Bloom, "Place of Pater" 37). Marius's adherence to a philosophy that is based on change is thus less about the kind of superficial change often associated with the hedonistic lifestyle, than it is about maintaining the receptivity that represents a state of continual "becoming."

In the process of "becoming," Marius's moments of heightened awareness give him transitory visions of the ideal which he strives to realise by adjusting his philosophy to accord with these experiences. Ultimately, the aim of Marius's aesthetic philosophy is to achieve a harmony between the real and the ideal. This aim is put most succinctly at the end of the climactic chapter, "The Will as Vision," just after Marius has had a spiritual vision in which he senses the presence of a Divine companion: "Must not all that remained of life be but a search for the equivalent of that Ideal, among so called actual things--a gathering together of every trace or token of it, which his actual experience might present?" (181). While this revelation is expressed in a way that emphasises the spiritual nature of Marius's quest for the ideal, it in fact embodies the same sentiment as the following lines from the "Conclusion": "A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. . . . How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?" (*Renaissance* 188). Although the different styles of language alter the rhetorical effect of the passages, both express a desire to maintain an ideal state of heightened awareness. Nonetheless, the shift in rhetoric from the enthusiastic energy of *The Renaissance* quotation to the more contemplative philosophic tone of the *Marius* quotation is an indication of Pater's more guarded stance towards his audience, particularly his young disciples.

Although Marius's spiritually motivated aesthetic philosophy is not overtly anticipated by the "Conclusion," it is not denied by it either. Marius's spirituality is not what ultimately defines him as the ideal embodiment of the aesthetic philosophy. Marius's "success" is defined, at the end of his life, by the fact that he has

"developed, with a wonderful largeness . . . his general capacity of vision" (*Marius* 264):

> Throughout that elaborate and lifelong education of his receptive powers, he had ever kept in view the purpose of preparing himself towards possible further revelation some day . . . At this moment [of his death] his unclouded receptivity of soul, grown so steadily through all those years, from experience to experience, was at its height . . . . And was not this precisely the condition, the attitude of mind, to which something higher than he, yet akin to him, would be likely to reveal itself? . . . Surely, the aim of a true philosophy must lie, not in futile efforts towards the complete accommodation of man to the circumstances in which he chances to find himself, but in the maintenance of a kind of candid discontent, in the face of the very highest achievement; the unclouded and receptive soul quitting the world finally, with the same fresh wonder with which it had entered the world still unimpaired, and going on its blind way at last with the consciousness of some profound enigma in things, as but a pledge of something further to come. (264-65)

It is Marius's curious and questioning nature, his "candid discontent" even "in the face of the highest achievement," that is ultimately valorised, not his religious beliefs. He quits the world with a sense of "wonder," a "consciousness of some profound enigma" which is in itself a kind of tacit understanding of "something further to come." Even though he has not yet fully defined that "something" by the time he dies, the ongoing search for this ideal constitutes a "success." In this scene, the aesthetic view is not so much characterised by its spiritual aspect as it is itself given a kind of divinity. As DeLaura notes: "Pater was at once retreating from the antinomianism of the *Renaissance* volume while almost delightedly re-exhibiting his Hellenic ideal in sacerdotal robes" (282). While Pater changed the rhetoric in *Marius* as a result of the change in his perception of audience, he did not change the inherent philosophy. Pater's style was a means of re-contextualising his ideas so as to assuage

the concerns of his peers and to temper the inclinations of his disciples, while ultimately reaffirming the validity of his philosophy--expressing it more clearly to those who had misinterpreted it.

II

Pater's depiction of Marius, an ethical aesthetic critic, was largely the result of Pater's sense of an obligation or "duty"[13] that he felt with respect to his detracting peers and to the young men who might have read into his philosophy a sensual hedonism that was not intended. As a result, the novel directly and blatantly addresses issues of audience at the level of plot construction, characterisation, and narrative style. In the *Imaginary Portraits*, however, Pater was free to pursue a project much "pleasanter" to him (*Letters WP* 52) because he was far less directed by the need to correct his audiences' understandings of his aesthetic philosophy. *Imaginary Portraits*, then, while not as inherently didactic and moral as *Marius*, does demonstrate that the aesthetic perspective is not as self-absorbed or detached as the rhetoric of *The Renaissance* had made it seem. In addition, by foregrounding issues of perception, *Imaginary Portraits* is linked with the essays of *The Renaissance* in its attempt, once again, to promote an aesthetically critical awareness, which is, this time, also ethically aware. Each of the stories, told by a narrator with aesthetically critical perception, reveals the kind of ethical sympathy that can be generated for characters who hold unconventional points of view.

In *Imaginary Portraits*, Pater reverts to the dialectical form of mediation between objective and subjective data--the "process of speculation" (Williams, "Pater in the 1880's" 41)--that characterised his early critical essays, rather than the ultra-

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[13] In a letter to Violet Paget, Pater referred to his writing of *Marius* as "a sort of duty," the duty being to present a "fourth sort of religious phase possible for the modern mind [Pater here is responding to the fact that Paget depicted *three* possible phases in 'The Responsibilities of Unbelief']" (*Letters WP* 52). In *Marius*, Pater demonstrates how the aesthetic temperament, though somewhat sceptical, can be receptive to religious feeling and sentiment.

omniscient narrative style of *Marius*. As we have seen, this kind of mediation, which is carried out by the aesthetic critic in the analysis of the object, results not in truth or fact, but rather in "possible truth" (*Plato* 188), the only kind of knowledge available to "the modern spirit" to whom "nothing . . . can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions" (*Appreciations*, "Coleridge" 65).[14] In *Imaginary Portraits* objective knowledge is represented by historical facts, while subjective knowledge is represented by the narrators' impressions of the figures they are studying. But while this blending of subjectivity and objectivity was "disturbing" to some Victorians in the context of Pater's critical, historical essays in *The Renaissance* (Williams, *Transfigured World* 147), it did not have such an effect when used in his fiction. Unlike the critical or historical essay, fiction--even historical fiction--does not come furnished with an implicit truth claim. Such remarks as there were about the historical truth of the portraits in the reviews of the book attest to the inoffensiveness of Pater's approach within the realm of fiction. Thus, the reviewer for the *Spectator* noted: "We are not able to discover that the other three originals [apart from Watteau] of these 'portraits' ever really existed," and "[w]hether Denys has really left traces of himself in stained glass and old tapestries at Auxerre, is a question we cannot answer; we have no clues as to where the imagination ends, and fact begins" (qtd. in Seiler 168, 170). This response is a far cry from the upset caused by what was perceived to be the shoddy historical method of *The Renaissance* in reviews such as that of Mrs. Pattison. In fiction, Pater can make claims to universal truths about the human condition without compromising historical truth.

Through a combination of factual material and the subjective impressions of different types of "aesthetic critics" who function as narrators, Pater paints his portraits "from a perspective at odds with a conventional point of view" (Bassett

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[14] Although it is true that in *Marius* the protagonist serves as a model for this kind of thinking, the narrative itself is characterised by a definite thesis.

56).[15] Pater's use of these aesthetic narrators gives him a freedom of expression, unavailable to him as a critic, which allows him to imagine subjective impressions other than his own. As such, he is placed at a further remove from his audience. He is not responsible for the views expressed in the fictions; his narrators are. And even then, Pater does not give his narrators the objective, authoritative, omniscient voice that characterised the narrator of *Marius*. In the *Imaginary Portraits*, "the narratives are all mediated, *impressions* which reveal their partiality, the filters or lenses through which the narrative is conceived and 'told'" (Brake, *Walter Pater* 46). Thus, even the narrators' perspectives are called into question as the nature of their partiality is foregrounded. Marie-Marguerite's depiction of Watteau is coloured by her obvious love for him, which reveals itself in subtle yet visible ways throughout the narrative, as in the following example: "Jean Baptiste! he too, rejected by Antony" (26). The simple inclusion of "too" changes the whole meaning, exposing Marie-Marguerite's bias and therefore compromising the reliability of her perception of Watteau. For example, readers have no first-hand knowledge of Watteau's dissatisfaction with Parisian life, a fact that Marie-Marguerite seems convinced of. It may well be that she wants him to be dissatisfied with a life that she takes no part in.

In the other stories, the limited perspectives of the narrators are demonstrated in different ways. In "Sebastian van Storck," although the narrator has access to

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[15] In an interesting article on the *Imaginary Portraits*, John Coates explores how, in the stories, Pater subtly flouts conventional viewpoints. Coates examines the "submerged controversial intention" (93) of "A Prince of Court Painters," "Sebastian van Storck," and "Duke Carl of Rosenmold." He demonstrates how these portraits responded to contemporary ideas about Watteau, Spinoza, and Germany before the *Aufklärung*. Coates suggests that Pater's depiction of Watteau as a dissatisfied seeker ran counter to contemporary thought, and points to Wilde's comment as indicative of this thought. Wilde said that the portrait "is perhaps a little too fanciful" and found it inapplicable "to the gay and debonnair [sic] *peintre des fêtes galantes*" (qtd. in Coates 94; see also Seiler 163-165 for the full review). While Wilde accepted the stereotypical view of Watteau as popularised by the Goncourt brothers, Pater's "aesthetic perception" enables him to see beyond the conventional opinions of his age, in much the same way as Marius had done in his own. Coates suggests that by adopting an unusual perspective from which to view Watteau, he "encourage[s] the seeing of fine shades within a subject" (99).

Sebastian's journals for much of his information, the incidents leading to the death of Sebastian in the act of saving a child are left sketchy. The narrators of the stories put together their information with a combination of documentary evidence and imaginative recreation. Thus, the antiquarian narrator of "Denys l'Auxerrois," tells us: "With [a] fancy in my mind" of a pagan god who "had cast in his lot with the creatures of an age later than his own," and "by the help of certain notes . . . which lay in the priest's library . . . and in repeated examination of the old tapestried designs, the story shaped itself at last" (54). This narrator's description of his process directly recalls the mediation between objective perception and subjective impression that Pater attributes to the "aesthetic critic."

Perspective is not only central in terms of narrative viewpoint, but is often a subject treated within the narratives themselves. In "Denys l"Auxerrois," the monk Hermes is the medieval equivalent of the narrator. Within the medieval context, Hermes offers an "aesthetic" perspective on Denys, which none of the other townspeople seem capable of. Hermes recognises the mythic quality of Denys, associating him with Dionysus. Yet even though Hermes understands that Dionysus brings with him the bad as well as the good ("the Wine-god . . . had his contrast, his dark or antipathetic side; was like a double creature, of two natures, difficult or impossible to harmonise" [66]), he is one of the few who remain sympathetic to Denys.

Perhaps the best example of the treatment of perspective within the stories occurs in "Sebastian von Storck." Throughout the story, the narrator draws attention to the difference between Sebastian's perspective and the perspective of those who are in tune with the cultural richness of Holland in the mid-seventeenth century. Therefore, the scene that, for Albert Cuyp, "gleamed very pleasantly russet and yellow . . . seemed wellnigh to suffocate Sebastian van Storck" (81-2). Where the Dutch genre painters see beauty and gaiety in the winter scene, Sebastian prefers to see a "vast surface of . . . frozen water-meadow" (81). In another example, the narrative subtly reveals the difference between Sebastian and his idol, Spinoza. Although Sebastian is an ardent follower of Spinoza, the narrative suggests that while

Spinoza has influenced the tenor of Sebastian's thinking, he is not responsible for the lengths to which Sebastian goes in pursuit of the realisation of the abstract theorem, for, as the narrator states: "There have been dispositions in which that abstract theorem has only induced a renewed value for the finite interests around and within us" (107-08). Sebastian's reaction to the philosophy is a function of an "inherited satiety or fatigue in his nature" (108). In a telling narrative moment, Spinoza, a guest at the von Storcks', draws Sebastian's "likeness on the fly-leaf of his note-book" (97). Though not overtly stated, the suggestion is that Spinoza, despite his bleak philosophy, does not object to the cultural preoccupations of the times as Sebastian does. As Monsman writes: "That Spinoza does not share Sebastian's aversion [for art] undoubtedly is significant, for it shows that the master had not carried his uncongenial philosophy to abnormal extremes as had his disciple" (123).

By drawing attention to perspective both within the narratives themselves and through the foregrounding of the narrators' mediating tactics, Pater indicates something about the nature of interpretation and communication which reflects his experiences of the writing and reception of his two previous major works, *The Renaissance* and *Marius*.[16] Continuing with the ascetic style he had adopted after *The Renaissance*, Pater does not, in *Imaginary Portraits*, put his "reader . . . [in] danger of being carried far away by an alluring imagination and by a singularly seductive diction" (qtd. in Seiler 21; review of *The Renaissance* in the *Saturday Review*), thus blurring the distinction between reality and imagination. Nor does he offer ready-made interpretations by drawing explicit parallels between the factual and fictional, as he did in *Marius*. Both these tactics had resulted in seamless narratives. In *Imaginary Portraits*, however, Pater gives his audience an indication of where factual documentation fails and imaginative reconstruction takes over. In the

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[16] M. F. Moran makes a similar argument in his discussion of Pater's mythic fiction, particularly "Denys l'Auxerrois" and "Apollo in Picardy." He says of these works that "their form and narrative strategies call into question traditional concepts of 'reading,' of the process of ascribing meaning, of the practice and nature of interpretation" (Moran 171).

communication of their stories, the narrators reveal the conditional nature of their knowledge. Thus, the narrator of "Denys l'Auxerrois" tells us how the "story shaped itself" from a "fancy" in his mind and a few tapestries and notes (54). Sometimes the narrator leaves questions unanswered, refusing to interpret or provide answers for the unanswerable, as is the case with the death of Sebastian. In the *Imaginary Portraits*, the narrators' attempts to mediate between the factual and the imaginative result in anything but a seamless narrative; in fact, the emphasis on the subjective perspectives of the narrators and characters undermines the notion "of a stable, identifiable meaning" (Moran 173), not only in the mythic fiction, which is Moran's focus, but in his other imaginary portraits as well.

While Pater recognises and underscores the fact that interpretation will be coloured by subjective impressions in *Imaginary Portraits* in a way he does not do in *Marius*, it does not necessarily follow that he denies the validity of such interpretations. The instability of meaning is not a source of anxiety for Pater in *Imaginary Portraits*. Illustrating in these narratives that "truth . . . depends a good deal on the receiver; and must be, in that degree, elusive, provisional, contingent, a matter of various approximation" (*Plato* 187), Pater illustrates the positive aspects of "possible truth." The aesthetically perceptive narrators view their subjects with a non-judgmental eye, causing Symons, in his review of *Imaginary Portraits*, to note:

> In truth, Mr Pater is no moralist, and alike as an artist and as a thinker, he feels called upon to draw no moral, to deduce no consequences, from the failures or successes he has chronicled to a certain culminating point. 'There is the portrait,' he seems to say; all I have been writing is but so many touches toward that single visible outline: there is the portrait!' (qtd. in Seiler 181)

Yet despite this non-judgmental stance, the tone is far from detached. In these portraits, Pater demonstrates that the aesthetic point of view can lead to a sympathy with its objects of study. The process that the aesthetic critic undertakes leads inevitably to this outcome, "for the habit of noting and distinguishing one's most

intimate passages of sentiment makes one sympathetic, begetting, as it must, the power of entering, by all sorts of finer ways, into the intimate recesses of other minds" ("Postscript," *Appreciations* 266).[17] Thus, although the portraits are not moral in a conventional sense, they do demonstrate the "morality" that "is all sympathy" of Botticelli, of Marius and the Christian community in *Marius*, and of Pater's more refined definition of the aesthetic critic, all of which he presents as models for his audience. Pater's treatment of "failures" in *Imaginary Portraits*, of those who are out of step with their times, allows him to demonstrate how, with the full force of this sympathy, an "aesthetic perspective" can accommodate figures that its own age does not understand. In *Imaginary Portraits*, Pater finds the perfect vehicle for his philosophy. He justifies the "aesthetic perspective" without appearing solipsistic or hedonistic as he did in the "Conclusion": in addition, he demonstrates the kind of morality involved in his philosophy without appearing overly pedantic. As a result, Pater is able to appeal to both his more rigorous morally earnest audience as well as his disciples without compromising either his aesthetic or ethical ideals.

III

While the careful, studied manner and ethically-oriented nature of *Marius* and the *Imaginary Portraits* served, to a large extent, to answer the objections of Pater's detractors, the change in emphasis was antithetical to the interests of Pater's Decadent disciples. It remained to be seen how these disciples would react to this new manifestation of Pater's philosophy. Published in 1885 and 1887 respectively, *Marius* and *Imaginary Portraits* appeared at a pivotal point in time, having the potential to reform or alienate disciples like George Moore, Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde,

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[17] In his book, *Walter Pater: The Critic as Artist of Ideas*, Buckler says that this statement "appears to be not only the motive of the portraits but also the connecting link between the critical essays and the critical fictions" (182). The "Postscript" was originally published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1876. It was one of the handful of essays that Pater published between the *Renaissance* and *Marius*. As this passage suggests, Pater was still giving thought to the role of the "aesthetic critic."

who were now not only reading Pater but reviewing his work and corresponding with him personally with respect to works that they were producing partly under his influence.[18] In Moore's case, these works did nothing to alter his interpretation of Pater's philosophy. He continued to read Pater in light of his interpretation of the "Conclusion," and his opinion of *Marius* is coloured by this reading. By concluding that the novel expressed the "belief that the beauty of material things is sufficient for all the needs of life" (*Confessions* 166), Moore focused only on the *real*, missing the ethical imperative, which in Marius's case is provided by his desire for the ideal.

Although Moore may not, in his life, have "followed Pater's aestheticism to an extreme as Wilde and his contemporaries [did]," as Susan Dick points out in the introduction to her critical edition of Moore's *Confessions* (15), he nonetheless misinterpreted Pater in his art, perhaps more than Pater's other disciples. Pater confirmed Moore's "belief in the right of art to be free from all external moral restraints" (Dick 15), but Moore did not heed the qualification with which Pater asserted such a claim in his works after *The Renaissance*. While Pater admired Moore's style, he expressed his reservations about the immoral nature of two of Moore's works, *A Mere Accident* (1887), and *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888), which were published shortly after Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*. Pater objected to Moore's choice of subject matter in both novels: *Confessions* seemed to him to come in a "morally questionable shape" (*Letters WP* 81), while *A Mere Accident*, which was similar to *Marius* in its focus on a contemplative rather than active character (Dick

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[18] Symons and Wilde reviewed *Imaginary Portraits* in 1887, their first formal reviews of Pater's work. In addition, both men published important works in the year or so following the publication of *Imaginary Portraits*. Symons published his first book of poetry, *Days and Nights*, which was dedicated to Pater, and Wilde published his first volume of stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. Moore did not review Pater's work formally, but he did correspond with him regarding two novels that were published shortly after *Imaginary Portraits*, *A Mere Accident* and *Confessions of a Young Man*.

12n32)[19], was equally disturbing to Pater. In a paraphrase of the letter he received from Pater, Moore discusses Pater's objections:

> Without any stress of expression, he made me understand very well that descriptions of violent incidents and abnormal states of mind do not serve the purpose of art, the purpose of art not being to astonish or to perplex. He made me understand that the object of art is to help us forget the crude and the violent, to lead us towards certain normal aspects of nature . . . (qtd. in *Letters WP* 74)

In his objections to Moore's portrayal of "violent incidents and abnormal states of mind," and his sense that Moore was trying to "astonish or to perplex" (or shock) his audience, Pater distanced himself from the emphasis that his disciples placed on immorality in their interpretation of his philosophy. And although Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, released in the same year as *A Mere Accident*, treat violence (the killing of Denys l'Auxerrois) and "abnormal states of mind" (Sebastian van Storck's abstract philosophy), they do so not to "astonish or to perplex," but rather "to lead us towards certain moral aspects of nature." Pater's stories give the reader glimpses of the transcendency or ideal that is or can be achieved despite the characters' failures. In dying, Sebastian saves a child's life; though Denys brings violence to Auxerre, and is destroyed by violence, he also brings a prosperity and cultural renewal that lives on; though Duke Carl fails to bring the *Aufklärung* to Germany, he foreshadows Goethe's success fifty years later. Pater's works end with hope that is in part inspired by the desire to portray his characters from a perspective that evokes sympathy and understanding from a receptive and aesthetically critical audience, rather than the Decadent aesthetic perspective which seeks to "astonish" and "perplex" the general public.

Symons's understanding of Pater at this time was far greater than that of

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[19] In addition to this observation, Dick also points out another connection with *Marius*: John Norton, the Marius-like protagonist of the novel, "is writing a history of Christian Latin, an idea he has taken . . . from *Marius the Epicurean*" (Dick 12n32).

Moore, and Pater's attentions to him by way of correspondence reveal a much less ambivalent master-disciple relationship. In his review of *Imaginary Portraits*, Symons gave a detailed and thorough analysis of the transformation of Pater's style from *The Renaissance* to *Imaginary Portraits*. In addition, he recognised Pater's treatment of the subjectivity of perception and his attempt to "give . . . concrete form to abstract ideas" (qtd. in Seiler 179). Symons's astute critical analysis of *Imaginary Portraits* won the praise of Pater himself, who gladly agreed to be "an arbiter in the matter of [Symons's] literary work" (*Letters WP* 78-9), helping him to get his first book of poems, *Days and Nights*, published through his own publisher, Macmillan, in 1888.

Although generally complimentary about Symons's work, Pater's criticisms about a certain "sordidness" (*Letters WP* 79) in some of the poems illustrate the point of difference between the two men, which became more pronounced as Symons's style became more decadent in manner. Thus, by the time Symons's next book of poems were published in 1892, he and Pater were estranged, "perhaps because Pater disapproved of the frank, or decadent, eroticism of Symons's poetry, and life" (Evans xl). This estrangement may also have been a result of Symons's association of Pater with the Decadent movement. In his 1893 essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature," Symons posits Pater as a proponent of Decadence, classifying not *The Renaissance*, but Pater's more restrained works *Marius* and *Imaginary Portraits* as prototypical Decadent works: "Have they not that morbid subtlety of analysis, that morbid curiosity of form, that we have found in the French Decadents?" (Beckson, *Aesthetes* 149-50). Though his earlier comments about the development of Pater's style reveal a certain degree of understanding, Symons, like Moore, valued the effect of the prose more than the content; it was only later (in the early twentieth century), in re-reading Pater, that Symons recognised both the "effectiveness" of Pater's style "in reflecting a variety of moods and subjects" (Munro 83) and the presence of "an ethical system of some practical value . . . for those who cared to listen" (Munro

82-3).[20]

While Wilde, as a result of his lifestyle, is generally classed among those who did not heed Pater's ethical system, his art and criticism demonstrate a strong grasp of the ethical and aesthetic components of Pater's philosophy. In his review of the *Imaginary Portraits*, Wilde called Pater an "intellectual impressionist," recognising his attempt to capture and analyse "exquisite moments" (qtd. in Seiler 164). In addition, he characterised the stories as explorations of the various forms of passion alluded to in the "Conclusion," writing: "'Denys l'Auxerrois' symbolizes the passion of the senses, and 'Sebastian Van Storck' the philosophic passion, [while] . . . the passion for the imaginative world of art is the basis of the story of 'Duke Carl of Rosenmold' (qtd. in Seiler 164). Despite the fact that his comments are largely informed by the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, Wilde sensed the intention behind Pater's increasingly ascetic style. His reviews of both *Imaginary Portraits* in 1887 and *Appreciations* in 1890 reveal that, unlike Symons and Moore, while Wilde may have been overwhelmed with the style of *The Renaissance* to the point of idolatry, he was not overawed to this extent by Pater's style in subsequent works. In fact, he is quite reserved in his praise of the asceticism of *Imaginary Portraits*. Thus, he writes: "at times it is almost too severe in its self-control, and makes us long for a little more freedom. For indeed the danger of such prose as his is that it is apt to become somewhat laborious. Here and there one is tempted to say of Mr. Pater that he is 'a seeker after something in language that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all'" (qtd. in Seiler 165). Wilde's reserve in his analysis of Pater's style made him a better reader than one might be led to suspect given Wilde's treatment of Pater's themes in his own work.

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[20] Munro cites the following quotation from Symons's *Figures of Several Centuries* to illustrate his enhanced understanding of Pater: "As he grew older, he added something more like a Stoic sense of 'duty' to the old, properly and severely Epicurean doctrine of 'pleasure.' Pleasure was never, for Pater, less than the essence of all knowledge, all experience, and not merely all that is rarest in sensation.; it was religious from the first, and had always to be served with a strict ritual" (Munro 83; also qtd. in Symons's introduction to the Modern Library edition of *The Renaissance* xiv).

Of the works of Pater's disciples published a year or two after *Imaginary Portraits*, it is Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* that most strongly indicates an absorption of all aspects of Pater's philosophy. Though Pater did not formally review the book, he praised the stories highly in a letter to Wilde (see *Letters WP* 85).[21] Wilde's stories reveal Pater's influence in both style and subject matter. While Wilde's style indicates his preference for Pater's early, more ornate style, his subject matter and treatment reflect Wilde's informed reading of *Marius* and *Imaginary Portraits*. Though different from these works, Wilde's stories do treat their subjects with a kind of sympathy that demonstrates a morality beyond what is merely conventional. Though Wilde, like Symons, eventually takes Pater's aesthetic philosophy to its inevitable Decadent extreme, Wilde's development and playful manipulation of the older man's ideas is based on a thorough understanding of those ideas to begin with. Wilde demonstrates this understanding in both his critical writings and his fiction, an examination of which reveals that, if anything, Wilde's "misinterpretation" of Pater is more deliberate than misguided or uninformed. In addition, Wilde's flamboyant representation of aestheticism is a result of his desire to cater to a wider audience than that defined by Pater in his work.

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[21] If Pater's praise of Wilde was more reserved than his praise of Symons, it was most likely due to his knowledge of Wilde as the flamboyant "aesthete" of the early eighties.

Chapter 3

Ambiguous *Intentions*: "Corrupt" and "Cultivated" Readers of Wilde's Criticism

As a disciple of Pater, Oscar Wilde was concerned with developing the appropriate temperament in his audience for the aesthetic appreciation of beauty in art. In his critical writings, Wilde absorbs and develops Pater's concept of the ideal perceiver of art, whom he also refers to as the "aesthetic critic." Later, in the "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde refers more fancifully to his projected ideal audience as "the cultivated"--"[t]hose who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things," (17) and "the elect"--"those to whom beautiful things mean only beauty" (17).[1] Yet Wilde's circumstances were such that he recognised the limits of his actual audience, knowing that he had to contend with another audience as well: "the corrupt," who "find ugly meanings in beautiful things" (*Dorian Gray* 17). In other works, Wilde referred to this audience more conventionally as "the public."[2] Where Pater conceived of his audience in terms of individual readers--Oxford dons and young Oxford men--Wilde saw a "public," and not simply one, but many: "There are as many publics as there are personalities" (qtd. in Mikhail 1:240).[3] Given this broader concept of audience, Wilde faced a far tougher task in his audience-fashioning than did Pater, who merely had to refine the sensibilities of those who were, for all intents and purposes, already refined.

Wilde's more sophisticated and cynical view of audience was a result of circumstances that made him more accountable to his audience than Pater was. Unlike Pater, Wilde was completely dependent on art for his income. Although he had tried to obtain a fellowship at Oxford and a position as an inspector of schools,[4]

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Wilde's works are from *The Complete works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966).

[2] See "The Decay of Lying," "The Critic as Artist," and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."

[3] Wilde made this comment in an interview with Gilbert Burgess which appeared in *The Sketch* in January 1895.

[4] See Ellmann 99-106.

jobs held by Pater and Arnold respectively, Wilde was unsuccessful in obtaining an occupation that would give him financial security, allowing him to pursue his literary interests with the "disinterestedness" necessary to the creation of great art. Denied other employment, Wilde looked to his art as a means of living and so was inevitably connected to the "corrupt" public that he so despised. Although he believed that "the moment an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman" ("The Soul of Man Under Socialism" 1090), his financial need for popular success made him, in effect, a tradesman of the arts. Given this economic reality, Wilde's dilemma was to find a way to maintain his integrity as the "disinterested" artist who "fashion[ed] . . . beautiful thing[s] . . . solely for his own pleasure" ("Soul of Man" 1090) when faced with a public that was only "at its ease when mediocrity [was] talking to it" ("Critic as Artist" 1009).

Desiring the financial security that came with public recognition, yet reluctant to cheapen himself and his art by giving the people what they wanted, Wilde set out to enlighten the masses: "Art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic" ("Soul of Man" 1090). In his capacity as a populariser of Aestheticism, Wilde sought to demonstrate to the public the delights of the private, reclusive world of the aesthete. As a contemporary reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* put it: "[Wilde] has every qualification for becoming a popular Pater" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 91). But the notion of a "popular Pater" is oxymoronic, for it involves bringing to the masses a philosophy that is based on a retreat from the world. Wilde's situation with respect to his audience was at once social and anti-social. His aestheticism was a combination of the Paterean conception of art as a "cloistral refuge . . . from a certain vulgarity in the actual world" (*Appreciations* 18), and the aesthetic idealism of Morris and Ruskin with its more socially-motivated aims. Traversing the spectrum between these two extreme positions involved Wilde in a range of responses to his audience, from idealistic to cynical. In his moments of socialist-idealist fervour, Wilde envisioned the successful refinement of the masses culminating in a utopian society in which each person "realises the perfection of the

soul that is within him" ("Soul of Man" 1087). In this ideal, the cloistral refuge is no longer a retreat from the actual world because it has *become* the actual world. At the other end of the spectrum lies Wilde's artistic-idealist Paterean sentiment: "through Art . . . we shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence" ("Critic as Artist" 1038). While similar to Pater's above-quoted statement about art as cloistral refuge, Wilde's choice of diction reflects the differing circumstances of the two men. Pater's concept of art as a "cloistral refuge" is passive and peaceful. His comment about the "vulgarity of the actual world" is made at a safe distance from this philistine world. Wilde's, on the other hand, is made from *within* that world and is therefore defensive in nature. His expression is based on *actual* experience of the "sordid perils" of the philistine world, after having once enjoyed, as a student at Oxford, the pleasure of being among a community of cultivated peers in the "cloistral refuge" of the "dreaming spires." Thus, Wilde's position as an artist in the vulgar world of the public created not only an idealistic desire for change, but also a more cynical view which resulted from a suspicion that the public might be incapable of change.

By using art as a "shield," Wilde can withdraw from the vulgar world to a certain extent, but not to the extent of the "cloistral refuge." His position of retreat is constantly threatened. In this sense, Wilde is caught between two worlds: that of the cloistered artist which is always just out of reach, and that of the vulgar masses. Because he cannot quite escape from his dependence on the latter, he uses its vulgarity to define his own superiority. Wilde needs the public in its pejorative sense in order to assert his own individuality as distinct from that of the masses. While Wilde claims that in his ideal society individuality will flourish because society will have come to recognise "infinite variety of type as a delightful thing" (Soul of Man" 1101), one can hardly help noticing that, in envisioning this Utopia, he must launch a scathing attack against the formless masses in order to assert his own individuality and superior sensibility. Wilde's "cultivated," then, are defined, in part, by their opposition to the "corrupt." The Paterean aesthete who retires from the ugliness of the world to contemplate beauty in solitude gives way to the Wildean decadent who, unable to know beauty except through its opposition to ugliness, throws stones at the

world which he cannot fully leave behind.

Wilde's definition of the "cultivated" through opposition to the "public" or "corrupt" occurs in his criticism in tandem with a more Paterean style of audience projection whereby he outlines the aesthetic mode of awareness or receptivity necessary to the "cultivated" aesthetic critic. Keeping in mind the caution with which one must approach any of Wilde's statements about his critical beliefs,[5] I will consider those issues upon which I think one can make a claim for a systematic idea. These topics, which include the subjectivity of perception, the dynamic nature of the aesthetically critical mind, and the superiority of art to nature, are related to Wilde's projection of an ideal audience of "cultivated" aesthetic critics who, by "finding beautiful meanings in beautiful things" (*Dorian Gray* 17), ultimately "realise [their] perfection" ("Critic as Artist" 1038). In his treatment of these subjects, Wilde demonstrates his indebtedness to Pater by borrowing and developing, sometimes quite radically, many of the older critic's concepts.[6]

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[5] Wilde's criticism has not garnered a great deal of attention as criticism, chiefly because he contradicts himself so frequently. Bruce Bashford sums up the problem succinctly in his essay "Oscar Wilde, his Criticism and his Critics": "Arch and paradoxical, they ["The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist"] do not look like serious discussions of criticism. Furthermore, their doctrine is suspicious. . . . it is difficult for us to believe that someone whose avowed aim is 'to see the object as in itself it really is not' can be doing anything systematic at all" (181). Critics who do give serious attention to Wilde's criticism (most recently, William Buckler and Ian Small) focus, as I will do, on the dialectic nature of Wilde's criticism.

[6] Pater is certainly not the only influence on Wilde's criticism. Wilde's sources also include Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, Whistler, Plato, Aristotle, and a host of others. I focus mainly on Pater in order to demonstrate how Wilde's treatment of similar issues is affected by, and in turn affects, the relationship with his audience.

I

In the presentation of his critical ideas in "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist,"[7] Wilde adopts the form of the dialogue, a form that Gilbert comments on in "The Critic as Artist":

> By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from every point of view, and show it to us in the round . . . gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme . . . (1046)

For Wilde, the dialogue serves the same function as the essay serves for Pater--it is a dialectical form through which to explore possible truths. Ultimately the goal is the process of speculation rather than any final conclusion that may be reached,[8] for the "cultivated" reader recognises that a different mood might suggest an entirely different process of thought leading to a conclusion equally true.

Wilde's use of the dialogue form also distances him from the theories imparted

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[7] "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist" were originally published in the *Nineteenth Century*, the former in January 1889, and the latter, under the name "The True Function and Value of Criticism," in July (part one) and September (part two) 1890. They were republished in *Intentions* in May 1891 along with two other previously published essays, "The Truth of Masks" (originally published as "Shakespeare and Stage Costume" in the *Nineteenth Century* in May 1885), and "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" (originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* in January 1889).

[8] In his essay, "Wilde's 'Trumpet Against the Gate of Dullness': 'The Decay of Lying'," Buckler makes a similar point about Wilde's use of the dialogue, which he sees as an attempt to highlight "the mental process by which the standpoint [is] reached and how it [is] expressed rather than . . . the simple truth or falsehood of it" (313).

by his interlocutors--most importantly his sages, Vivian and Gilbert.[9] While Wilde's views may sometimes correspond to those of the two dominant characters (for the dialogue "reveals" as well as "conceals" the critic), the reader, as Buckler points out, "is at no time justified in equating [Wilde with the dominant persona], Wilde's chief sympathy being with Gilbert's [and Vivian's] right to reverse conventional wisdom on his subject and to have what he says considered on its intrinsic merits regardless of the unorthodox manner in which he re-writes orthodox points of view" ("Building a Bulwark" 279-80). The audience members may take as their model not Cyril and Ernest, who as disciples are converted by the end of the dialogue, but rather the sages, Vivian and Gilbert, who, in their receptivity to many points of view, "find it "so difficult to convert [themselves]" ("Critic as Artist" 1047). Better yet, the "cultivated" audience may adopt the position of the author, Wilde, who, through the subtitle of "The Decay of Lying"--"An Observation"--reveals the proper, distanced stance to adopt towards the views expressed, as opposed to the stance suggested by the subtitle of Vivian's essay--"A Protest"--which reveals a more tendentious view. As observers of the dialogue, the "cultivated" audience can distinguish between the views expressed by the characters, and the implications of these views for Wilde's overarching message.

Although his characters, particularly the sages, exaggerate, I think it can be reasonably said that Wilde often supports a milder form of what his more outspoken representatives declare; hence his suggestion in a letter to a friend that "under the fanciful form ["The Decay of Lying"] hides some truths, or perhaps some half-truths about art" (*Letters OW* 237). One of the "truths" or principles that we can attribute to a definite belief on the part of Wilde has to do with the nature of the ideal audience

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[9] The identification of Wilde with the dominant interlocutors, Vivian and Gilbert, is a source of debate among critics. Bashford, for example, makes no distinction between Wilde and his sages. He always cites passages without reference to the speaker, as if they represent Wilde's own statements. However, both Herbert Sussman, in "Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde's Critical Writings," and Buckler in his essays on "The Critic as Artist" (*ELT* 33) and "The Decay of Lying" (*ELT* 32), distinguish, and rightly, I think, between Wilde and his dominant speakers.

as "cultivated" perceivers of art. Like Pater, Wilde refers to his ideal perceiver as the "aesthetic critic." In outlining the qualities of the aesthetic critic, Wilde uses different terms from Pater's, but they refer to similar characteristics. Thus, instead of "imaginative reason" (*Renaissance* 102) or "imaginative intellect" (*Renaissance* 169), Wilde's ideal perceivers of art are endowed with

> the aesthetic sense[10] . . . which while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, and, taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself. ("Critic as Artist" 1031)

Having received an impression, the aesthetic critic's aim is to "analyse [it], to investigate its source, [and] to see how it is engendered" ("Critic as Artist" 1018).[11] In terms of receptive and analytical abilities, then, Wilde's aesthetic critics sound much like Pater's.

Yet Wilde moves even further towards a position of relativism, as he places increased emphasis on subjectivity in the apprehension of the object. Through Vivian, Wilde demonstrates the extreme to which the idea of the subjectivity of perception can be taken in the observation of life. While in Pater's "eager observation" (*Renaissance* 188) there is a mediation between objective and subjective data, those who have Wilde's "cultivated blindness" are blind to objective data in their creative vision of life and art. As Vivian says, Nature "is our creation. It is in

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[10] In a similar passage in the same essay, the "aesthetic sense" is referred to by Gilbert as a "beauty-sense," which he says is "separate from the other senses and above them, separate from the reason and of nobler import, separate from the soul and of equal value--a sense that leads some to create, and others . . . to contemplate merely" (1049).

[11] Recall Pater's similar description in the *Renaissance*: "the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced" ("Preface" xx-xxi).

our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us" ("Decay of Lying" 986). Likewise, in "The Critic as Artist" Gilbert extols complete subjectivity in the observation of art, countering Arnold and developing Pater with his claim that the aim of the "highest Criticism"[12] "is to see the object as in itself it really is not" (1030).[13]

While Vivian and Gilbert make their statements about subjectivity in a frivolous and essentially illogical way, the point behind their assertions is to demonstrate to the reader the ways in which thinking can become stagnant. If we insist on seeing things only as they are, we are limiting our thinking in a denial of the "free play of the mind" ("Critic as Artist" 1057). Objective literal vision is a type of blindness. Those who do not engage in the "free play of the mind," like Wilde's

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[12] Gilbert outlines two types of criticism in this essay. The "higher criticism" is "creative and independent" (1026), treating "the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation" (1029). The "lower" form of criticism is "interpretive," although even this criticism involves a substantial amount of subjectivity. In this form, the critic is "an interpreter," although not "in the sense of one who simply repeats in another form a message that has been put into his lips to say" (1033): "Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify" (1033).

[13] While this method may seem to make any interpretation valid, there is an implicit understanding, even on the part of the unorthodox Gilbert, that the "aesthetic critic" is only able "to see the object as in itself it really is not" after he has understood "the object as in itself it really is." The "true man of culture" is he "who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent" ("Critic as Artist" 1041). The knowledge of the objective features of a work (the relationship of the artist to his age, the relationship and struggle between old forms and schools and new ones, the materials available to the artist, and the way in which he used them, the criticism of the time--its aims, modes and canons--and the relation of past artists to the present ["Critic as Artist" 1033]) is a prerequisite for fine aesthetic appreciation. It is only the uncultivated who believe that we need only read the works themselves: "Ordinary people are 'terribly at ease in Zion.' They propose to walk arm in arm with the poets and have a glib ignorant way of saying, 'Why should we read what is written about Shakespeare and Milton. We can read the plays and the poems. That is enough'" ("Critic as Artist" 1032-33). The valid interpretation of the aesthetic critic is informed by background and context. The aesthetic critic must have this knowledge before he can reject it.

detracting audience--"the public"--"never see anything" ("Decay of Lying" 989) because they have not allowed art to enhance their perception. They would rather have art show them something they can see: reality. As "[the public] are interested in their immediate surroundings," they feel that "Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter" ("Decay of Lying 976). However, Wilde's ideal audience of aesthetic critics and artists prefer to see beyond reality: "No great artist ever sees things as they are" ("Decay of Lying" 988). Thus, while the public are blind in an imaginative and aesthetic sense, the aesthetic critic and the artist are blind to the literal in a form of "cultivated blindness" ("Decay of Lying" 970). The function of Wilde's criticism, then, with respect to audience is, as with Pater, to demonstrate how this "aesthetic" form of perception manifests itself in the appreciation of art and life.

In his expansion of the idea of the subjectivity of perception, Wilde radicalises the function of art, the artist, and the aesthetic perceiver of art and life. While Pater's treatment of the expression of subjective impressions in art causes him to broaden the definition of truth by promoting the representation of "possible truth" (*Plato* 188), a "truth" based not on "mere fact" but on a "personal sense of fact," (*Appreciations* 34), Wilde has Vivian declare that "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art" ("Decay of Lying" 992). If objectivity is Truth, then it follows that subjectivity must be a lie. Therefore, those, like "the public," who follow Arnold in the attempt to see objectively, are truthful, while those who see, in their "cultivated blindness," the "object as in itself it really is not," in either art or life, are liars. Keats is turned on his head, as *untruth* becomes beauty. Vivian's qualification for those who desire to be among the "cultivated" is quite clear: "those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art" ("Decay of Lying" 990).

Developing the notion that the critic, the artist, and those who see aesthetically are valuable liars, Wilde has Vivian and Gilbert extol the virtues of inconsistency and insincerity. Like Pater, Wilde was opposed to stagnation of thought, custom, and habit, and he engaged an even stronger resistance against it than his master. In his

critical dialogues, Wilde revitalises Pater's statement from the "Conclusion" to the *Renaissance*--"What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own" (189)--by suggesting that this practice involves "inconsistency" and "insincerity." In Gilbert's usage these terms are the equivalent of what Pater refers to in the "Conclusion" as a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" (*Renaissance* 190), or what in *Marius* becomes the philosophy based on change. In fact, Gilbert's description of the terms amounts to a virtual paraphrase of Pater:

> The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will be ever curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. . . . What people call insincerity is simply a means by which we can multiply our personalities. ("Critic as Artist" 1048)[14]

In this passage Gilbert describes the aesthetic critic in fairly conventional terms, speaking of him in the third person until the final sentence. In this sentence, Gilbert expresses a more unconventional belief and uses "we" and "people" to distinguish between the "cultivated" *we* who accept the proposition and the "corrupt" *people* who reject it. This forces readers into a position of alignment with one of the two audiences, depending on their reaction to the paradoxical statement.

Wilde's replacement by multiple "personalities" of Pater's "quickened,

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[14] In a remarkably similar passage earlier on, Wilde writes: "The aesthetic critic, constant only to the principle of beauty in all things, will ever be looking for fresh impressions, winning from the various schools the secret of their charm, bowing, it may be, before foreign altars, or smiling, if it be his fancy, at strange new gods. . . . Criticism is always moving on, and the critic is always developing" (1045-46).

multiplied consciousness" in this passage makes manifest a potentially unsettling element of Pater's theory, breaking down the barrier he observes between ourselves and others. For Pater, an appreciation of the various forms of human life, both noble and ignoble, comes from having a strong understanding of self first: "the habit of noting and distinguishing one's most intimate passages of sentiment makes one sympathetic, begetting, as it must, the power of entering . . . into the intimate recesses of other minds" (*Appreciations* 254). For Wilde and his sage Gilbert, however, the process is reversed--we know ourselves only by knowing others, and those others, even the least savoury of them, enter the "recesses of [*our*] minds"--hence the multiple personalities:[15]

> And so it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins. It is wiser than we are and its wisdom is bitter. ("Critic as Artist" 1040-41)

While Pater's aestheticism does not shy away from the exploration of the darker elements of the human soul, the stance from which he examines them is removed. Wilde, on the other hand, has Gilbert suggest that these dark elements can easily be awakened in us, and that by realising them we are contributing towards the "perfection of our development" (1041). The difference between Pater's and Wilde's

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[15] In their discussions of the aesthetic critic's capacity for knowing the minds of others, both Pater and Wilde echo Keats on the "camelion [sic] Poet": "When I am in a room with People if I am ever free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated" (from a letter to Richard Woodhouse, Perkins 1286). Pater's notion of knowing others is less threatening to the self than Keats's because it does not involve annihilation. Wilde's, however, is almost more threatening because his aesthetic critic, unlike Keats's "camelion Poet," *has* an identity, and this identity is unsettlingly polymorphous.

ideas about the way in which the darker aspects of the soul are experienced represents another aspect of the shift from pure aestheticism to the "decadent" aestheticism of the 1890's.

Though Wilde draws out the subversive elements of the aesthetic critic's realisation of all manner of experience, his critic, like Pater's, is contemplative rather than active. While Gilbert provocatively suggests that "Sin is an essential element of human progress" ("Critic as Artist" 1023), it is not for the aesthetic critic to venture upon sinful deeds, for he recognises that "[a]ction is limited and relative" ("Critic as Artist" 1039), while ideal forms of art, by their very "incompleteness" ("Critic as Artist" 1031), offer a multiplicity of interpretations and effect. By contemplating works that "suggest reverie and mood" ("Critic as Artist" 1031), the "cultivated" realise various aspects of their personalities. Like Gilbert, they can feel the effects of sin without sinning: "After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own" ("Critic as Artist" 1011). Indeed, through art, "[t]here is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify" ("Critic as Artist" 1038).

Art's ability to stimulate various passions within us through contemplation rather than action makes it superior to life--from the point of view of the "cultivated."[16] In this respect, Wilde does not essentially differ from Pater, who believes that, at its best, art captures "exquisite pauses in time, in which we seem to be spectators of all the fulness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life" (*Renaissance* 118). In developing this idea, Wilde attributes art's superiority to its ability to bring form to what in life is "incoherent" ("Critic as Artist" 1038). In other words, art, and more particularly literature, "is the perfect *expression* of life" (emphasis added--"Critic as Artist" 1016). In a paradoxical extension of the superiority of Art to Life, Vivian, in "The Decay of Lying," declares

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[16] Contemplation is another quality that is used to distinguish between "the public" and the "cultivated," because "while, in the opinion of society, Contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man" ("Critic as Artist" 1039).

that "Life imitates Art" (982), because Art offers the expression that Life is seeking: "the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and . . . Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy" ("Decay of Lying" 992). In the most extreme manifestation of this doctrine, Vivian tells us, "[a]t present people see fogs because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. . . . They did not exist till Art had invented them" ("Decay of Lying" 986). While this view is patently absurd, Wilde demonstrates through the somewhat less cynical Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" that life could, in fact, benefit from modelling itself after art: or, more precisely, that an aesthetically critical devotion to art can improve the quality of our lives.

In the shift of attention from art to life, Wilde's aestheticism reveals its potential to develop into an idealistic and socially motivated philosophy, and it is in these more serious parts of the dialogues that Wilde "reveals" more than "conceals" ("Critic as Artist" 1046) himself through his dominant interlocutors. Although Wilde contradicts Arnold's statement about the function of criticism through his valorisation of subjectivity, he does share with him a belief in the social benefits of the development of the critical spirit. In this respect, Wilde surpasses Pater, who was concerned with the refinement of a few souls. For Wilde, criticism offers both the "insight" that Arnold attributed to it, and the "delight" that Pater contributed to it, because "the critical spirit, through its creativity, can get outside the individual consciousness which Pater so eloquently describes and give it access to the fundamental qualities of man" (Harris 745). Wilde's belief in the power of criticism implies a much broader conception of audience than that held by his master, Pater.

The "aesthetic" or "beauty-sense," when properly developed, is to Wilde an ethical force in itself. A cultivated beauty-sense becomes, in turn, a "critical and self-conscious spirit" ("Critic as Artist" 1050) which will naturally lead one to choose the "good" over the "bad" ("Critic as Artist" 1049). The aesthetic critic's "insincerity," his ability to consider multiple possibilities of interpretation, and his own dynamic character, ensure that he will be ever searching for the ideal, just as Pater's Marius does. It is this aesthetic, critical instinct that, "recognising no position

as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable" ("Critic as Artist" 1057). The aesthetic critic's recognition of the subjectivity of perception, "of the human mind in the variety of its forms" ("Critic as Artist" 1057), is the ideal point at which society, as a whole, can arrive, but in order to arrive at this point, people must be taught "how to grow" instead of "how to remember" (1055). In his writings, then, Wilde attempts to fashion his ideal audience by inspiring the "growth" and expansion of the imaginative powers of his readers' minds.

The ethical dimension of Wilde's thought is often overlooked because of his constant assertion that ethics have no place in art. Thus, in the "Preface" to *Dorian Gray* he writes: "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (17). Wilde even goes so far as to give ethics a secondary role in life: "Aesthetics are higher than Ethics. . . . Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong" ("Critic as Artist" 1058). While Wilde's bold rhetoric is an indication of the force of his philistine opponents who insisted on didactic and moral art, it also belies somewhat the valid point he is making: morality need not be imposed because with the proper development of an individual it will be a natural effect. Art, therefore, should not *aim* to be ethical, but a cultivated appreciation for art and beauty ultimately has a moral *effect*. John Allen Quintus offers the following insightful comment on Wilde's view of the connection between art and ethics:

> Art does not exist solely for its own sake for Wilde because it is more than decoration, not by *design* of the artist (who seeks beauty and avoids argument), but by virtue of the lasting effect art has upon a culture, a race, a nation. That effect can only be to the good, not because art instructs people to be good or because art illuminates the rarely seen connection between God and man, but because art makes of people sentient, emotional, sympathetic beings whose consciousness of

> beauty diminishes their capacity for meanness. . . . The aim of art may be to create a mood, but the effect of art is to make life lovely and worth living. (570-71)

Wilde does not necessarily oppose the ideals of Victorian society, but he does think that they are falsely grounded. "Aesthetics are higher than Ethics" because the development of an aesthetic temperament results naturally in an ability to choose the good over the bad: "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 renunciations of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul" ("Critic as Artist" 1058).

While we may not agree that an aesthetic sensibility can be the basis of an ethical one, we cannot deny the presence of an idealistic and ethical drive in Wilde's criticism. But was Wilde's rhetorical idealism really indicative of a desire to cultivate the masses, or was it yet another means of vaunting himself above the vulgar public? Wilde, with his ideas about the value of art and criticism for society, seems to have been more socially engaged than Pater, who was clearly concerned with the refinement of a select elite. Yet there is something that makes me slightly sceptical of Wilde's social aims. Partly my scepticism arises from Wilde's need, as we have seen, to define his ideal audience through opposition to the public. However, an antagonistic feeling towards the public is not necessarily incompatible with a desire to enlighten and reform them: after all, Ruskin, and even Arnold, were not without their own invective against the "Philistines." Rather, Wilde's lack of credibility in the attempt to "cultivate" the uncultivated is, I would argue, a result of his style, more particularly the cynical aspects of his style. While his content suggests a desire to enlighten by bringing culture to the masses, his witty paradoxes undermine this aim, suggesting an intent to exclude the very audience he seems to want to reform. Under its social rhetoric, Wilde's aestheticism is ultimately as exclusive as Pater's.

II

Style was an essential element of Wilde's communication with his audiences. In *Idylls of the Market-Place*, Regenia Gagnier discusses Wilde's development of two distinct prose styles (cynical and idealistic) in reaction to his different audiences: "He displays his cynicism in his technique of ironic reference, his idealism in imaginary dialogues of purple prose between two men. The first technique would lead to his theater and comedies; the second to a select audience of artful young men, romances and prose poems. The first style was Wildean wit; the second a prose jeweled and seductive" (19). But Gagnier's delineation of specific styles for specific audiences, while useful, is perhaps overly simplistic. She overlooks the potential implications of the overlapping of styles within the same work--meaning that the public and coterie audiences might be exposed to styles supposedly "not meant" for them. The dialogues, for example, shift between an artistic idealism which takes the form of lavish poetical prose passages like those in Pater's *Renaissance*, and a social idealism demonstrated by earnest declarations about the state of society. Wilde's idealistic style is, as Gagnier suggests, a reflection of his desire to appeal to a coterie audience (though I would include in this select group not only Wilde's homosexual coterie [as Gagnier does], but also fellow lovers of art). In addition, both forms of idealism are evidence of Wilde's serious beliefs and concerns about art beyond the glittering surface of his style. This idealistic style, however, does not always exist in isolation from the predominant aspect of Wilde's style, his cynicism: the witty inversions, paradoxes, and reflections of the sage-dandy. Wilde's cynicism is extremely important in determining his creation of and relationship with his audience. The status of Wilde's readers as "corrupt" or "cultivated" is largely determined, not so much by their recognition of the "beautiful" (as Wilde would have us think), but rather by their reaction to his cynical wit.

Before turning to the effect of Wilde's cynicism on his audiences, I will consider the role that style and form play in Wilde's critical ideas. For Wilde, style is far more important than mere content for, in a world of relative truths, content is largely determined by style. It is style, and consequently attitude, that convince.

Wilde's faith in the persuasive effects of style was so strong that he was willing to challenge, through inversion, not only the common assumptions of the public, but his own ideas as well. Thus, after arguing convincingly in favour of historical accuracy in theatrical costume and staging practices in his essay "The Truth of Masks,"[17] Wilde concludes in a manner which entirely undermines his claim:

> Not that I agree with everything I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true. (1078)

Because "The Truth of Masks" is the concluding essay of *Intentions*, this statement is the final word of both the essay and the book. While representing an attitude similar to Pater's concerning the relative nature of truth, the statement also demonstrates the degree of difference between the two men. As Pater proceeds through the "process of speculation" that characterises his dialectical style, he aims to *convince* both himself and his reader, if not of the truth in a universal sense, then at least of the "possible truth" of his perception, which is achieved through the "absolute accordance of expression to idea" (*Appreciations* 32). Wilde, on the other hand, as a result of his valuation of subjectivity over objectivity, expression over idea, and style over content, draws explicit attention to the provisional nature of his ideas, implying that readers should be wary of anything that aims to convince. Unlike Pater, Wilde does not take

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[17] Originally published under the title "Shakespeare and Stage Costume," in the *Nineteenth Century* in May 1885, "The Truth of Masks" was included in *Intentions* largely as filler. The essay, in its defense of realism on the stage (although Wilde replaced the term "realism" with "illusion" for its publication in *Intentions*), seems to contradict the style and tone of the other essays in *Intentions*. To make it more in keeping with the tone of the volume, Wilde added the above-quoted perplexing conclusion. Wilde himself expressed dissatisfaction with the essay when he was considering the French translation of his book. He wanted to replace "The Truth of Masks" with "The Soul of Man" because, as he wrote to his French publisher: "je ne veux pas qu'il traduise le dernier essai, 'La Verité des Masques;' je ne l'aime plus" (*Letters OW* 295).

his "possible truths" as seriously as the manner in which they are conveyed. Wilde, in this essay, performs the function normally allotted to his sage-dandies in the dialogues by reminding the reader of the philosophy of change that he advocates for his ideal aesthetic critic: "Its practitioner discovers the new not by knowing in advance where he should go but by ceaselessly rejecting where he has been. Therefore being comprehensible to others or even consistent with one's former self signifies stagnation" (Bashford 184). Wilde's willingness to contradict his own arguments is an indication that in his development of aestheticism "it was as essential to disturb complacencies as to convince, or possibly more" (Ellmann 289).

Wilde's privileging of style was, in some sense, due to Pater's influence. As I argued in Chapter One, the effect, though not the intention, of Pater's jewelled prose style on his disciples led to the decadent worship of form. For Wilde, "Form is everything" ("Critic as Artist" 1052)--nothing exists in any meaningful sense without it. Our subjective impressions, and subsequently our expressions of them in art, give form to life. Even people are given form through such superficial "accidentals" as "dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit and the like" ("Decay of Lying" 975). Style determines identity because at base "we are all of us made of the same stuff" ("Decay of Lying 975). While Vivian, the aesthete-sage, is perfectly willing to admit that Nature and Life are essentially formless, "[i]t is a humiliating confession" (975) to admit to "that dreadful universal, human nature" (975) wherein we are all alike. To be free of this horrid truth the arch-aesthete turns to the subjective realms of imagination and art to create himself in fanciful forms in a desperate attempt to escape the objective truth of human nature.

In their worship of form, Wilde and some of Pater's other disciples did not, as did Pater, seek solace from relativism in the "possible truth" that could be achieved through a mediation between objective and subjective data. Their response was rather to find truth in form and style. If truth is indeed subjective, then what makes a thing "true" is style. Hence Vivian's assertion in "The Decay of Lying" that, "[i]t is style that makes us believe in a thing--nothing but style" (989). This shift in emphasis amounts to the puzzling paradox that "Truth is lies," which, though not overtly stated,

is an implied critical position in "The Decay of Lying," due to the association of both Lying and Truth with subjectivity. In the following passage Wilde juggles with a number of terms, inverting and converting meaning:

> Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him [the liar], and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style. (981)

Art hates realism because it presents objective truth; she welcomes the liar, however, because he knows another kind of truth--the subjective truth that recognises beauty. The liar is the possessor of Truth because he, recognising the subjective nature of truth, finds it in the infinitely changeable, and therefore "inconsistent" and "insincere," realm of style.

As the liar who "realise[s] himself in many forms" ("Critic as Artist" 1048) through his criticism, Wilde asks his audience to read for style before content.[18] Ideas take second place to the expression. After all, as we have seen in the discussion of the basic content beneath the fanciful form of Wilde's criticism, his ideas are not entirely original, his philosophy being derived from critics such as Ruskin, Arnold and Pater, to name but a few.[19] It is Wilde's style that transforms innocuous critical commonplaces into radical ideas, by drawing attention to the effect

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[18] In *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Norbert Kohl draws attention to Wilde's vagueness on the issue of content in comparison with his articulate views on style, which Kohl sees as problematic (90-93). To make his point, Kohl draws attention to some of Wilde's elliptical statements concerning the subject-matter of art, such as: "To art belongs all things that are and all things that are not" (*Letters OW* 261), and "[t]o art's subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent" ("Decay of Lying" 976). The issue of content will become increasingly important in my discussion of Wilde's relationship to his audience in his fiction.

[19] For a discussion of Wilde's position in the tradition of classical criticism, see Edward A. Watson's "Wilde's Iconoclastic Classicism: "The Critic as Artist," in which he discusses Wilde's relation to Plato, Aristotle, Pope, and Arnold. For a discussion that centres on the nineteenth-century critical tradition, see Wendell V. Harris's "Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It."

of language rather than to the content. Through inversion and paradox, Wilde constantly disrupts the audience's expectations and assumptions. The validity of the content depends wholly upon the style in which it is presented. While Pater's style aims at synthesis, at a gradual reconciliation of thesis and antithesis through a slow cumulative process (for example, his demonstration of the inherent similarities between early paganism and early Christianity in *Marius the Epicurean*), Wilde reverses the procedure. He begins with the antithesis to a commonly held thesis, presenting it in a shocking or provocative manner. Although he ultimately goes on to explain and justify the paradox, the initial jarring antithesis establishes a receptivity in the audience quite different from that achieved by Pater's style. By confronting his audience with inversions of their common assumptions, Wilde challenges them to question conventional platitudes. This challenge typically results in two kinds of responses--that of the "corrupt" reader and that of the "cultivated"--both of which are anticipated by the confrontational nature of Wilde's style.

While Wilde's cynical inversions and witty paradoxes may have sought to stir people out of their complacency, they also had the effect of alienating a good portion of his audience. Because of the idealistic aspects of his philosophy, it is not always clear whether he expects the "public" to understand the function of his wit, or whether he uses it deliberately to exclude them. Given his practical, financial need for popularity, one would assume that Wilde would adopt an amicable--or at least neutral--stance towards the public. But although he is more dependent on the public than Pater is, his reaction to his naysayers is antagonistic rather than conciliatory.[20]

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[20] For an excellent discussion of Wilde's paradoxical style as a direct attack on Victorian values see Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence*. Dollimore refers to Wilde's use of paradox and inversion as a "transgressive aesthetic." According to Dollimore, Wilde's inversions, which valorised insincerity, inauthenticity, and unnaturalness, were transgressive because they were inscribed "*through and within* some of [society's] most cherished and central cultural categories--art, the aesthetic, art criticism, individualism" (15). Thus, although a statement like "only the shallow know themselves," from "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," is not immoral *per se*, the aesthetic transgression, in the form of the inversion, became equated in many Victorian minds with a more serious kind of transgression, namely sexual. Dollimore

While Pater experimented, after the scandal provoked by the *Renaissance*, with style and form in his desire to make his doctrine understandable to those who thought it immoral, Wilde, in a letter in which he discusses "The Decay of Lying," admits to alienating the "uncultivated": "the public so soon vulgarise any artistic idea that one gives them that I was determined to put my new views on art . . . in a form that they could not understand, but that would be understood by the few who . . . have a quick artistic instinct" (*Letters OW* 236). Wilde, then, like Pater, wanted to appeal primarily to the "cultivated," and as such, his wit was a deliberate attempt to exclude a public that he felt could not understand him. To the right audience, Wilde's witty style, as J. E. Chamberlin points out, evokes "a conspirational complicity, a sense of brotherly blasphemy. We need to feel slightly wicked as we smile at Wilde's outrageous statement: for which feeling of course we need a sense of its outrageousness as well as its truth" ("High Decadence" 592).

But although Wilde wishes to generate a sense of complicity with his "cultivated" audience, he does not want to exclude the public or "corrupt" to the extent that they would ignore him, however, for part of his aim was to "bewilder the masses" (*Letters OW* 236), and to "bewilder," he must be read. Whereas Pater *unwittingly* provokes (in the *Renaissance* at least), and consequently seeks to make amends, with his detractors, Wilde *deliberately* provokes, knowing that a controversial attitude is a saleable good.[21] Wilde's sharp understanding of the public

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suggests that through such inversions,

> Wilde attacked . . . not so much conventional morality itself as the ideological anchor points for that morality, namely notions of subjective depth which manifest[ed] themselves in . . . newspaper reports as wholesomeness, right reason, seriousness, etc. . . . . Wilde's transgressive aesthetic subverted the dominant categories of subjectivity which kept desire in subjection, subverted the essentialist categories of identity which kept morality in place. (68)

[21] For studies that deal more fully with "aestheticism" as it faces the emergence of an increasingly consumerist society, see Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace*. The first chapter of Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste* also provides an analysis of the complex relationship between British Aestheticism and consumer culture. He writes:

was fostered in the 80's when "styl[ing] himself Professor of Aesthetics and adopt[ing] a costume for the part," Wilde set out to "impress . . . the paying public" (Moers 295-96). Having caught their attention, Wilde could proceed, as he did in the 90's, to mock and criticise the public and their values because, as Jonathan Freedman notes, Wilde understood "the spectacular ability of an advanced consumer society to transform criticisms of that society into objects of consumption" (60).[22] Wilde's previous experience with the public, as well as his remarks about "bewildering" and confounding the masses in his letters, suggest that Wilde's idealism, while not entirely disingenuous, was not practical, nor was it meant to be. Because Wilde's conception of audience was so much broader than Pater's, he did not envision the potential transformation of all his readers into aesthetic critics. Wilde anticipated the reaction of an unsavvy audience who, with its predictable behaviour, played right into his hands. Thus, in what almost amounted to a thank-you note for a negative review of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde wrote to the editor of the *St. James Gazette*: "The English public, as a mass, takes no interest in a work of art until it is told that the work in question is immoral, and your *réclame* will, I have no doubt, largely increase the sale of the magazine; in which sale, I may mention with some regret, I have no pecuniary interest" (*Letters OW* 257).

To an audience accustomed to more earnest expressions of the importance of art to culture, Wilde's style does indeed perplex. To some of the "corrupt" audience, his use of paradox and wit to invert the values they held dear bespoke a lack of sincerity and seriousness ultimately undermining, in their eyes, anything potentially

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"British aestheticism prepares for the establishment of a consumer culture," but also the "ways in which it represents and anticipates a variety of different forms of opposition to such an ethos" (3).

[22] Freedman suggests that Wilde benefitted not only from his own experience with the consumer public, but also from his observation of the public's "consumption" of the work of earlier aesthetes (Morris and Ruskin) who criticised them. Thus, aestheticism in the hands of Wilde is transformed from the earlier "critique of commodification" to a critique of the *commodification* of the critique of commodification (60).

useful he might have to say. Many of the "corrupt," however, were not so "corrupt" that they could not see that Wilde did indeed have something to say. The reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for example, after a lengthy denunciation of Wilde's paradoxes as a "facile formula," wrote: "Mannerism apart, there is much excellent *matter* in Mr. Wilde's dialogues and essays" (emphasis added--qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 91). While the reviewer's ability to see the "matter" behind the fanciful form almost ranks him among the "cultivated," his inability to comprehend the purpose of the "facile formula" makes him one of the "corrupt" who react predictably to the inversion of their values through paradox. Thus, faced with a character like Vivian in "The Decay of Lying," who suggests that "truth-telling" is "morbid and unhealthy" (973), while Lying, "the telling of beautiful, untrue things," (992) is a graceful art, some "corrupt" readers are affronted by the reversal of terms. They resist Vivian's equation of "truth" with the "morbid" and the "unhealthy" and resent his glorification of lying. Similarly, they balk at Gilbert's validation of the qualities of insincerity, inconsistency, irrationality, and unfairness. These "corrupt" readers take the inversions quite literally, seeing Wilde as a wilful underminer of moral values.[23]

The less severely "corrupt" public, like the reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, while recognising Wilde's inversions as a stylistic method, did not appreciate them. This

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[23] Although this severely literal reaction was not in evidence in the reviews of *Intentions*, it did occur in the reviews of *Dorian Gray*. Most importantly, however, the literalisation of Wilde's inversions occurred in Edward Carson's cross-examination of Wilde at the first trial. Carson did not draw on the paradoxes of *Intentions*, however. Rather he used those from "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young." While no different from those to be found in *Intentions*, or in any of Wilde's plays for that matter, the inversions in "Phrases and Philosophies" are simply that: inversions without any context that might lessen their subversive nature. While, in "The Critic as Artist," Wilde can explain away the claim that "insincerity is a means by which we can multiply our personalities" in such a way that it takes on a positive connotation, the similar statement "[o]nly the shallow know themselves," without the explanatory context, takes on a more rebellious tone. For an account of Carson's cross-examination of Wilde on the subject of his literary works, see H. Montgomery Hyde's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* 105-15.

reviewer called Wilde's use of paradox "mechanical" and "wearisome" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 92), and referred to Wilde's style as his "tiresome way of expressing himself" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 93). While claiming to understand the function of Wilde's paradox, the reviewer still tried to literalise, reading for content before form--proving, in Wilde's terms, that he was one of the "masses" who has been "bewilder[ed] . . . by [the] fantastic form" (*Letters OW* 236). As one of the "corrupt," the reviewer strove to find meaning at the level of content in the statements of Wilde's interlocutors, rather than seeing beyond this level, as his "cultivated" readers did, to Wilde himself and the truth to be found in form, style, and the "mask." In an attempt to catch Wilde out in what he referred to as "reckless" statements (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 93), he fell into the trap of literalisation: "what can Mr. Wilde have been thinking of, except effect, when he said that bad artists always admire each other's work, as a summary of his theory that good ones do otherwise? Had he forgotten his Vasari and the evidence of the golden age of the great Italian artists?" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 93). Of course Wilde had not forgotten his Vasari, and of course he was thinking of effect. Had this reviewer forgotten Vivian's statement about the perception of art in "The Decay of Lying"--"Where the cultured catch an *effect*, the uncultured catch a cold" (emphasis added--986)--in his "uncultivated" literalisation of Wilde's philosophy?[24]

Unlike the "corrupt" audience, Wilde's "cultivated" recognise the efficacy of a style that forces us to examine the basis of supposedly fundamental principles. Because they see beyond the literal level, they know not to take the outrageous

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[24] This witticism occurs as a summation of Vivian's discussion of the Impressionists' creation of fogs as an example of how Nature imitates Art. The aesthetic critic, knowing that fogs are an artistic creation, catches their artistic effect, while the literalising tendency of the "dull people" causes them to catch "bronchitis." ("Decay of Lying" 986). In a revealing comment on Wilde's provoking style as a trap for the "literalist," Henry James, in what seems a mixture of envy and contempt, wrote: "Everything Oscar does is a deliberate trap for the literalist, and to see the literalist walk straight up to it, look straight at it, and step straight into it, makes one freshly avert a discouraged gaze from this unspeakable animal" (qtd. in Freedman 173).

assertions of Wilde's "sages," Vivian and Gilbert, at face value. Likewise, they recognise the undesirable position of the "disciples," Cyril and Ernest, who are made somewhat ridiculous (though not to quite the same degree as the public) as representatives of the conventional point of view. Taking its cue from the style and form of the dialogue, the "cultivated" audience transcends the literal content to the larger issues raised by the creator of the dialogue, Wilde himself. Because they are given in advance the antithetical statement that Wilde's sages will proceed to prove (such as "Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life"), the "cultivated" attend to the process of argumentation rather than remaining fixated on content.[25] "Cultivated" readers know that the sages' outrageous propositions are not "literally" true, but they grant them the status of a "truth in art" if the argument is intrinsically sound. While they reject the extreme form of the proposition that "Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life"--a statement that leads to such suggestions as "the whole of Japan is a pure invention" ("Decay of Lying" 988)--they grant it provisional truth based on the intrinsic soundness of the argument. They also recognise the degree to which there is a kind of truth in a milder form of the proposition, as an illustration of the way that people copy what they see in art, like the boys who commit crimes after reading Dick Turpin stories ("Decay of Lying" 983).

Arthur Symons, one of Wilde's fellow aesthetes and disciples of Pater, was endowed with the "artistic temperament" (*Letters OW* 237) of the "cultivated." In his review of *Intentions*, Symons demonstrated an appreciation of the function of Wilde's style: "By constantly saying the opposite of sensible opinions he proves to us that opposites can be equally true" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 96). Because he understood the purpose of the style above all else, Symons was able to assess the content adequately: "All this, startling as it sounds, needs only to be properly apprehended, to be properly analysed, and we get an old doctrine, indeed, but a

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[25] Wilde's attempt to achieve a style that draws the reader's attention to the process of argumentation resembles Pater's similar attempt. However, Wilde radicalises it by making the "possible truths" outrageous propositions.

doctrine in which there is a great deal of sanity and a perfectly reasonable view of things" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 95). Likewise gifted with an appropriate artistic temperament was Richard Le Gallienne, who remarked: "he is so absolutely alive at every point, so intensely practical--if people could only see it--and therefore so refreshingly unsentimental" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 99). These reviewers saw past the "fanciful form" of Wilde's work to the more serious matter beneath it (matter that I have attempted to elucidate in my discussion of some of the main principles of Wilde's criticism), proving themselves to be endowed with the qualities of the aesthetic critic, Wilde's ideal audience member.

Yet the approval of Le Gallienne and Symons who, like Wilde, were associated with the Decadent movement, was not difficult to gain; it was rather like preaching to the converted. Le Gallienne's parenthetical remark "if only people could see it" points to the difficulty, for an average audience, of getting beyond the glittering surface of Wilde's style, as does Le Gallienne's statement later in the same review: "At present a delicate literary affectation, which is probably irritating to most, but rather a charm to those who know what it means, a suggestion of insincerity, a refusal to commit himself, to be 'the slave of his own opinions', makes him somewhat of a riddle" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 102). With these remarks, Le Gallienne demonstrates his alliance with Wilde's coterie audience, not only by recognising the "charm" of Wilde's style, but also in acknowledging himself as one of the elect who "know what [the literary affectation] means," in contrast to "most" people who find it "irritating." Le Gallienne's comments are a perfect representation of how Wilde and other artists of the 1890's distinguished between their "corrupt" and "cultivated" audiences, communicating with the latter in a manner that reflects, what Chamberlin refers to as the "refined complicity [of] the literature and art of the period" ("High Decadence" 594).

While Wilde's aesthetic theories are important in the shaping and determining of his "cultivated" audience, the inversions and paradoxes he uses in the presentation of these ideas are the determining factor in the distinction between the "corrupt" and the "cultivated." Wit, like Art, is a means by which we can "shield ourselves from

the sordid perils of actual existence" ("Critic as Artist" 1038). Cynical wit is the solution for an artist like Wilde who despised a society which made a commodity of art, but was dependent on that very society for his living. No longer able to contemplate the sublime from his ivory tower, wit became his version of the sublime within society. While wit was sure to appeal to the "corrupt" public that he *needed*, it was also a means of ensuring that they were deprived of the full understanding which was meant for the "cultivated" audience that he *wanted*.[26]

Though the idealistic aspects of Wilde's philosophy seem to reflect a desire for widespread cultivation of the "masses," his use of cynical wit and an artificial style made this impossible by "bewildering" the public. The comments of Le Gallienne, Symons, and Wilde himself indicate that though in the eighties and nineties aesthetes began to cater to a larger audience, they nonetheless saw themselves as a select group to which a large portion of their readers were denied access. A cynical wit which, on the surface, inverted the ethical values of many of these readers ensured that they would misunderstand the valuable nature of the aesthetic philosophy as a form of critical awareness, enabling Wilde and his "cultivated" to assert their superiority over this "corrupt" audience. Turning away from criticism to the imaginative realm of fiction and drama, Wilde increasingly explored the limit to which he could use the language of wit against the public and still be ensured of their patronage, without excluding the "cultivated" audience that was most dear to him.

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[26] In his article, "The Importance of Doing Nothing," Chamberlin makes a similar argument about Wilde's use of wit. He writes: [Wilde] admired wit, instinctively knowing that wit preserves all that is individual and egotistic in the highest sense. . . . Wilde admired the dilettante in himself and others, seeing it as a pose of incomparable value, a defense against the fanaticism of the serious and the earnest" (196).

Chapter 4

Aestheticism for the Masses: Wilde's Fictional Engagements with Audience

Like Pater, Wilde believed that the critical sensibility of the aesthetic critic was also needed by the artist: "Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name. . . . that spirit of choice, that subtle tact of omission, is really the critical faculty in one of its most characteristic moods, and no one who does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art" ("Critic as Artist" 1020). In his fiction, however, Pater is more clearly the "critic," using his artistic creations as a means of demonstrating his aesthetic philosophy. Thus, Pater's *Marius* is as much a work of historical criticism as it is an artistic work. Wilde, on the other hand, is more a pure artist than a critic in his fiction, and does not use it explicitly as a vehicle for promoting his critical outlook. These different artistic perspectives were partly a result of the men's differing relationships to audience. While Pater was keen on making his philosophy understood to the select audience that he envisioned, Wilde expected a larger audience comprising those who were aesthetic critics already, like the "cultivated," and those who were not, like general readers and the "corrupt." Wilde's aim in writing fiction was not to reinforce an aesthetic doctrine in such a way as to convert an audience: rather, it was to create a "beautiful" and "useless"[1] thing which, in addition to being more purely artistic than the kind of fiction Pater wrote, was also less alienating to an audience not interested in art with a highly theoretical content. That being said, however, Wilde's fiction, though not overburdened with his aesthetic philosophy, does, to a large extent, benefit from an understanding of aestheticism. Though not alienating to the public in an intellectual sense, his fiction did alienate some through its style, the function of which could only be understood by the "cultivated." Because Wilde (as I have pointed out in Chapter Three) understood and deliberately utilised "fanciful forms" in order to exclude the "public" yet also wanted the public's attention, his fiction represents, in a number of

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[1] In the "Preface" to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes, "The artist is the creator of beautiful things" and "[a]ll art is quite useless" (17).

genres, his mediation of conflicting views amongst his various audiences about the aims of art. While Wilde's focus and the focus of his "cultivated" is on aesthetics and the meaning of style, his other audience, in their concern with ethics and the "usefulness" of art, are invited to attend to the meaning at the level of content. While Wilde does not go so far as to write strictly ethical fiction, all his works, up until *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are engaged, in some way, with establishing the proper relation between aesthetic and ethical concerns in an "aesthetic" work of art.

I

In examining Wilde's engagement, in his fictional work, with his "corrupt" and "cultivated" audiences, it may seem odd to begin with *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, not only because of the innocuous style of the tales, but also because it predates the critical writings in which Wilde so strongly establishes his conception of his audiences. As fairy tales, these stories seem to anticipate an audience entirely different from that of the critical dialogues--an audience of children who, in their innocence, are hardly likely to represent Wilde's "corrupt" audience, and in their ignorance are equally unlikely candidates for inclusion among the "cultivated." But even these stories for children demonstrate his understanding of different types of audience as well as his ability to communicate on more than one level, for Wilde did anticipate an adult audience as well for these tales: "They are studies in prose, put for Romance's sake into a fanciful form: meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (*Letters OW* 219).[2] In this statement concerning the

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[2] Wilde is somewhat contradictory on the nature of the intended audiences for his fairy tales. In another letter, written to W. E. Gladstone, he writes that *The Happy Prince* "is really meant for children" (*Letters OW* 218), yet in a letter to Amelie Rives Chanler he says that they are "written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!" (*Letters OW* 237). This discrepancy can be explained, I think, by the identities of the correspondents. In writing to a former Prime Minister (and non-artist), Wilde is likely to be more humble about his work (he refers to the volume in the letter as a "little book"), whereas in writing to Chanler, a fellow artist, it would be

intended audiences for the tales, Wilde adds a further dimension to the conception of the aesthetic critic by suggesting that this critic retains the "childlike faculties of wonder and joy." And while Wilde does not make mention of a "corrupt" audience in the above comment, his reference to the "fanciful form" of his stories foreshadows his use of this term to describe his critical dialogues, whose "fanciful" or "fantastic" form is a means of "bewilder[ing]" or excluding the "corrupt" masses (*Letters OW* 237, 236). In addition, the "corrupt" audience figures largely within the tales themselves.

Wilde's use of a "fanciful form" in the fairy tales is not as exclusionary as it is in the critical dialogues. For one thing, the "fanciful form" is decidedly different: it consists of fantasy rather than cynical wit. Wilde's declared aim in the stories was to "attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality--to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative" (*Letters OW* 237), and this aim was apparent even to the "corrupt" and inartistic public who were capable of recognising Wilde's social critique beneath the guise of the fairy tale. Thus, the average Victorian reader could easily have understood Wilde's depiction of his fairy tale characters as exaggerated representations of real types. Hence, in "The Devoted Friend," a frame narrative in which a linnet attempts to tell a moral tale about an exploitative friendship to an egotistical water rat, the reader is expected to recognise the characters as types to be found in society. The recognition of the treatment of "modern problems" through the guise of the fairy tale is the most basic level of response for an adult reader. According to Rodney Shewan, this audience "accept[s] the parable at face value as a reinforcement of the everyday ethics that they themselves instil into children, and beyond which many adults never develop. Their intellectual contribution will be fairly small" (48). These readers derive enjoyment primarily from the simple moral tenor of the tales, largely ignoring the ironic tone

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natural for Wilde to highlight the mature, artistic and aesthetic aspects of his work. I think that it is safe to say, given the popularity of the stories among children and adults alike, that Wilde, as always, is attempting to appeal to the broadest audience possible.

which somewhat undermines the morals the tales present.

Although this basic response is more advanced than that of a child, it is hardly "cultivated." Those who see the fairy tales as purely didactic are overlooking the complexities of the moral dilemmas that Wilde explores and the way in which he explores them. While it would be foolish to deny the moral aspects of Wilde's tales, it would be wrong to view them as parables. They are, as Shewan points out, more like "sermons by a sceptic to the relentlessly unconverted. While the Biblical parable is intrinsically didactic and incidentally narrative, Wilde's [stories] tend to be intrinsically narrative and only incidentally didactic" (38). This effect, I would argue, is a result of the moral's being derived from the narrators' portrayals of the characters, either by detached illustrations of the discrepancy between a character's words and actions or through equally detached and unemotional descriptions of the self-sacrificing acts of the sympathetic characters. For the most part, the narrators of the tales are supremely detached, never moralising or eliciting sympathy through their own voices. When the Happy Prince's heart breaks, presumably from sorrow over the Swallow's death, the narrator resists the sympathetic interpretation: "At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had been broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadful frost" (290). The "cultivated" reader, while not coldly regarding the events narrated, attends to the narrative voice that suggests that the simple form Wilde has chosen for his tales conceals a more ambiguous relation to the morality they seem to put forth.

The difference in comprehension between the "corrupt" and "cultivated" adult audiences is illustrated most fully in the ending of "The Devoted Friend." Once the tale of the "devoted" Big Hugh's abuses of his friend Little Hans (which results in the latter's death) has been told, we return to the narrative frame only to discover that the Water-rat has completely misunderstood the moral of the Linnet's story. Rather than sympathising with the exploited Hans, the Water-rat sympathises with the exploiter, Big Hugh, who is much like himself. The final exchange between the Duck and the Linnet, which is followed by the Narrator's closing remark, invites reactions that distinguish the "cultivated" audience from the merely competent "corrupt" readers:

> 'I am rather afraid I have annoyed him [the Water-rat],' answered the Linnet. 'The fact is that I told him a story with a moral.'
>
> 'Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,' said the Duck.
>
> And I quite agree with her. (309)

While the "corrupt" or average audience sees the narrator's final remark simply as wit, ignoring the fact that wit can carry deeper meaning in an attempt to read purely for the moral, the "cultivated" recognise the comment as a genuine subversion of the moral. These readers do not need a moral because, as Shewan observes, they

> are capable of finding stimulation and amusement in the pose of the egotist [the Water-rat] without ignoring the uncomfortable truth contained within the parable. They will realise, however, that the parable is not 'a story with a moral' in the linnet's sense, but a literary device which has no moral except the futility of telling stories with a moral. To this group, a story can have as many morals as readers, or as many morals as those readers are prepared to recognise. (48)

And indeed, the moral of this story is ambiguous. In sensing this ambiguity, the "cultivated" are responding critically in their recognition that Wilde's "stories satirize the very notion of a mutually understood moral problem" (Willoughby 19). Beneath their simple form, the fairy tales conceal greater intellectual matter, matter that is distinguishable only to the "cultivated" audience who look beyond the seemingly simple morality of the surface level.

This greater intellectual matter is reflected in the thematic content of the tales. While the stories satirise Victorian society in a fairly obvious way, they also treat more existential "modern problems" having to do with the subjective nature of perception and the relativity of truth. Drawing upon issues raised by Pater in *The Renaissance*,[3] Wilde explores the conflicting claims of the individual (particularly the

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[3] In *Art and Christhood*, Guy Willoughby also points out the connection between Pater's *Renaissance* and *The Happy Prince*. He writes: "Wilde's elegant tales of mutual misunderstanding reflect an awareness, imbibed most noticeably from Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* . . . of the fracturing and relativist universe that science, psychology, and

artist figure) and society in a modern world increasingly characterised by "entangled interests," "sorrows," "preoccupations," "bewildering . . . experience," and ultimately "the problem of unity with ourselves" ("Winckelmann," *Renaissance* 182). In addition, he explores the issue of art's representation of the modern world, a subject also treated by Pater in "Winckelmann."[4] Wilde treats these themes symbolically in his exploration of the relationship between aesthetic critics as represented in the selfless artist figures (the Happy Prince, the Swallow, the Nightingale) who are endowed with imaginative sympathy,[5] and the unsympathetic and selfish, "corrupt" public who are represented by characters like the Town Councillors in "The Happy Prince," the Student in "The Nightingale and the Rose," and Big Hugh and the Water-rat in "The Devoted Friend."

While both Pater (in *The Renaissance* and *Appreciations*) and Wilde (in

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social dislocation were exposing at the end of the 1880s" (19).

[4] Pater suggests that "What modern art has to do in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit" (*Renaissance* 184). Wilde's attempt, in the fairy tales, "to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative" (*Letters OW* 237) reflects his agreement with Pater on this issue.

[5] I am indebted to Guy Willoughby's study of Wilde's fairy tales for this term, which has its origins in *De Profundis*, where Wilde uses it in his discussion of Christ as the supreme artist-figure:

> the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the artist, an intense and flamelike imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that *imaginative sympathy* which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich (my italics--*Letters OW* 476).

I think this term is crucial to an understanding of Wilde's vision of the role of the artist and aesthetic critic in his aesthetic philosophy. Because of Wilde's valorisation of the imagination and his use of cynical wit, the sympathetic aspect of the artist is often overlooked. But Wilde, in "The Remarkable Rocket," shows that imagination, on its own, is not enough. In this tale, the Rocket, like the aesthetic critic, "sees things as in themselves they really are not," but in so doing, he is completely out of touch with his surroundings and fellow men, and as such, is lacking the sympathetic aspect of the true "cultivated" artist.

Intentions), valorise the subjective nature of perception and truth, in the fairy tales, Wilde explores the negative aspects of subjectivity. We must not forget that Wilde characterises subjective perception as "blindness" in *Intentions*, and although in the aesthetic critic or artist this blindness is "cultivated," in others, such as Wilde's "corrupt" audience, it might well be simply lack of vision in a thoroughly uncultivated sense. Similarly, the recognition of the relativity of truth leads the aesthetic critic or artist to expand his personality by exploring many points of view. In the "corrupt," however, the subjectivity of perception and the consequent relativity of truth validate narrow-minded thinking because "corrupt" individuals are limited, unlike the artist, to one perspective, and they rigidly define the truth based on this perspective. Artists, however, are able to make their subjective visions more all-encompassing through imagination, something which the corrupt individual lacks. This discrepancy between types of subjective vision is most apparent in "The Happy Prince." The story begins with a number of perspectives of the Happy Prince from townspeople who have their own subjective understandings of truth. Thus, one of the Town Councillors acknowledges the statue's beauty but laments its uselessness; a mother uses the so-called happiness of the Happy Prince to try to stop her child from crying; and, a disappointed man contrasts his miserable state with what he perceives to be the blissful state of the Happy Prince (285). While they are not necessarily selfish in orientation, the views of the townspeople reflect their limited perspective and, as Willoughby suggests, the "absence of comprehensive vision in the society at large" (23). The townspeople's views are consistently proven wrong; we are made aware of the sorrow of the Happy Prince as he looks at "all the ugliness and all the misery of [his] city" (286). Even the Town Councillor who laments the statue's "uselessness" is proven wrong as the Happy Prince, using the Swallow as his envoy, sacrifices the jewels and gold that adorn him to clothe, feed, and shelter the poor.

Similarly, the Student in "The Nightingale and the Rose" represents the narrow subjective vision that is a result of an inartistic and unimaginative nature. While the story's readers are privy to the meaning of the song in which the Nightingale tells the Student of the sacrifice she will make for him, the Student is

entirely ignorant: "The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written in books" (294). The Student's ignorance is further demonstrated as his association with the philistine and the bad art critic is revealed in his interpretation of the Nightingale's song:

> She has form . . . that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. . . . Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good! (294)

Once again, practicality and usefulness are demanded of the artist figure, when it is in fact the imagination of the *perceiver* that is meant to supply art with its meaning and use. The "corrupt" Student's lack of imagination makes him fail to realise that art can increase our sympathy and understanding of others, granting those who are "cultivated" a greater knowledge of things as well as a larger, more comprehensive vision of the world.

This expansive knowledge is granted to the artist figures of the tales, the Nightingale, the Happy Prince, and, eventually, through initiation, the Swallow. Ironically, it is the Student who initiates the Nightingale's self-realisation and greater awareness by revealing to her the meaning of her song. Observing the Student's love-lorn state, the Nightingale has a revelation: "'Here at last is a true lover,' said the Nightingale. 'Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars and now I see him. . . . What I sing of, he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain'" (292). The Nightingale is "cultivated" because she is able to learn, not only through her own experience, but through imaginative sympathy which leads her to "underst[and] the secret of the Student's sorrow" (293).

The Happy Prince comes to have a comprehensive vision in a similar way to the Nightingale. While he was alive, the Prince knew only of the good and the

beautiful, and was therefore characterised by a narrow subjective vision. This type of narrow vision is not as fatal as that of the townspeople, however, because a recognition of beauty is at least a first step towards a greater vision, which includes a knowledge of the good.[6] Though we are only told of the Happy Prince's transformation to a state of greater awareness, this change is dramatised in the story through the Swallow, who advances from a state of what Shewan characterises as "innocent hedonism" (40) to the greater imaginative sympathy of the Happy Prince. Their capacity for imaginative sympathy leads the Happy Prince and the Swallow to see things to which the townspeople are blind. Even the unfortunate people who are helped by the Swallow and the Prince, while appreciating the gifts, completely misunderstand the nature of the sacrifices made for them, a point which is made clear by the ironic descriptions of their reactions.

In both these stories, the artist-figures' self-realisations come from their ability to expand themselves (in *Intentions* Wilde would say "multiply their personalities") through an imaginative identification with the sufferings of others, making their subjective vision and their understanding of truth broader than that of the average individual. Yet despite their superior positions, the artist figures are unable to have an impact on their respective audiences. The Nightingale's belief that Love "may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold" (292) is proven to be merely a romantic fancy when the Student's lover rejects her in favour of the wealthy Chamberlain's nephew who has given her jewels. The Nightingale's truth has no place in a materialistic world, and just as the Happy Prince's sacrifice is essentially futile, so too, is the Nightingale's. Equally futile, though without tragic implications, is the attempt by the Linnet to tell a moral story to an audience who gains nothing from the process. In his examination of the artistic individual's attempt to come to terms with a fragmented world, Wilde seems to arrive

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[6] In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde, through his sage-aesthete Gilbert, demonstrates (following Plato) how a recognition of the beautiful can be developed into a "critical and self-conscious spirit" (1049-50).

at the conclusion that the imaginative sympathy of the artist, which prevents his subjective perception and the relativity of truth from being used towards selfish ends, does no good.

There is, however, another less cynical view that the "cultivated" reader of Wilde's tales can take. Wilde himself suggested that there were "many meanings . . . many secrets and many answers" to "The Nightingale and the Rose" (*Letters OW* 218), and the possibility of multiple interpretations follows for his other tales as well. After all, "The Happy Prince" does end with the Swallow and the Happy Prince in the Kingdom of Heaven (perhaps a symbolic representation of the realm of art) where their sacrifices are recognised. Still, this does not alter the fact that their sacrifice goes unrecognised in this world, and it does not help to account for the sacrifice of the Nightingale, who receives no such sign of heavenly grace. In *Art and Christhood*, Guy Willoughby suggests the form that the more positive interpretation might take, and although he is referring specifically to "The Nightingale and the Rose," it is applicable to the other tales I have discussed: "Although the story evokes the collapse of communication between the artist and her spectators, it nevertheless becomes in its readability--like the Rose--the bird's record and its monument. By composing such a parable, its writer assumes, and invites, an audience, and accordingly supposes that some of those 'many meanings' . . . may be apprehended" (33).

Although Wilde's satirisation of his "corrupt" audience in the tales suggests the futility of trying to communicate, the presence of "cultivated" aesthetic critics like the Happy Prince, or the potentially-"cultivated" like the Swallow, indicates the possibility of change.[7] The potentially-"cultivated" are capable of recognising the beautiful and may, therefore, be led to recognise the good. While imaginative sympathy fails for the artist-figures in the tales, it does not necessarily fail for the writer of the tales who, through the representation of its failure, makes his audience

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[7] Of course the audience of children, who also understand the tales in a basic way, is an important consideration in this respect. Wilde's address to a younger generation of potential aesthetes indicates a certain hope for the future.

aware of the necessity of such a faculty. By choosing the inoffensive realm of the fairy tale to promote imaginative sympathy Wilde addresses a broad audience. If, as he later says in "The Decay of Lying," "[t]hings are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it depends on the Arts that have influenced us" (986), then with the tales he proposes to influence his readers--young and old, "corrupt" and "cultivated"--to see things imaginatively, sympathetically, and eventually, critically.

II

In the conception of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde no doubt had every intention of creating an ideal work of art which would "suggest reverie and mood, and by [its] imaginative beauty make all interpretations true, and no interpretation final," rather than an "obvious mode of art . . . [with] but one message to deliver" ("Critic as Artist" 1031). And indeed the novel did, and still does, inspire many different interpretations. Part of the reason for the multiplicity of possible interpretations is the novel's eclectic style. It embodies stylistic aspects of a number of genres, including, as Ellen Moers points out, those of the fashionable society novel, supernatural melodrama, and novel of decadence (302). But while Moers describes this mixture of forms as "an incoherent amalgam" (302), it is quite possible that Wilde employed aspects of popular genres in an attempt to appeal to a broad audience: fellow aesthetes would appreciate Wilde's aesthetic innovation, and the public would respond to the familiar genres represented in the work. That Wilde expected his novel to be an artistic as well as commercial success is indicated in a letter to a prospective publisher, in which he expressed his belief that *Dorian Gray* would "make a sensation" (*More Letters* 88). And although the novel did indeed "make a sensation" in the form of a public outcry,[8] it was not the kind of sensation that Wilde

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[8] Wilde claimed that he was aware of at least two hundred and sixteen criticisms of *Dorian Gray*, of only three of which he took public notice (*Letters OW* 270). Yet those three responses generated an ongoing correspondence throughout July and part of August 1890, between Wilde, the editors of *St. James's Gazette*, the *Daily Chronicle*, and the *Scots Observer*, and various other correspondents. While many of the pertinent

anticipated. Wilde was not initially attempting a deliberate provocation of the uncultivated public in the first version of *Dorian Gray*. Indeed, in a letter to Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilde expressed his surprise at the negative reaction: "I cannot understand how they can treat *Dorian Gray* as immoral" (*Letters OW* 292). But though Wilde may not have intended to provoke his "corrupt" audience when he first wrote *Dorian Gray*, his ensuing correspondence, and the preface[9] which resulted from it, demonstrate his increasing antipathy towards the uncomprehending masses. Rather than focusing on Wilde's engagement with his audiences in the controversy following the publication of *Dorian Gray*, as Wilde realised the limits of certain of his audience, I will use the reviews as a starting point in a consideration of what it was about the novel that inspired such divergent reviews from Wilde's various audiences.

The representative reviews of the time indicate that the "corrupt" were the predominant, or at least most vocal, audience, for their major concern was with ethics and not aesthetics. These ethically-motivated reviewers were divided into two camps, those who believed the novel to be moral, and those who felt that it was immoral. Ironically, many of the positive ethically-concerned reviews came from Christian and mystical journals,[10] such as *The Christian Leader*, which suggested that "Wilde ha[d] performed a service to his age" in writing a novel that might have a positive moral

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reviews can be found in Beckson's *Critical Heritage*, and Wilde's responses are printed in Hart-Davis's collection of Wilde's letters, the best source is still Stuart Mason's work, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality*, which provides all these materials in one volume along with other relevant information, giving the reader a comprehensive understanding of the controversy.

[9] The "Preface" to *Dorian Gray* was originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* in March 1891, a month before the book version, in which it was reprinted, came out.

[10] Apart from *The Christian Leader*, the mystical journal *Light* also praised *Dorian Gray* for its moral value. The reviewers for *The Christian World* were almost tempted to praise the novel for its moral ("if we did not know the author's name . . . [*Dorian Gray*] would strike us as a 'moral tale'"), but were put off by Wilde's insistence, "in certain replies to his critics . . . that the story must be considered as a work of art," and, as a work of art, they could only rate it "tedious" (qtd. in Mason 139-40).

influence on "those classes of British society whose corruption it delineates . . . [by] preserving many young lives from the temptations by which they are surrounded" (qtd. in Mason 138).[11] Other reviewers, while agreeing with *The Christian Leader* as to the type of audience that *Dorian Gray* might affect, saw a negative moral influence:

> it is false to morality--for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity. . . . if he [Wilde] can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals. (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 75)

Regardless of whether they liked or disliked the novel, these reviewers, in their concentration on ethics, represent the general inability on the part of the public to absorb the doctrines of Wilde's aestheticism, which dictated that "the sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" ("Critic as Artist" 1048; *Letters OW* 257).

While Wilde may have appreciated, in the face of so many negative reviews, the favourable comments of the few who saw the inherent moral of *Dorian Gray*, these reviewers were certainly not "cultivated" in their understanding of the novel. In fact, they were similar to the adult audience of the fairy tales who saw, in the tales, only a reinforcement of their ethics, rather than more intellectual matter, matter which in *Dorian Gray*, as in *Intentions*, is reflected at the level of style. Unwilling to ostracise the few who had given him positive reviews, yet concerned with

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[11] The reviews of *Dorian Gray* cited in this chapter (with the exception of Pater's) are based on the *Lippincott's* version of the story because the book, upon its release, received little further critical attention. Because Wilde added to the text more than he altered the existing text, I am assuming that the reviews apply equally well to the book version. For a detailed analysis of the additions and emendations see Donald Lawler's edition of *Dorian Gray* or Isobel Murray's essay "Some Elements in the Composition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*". Mason's book also has a detailed technical analysis of the differences between the two texts.

demonstrating the proper approach to his novel, Wilde diplomatically distinguished between an aesthetic and an ethical viewpoint: "If a man sees the artistic beauty of a thing he will probably care very little for its ethical import. If his temperament is more susceptible to ethical than to aesthetic influences, he will be blind to questions of style, treatment, and the like" (from a letter to the *Scots Observer--Letters OW* 269). While Wilde does not accuse the positive ethical reviewers of "corrupt" reading (after all, they do see one kind of "beautiful meaning" in his work), their blindness to form and style could hardly have ranked them among the "cultivated" in the eyes of a man who suggested, "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" ("Preface," *Dorian Gray* 17).

To be fair to the ethically-minded reviewers, they did not entirely ignore questions of aesthetics. In fact, it was on the matter of style that both types of ethically-concerned reviewer were often in agreement, although their views on the relation of form to content differed somewhat. The views of the morally-censorious reviewers on what they perceived as immoral content, for example, were largely determined by their reactions to style, as the rhetoric of the reviews indicates. *Dorian Gray* was criticised by these reviewers for its "effeminate frivolity," "studied insincerity," "theatrical cynicism," "tawdry mysticism" "flippant philosophisings," and "garish vulgarity" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 72). As these descriptions indicate, the charge of immorality was, in fact, primarily a charge against style rather than content, for the plot contains the rather plain moral, as Wilde pointed out, "that all excess, as well as renunciation, brings its punishment" (from a letter to the *Daily Chronicle--Letters OW* 263).[12] Although recognising this moral, many of the

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[12] This discrepancy between a moral content and an immoral style is perhaps what prompted the following rather cryptic comment in the *Athenaeum*: "the book is unmanly, sickening, vicious (though not exactly what is called 'improper'), and tedious" (qtd. in Beckson 82). The qualifying statement seems contradictory in the context of the other adjectives. It is difficult to imagine how it can be all those things and not be improper, unless the reviewer recognises that the story is moral (and hence not 'improper') at the level of content.

positive ethically-motivated reviews made criticisms about style similar to those of the morally-censorious reviewers, but without the hyperbolic rhetoric. Thus, the reviewer for the *Speaker* who had praised the "strong" moral "motive" of the book (qtd. in Mason 142) complained about the treatment: "There is an amateurish lack of precision in the descriptive passages. They are laboured, finikin, overlaid with paint . . . a story demands simplicity and proportion, and here we have neither; it demands restraint, and here we have profusion only; it demands point, and here the point is too often obscured by mere cleverness" (qtd. in Mason 142-43). Thus, while those who found *Dorian Gray* immoral did so as a result of an inability to distinguish between form and content, those who recognised a moral saw it *in spite of* what they regarded as an essentially superficial style.

One major misunderstanding that resulted from the "corrupt" (particularly the morally censorious) audience's tendency to regard the style as merely "superficial" while disregarding the function of this superficiality was a belief that the novel represented an unqualified endorsement of aestheticism. But in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde, at the same time as he offers a critique of realism, also explores the potential for failure of the aesthetic outlook.[13] Where Pater had written of the success of the aesthetic ideal by way of a positive example and a highly mediated text in *Marius the*

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[13] Some modern interpretations of the novel as an exploration of aestheticism include those of Guy Willoughby, Christopher Nassar, and Donald Dickson. Willoughby sees *Dorian Gray* as an "aesthetic allegory" (62) of "a personality seeking, through aesthetic experience, exactly that expanded consciousness which art proposes to its spectators," but whose search is marred by a limited aesthetic view (62-3). Nassar, on the other hand, specifically defines the allegory of art contained in the novel in terms of its characters: "The novel is chiefly a study of various Victorian art movements corresponding to different stages in the development of Victorian human nature, and the main characters are meant to be personifications of these art movements and psychological states" (37). Nassar sees Dorian as a decadent, Basil as a Pre-Raphaelite, Henry as a Pater type, Sybil as a representative of the Hellenic ideal, or of high Victorian art after the mode of Tennyson, and Sybil's mother and brother as reflections of Victorian melodrama (see pages 37-72). Finally, Dickson discusses Dorian's and Basil's failures as artists in relation to the standards set out in Wilde's critical essays, and he sees the novel as a "dramatiz[ation] of the central aesthetic problem of its time" (5).

Epicurean, Wilde writes the "parable of the failed aesthetic quest" (Willoughby 74) using negative examples and an open text to imply, rather than dictate, a positive aestheticism. Though the characters in *Dorian Gray*, unlike Marius or Wilde's sage-dandies, have a limited understanding of an aesthetic perspective in its fullest realisation, this is not to say that Wilde shares or endorses this limited understanding. Wilde's depiction of three different types of aesthetic failure indicates a greater absorption of Pater and the way he could be misread than is generally attributed to Wilde. After all, none of Wilde's characters is meant to be upheld as an ideal. He agreed with the reviewer of the *St. James's Gazette* who accused his characters of being "puppies," replying: "They *are* puppies. . . . I think that puppies are extremely interesting from an artistic as well as from a psychological point of view" (*Letters OW* 258). He then goes on to describe the failings of all three of his characters: Basil Hallward, who "worship[s] physical beauty far too much," Dorian Gray, who lives a "life of mere sensation and pleasure," and Lord Henry, who "is merely [a] spectator of life" (*Letters OW* 259).

Although these three characters appear to be ideal fictional embodiments of the sage-aesthetes of Wilde's critical dialogues, they do, in fact, fail to achieve the fully expansive perspective of the ideal aesthetic critic. Each of these characters is punished within the course of the novel for their adherence to limited and limiting forms of aestheticism. Basil's aestheticism, for example, though at first intact, degenerates to a point where he confuses art and life--a major mistake for an aesthete. Thus, at first Basil paints Dorian with the "imaginative reality" ("Decay of Lying" 976) of the true artist, Dorian being merely a "suggestion" of a "new manner" (*Dorian Gray* 24). Basil's work, in this case, is truly aesthetic and non-representational because, as he himself says, "[Dorian] is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there" (24). But in the fatal portrait, Basil departs from this doctrine by representing Dorian with an "unimaginative realism" ("Decay of Lying" 976) that is disastrous to art because it merely *imitates*, when what is also needed for a truly aesthetic creation is the *innovative* critical spirit ("Critic as

Artist" 1022). Basil himself realises that his realistic portrait represents a failure to maintain the distinction between art and life, which results in the corruption of the aesthetic ideal:[14] "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life in them" (25), he tells Lord Henry, a sentiment which is endorsed by the "Preface" in which Wilde writes: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (17).

Dorian's sins against the aesthetic ideal are rather different from Basil's, but they also amount to a confusion between art and life, as he transforms the contemplative aestheticism of Lord Henry to an active and decadent aestheticism. Dorian is the Cyril or Ernest of the dialogues, who is converted wholly to a belief that is merely an intellectual exercise on the part of the ideal aesthete. He is a "dullard" in his realisation of Henry's theories "to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice" ("Decay of Lying" 971), theories that are to Henry whims that he forgets almost as soon as he says them. What Dorian fails to observe (as Basil does when he tells Henry, "[y]ou never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing" [20], and "I don't agree with a single word that you have said, and, what is more, Harry, I feel sure you don't either" [23]), is that Henry never puts his theories into practice, nor does he seem to believe them.

In putting Henry's theories into practice, Dorian follows a doctrine akin to the

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[14] Because Basil's aesthetic failure sets in motion the tragic course of Dorian's life, Houston Baker interprets the novel as a "tragedy of the artist," rather than the tragedy of Dorian Gray. He holds Basil primarily responsible for Dorian's fate because in turning from *imaginative* representation--which is true to the demand that art be "unconscious, ideal and remote" (*Dorian Gray* 94)--to *realistic* representation, Basil turns Dorian from the "physical embodiment of a high artistic ideal" "to the 'visible symbol' of the new hedonism" (Baker 353). As such, Dorian is led to pursue his hedonistic impulses in real life. While this view is certainly convenient for Dorian, who blames Basil at the end of the novel ("Basil had painted the portrait that had marred his life. He could not forgive him that. It was the portrait that had done everything" [165]), it is absurd to put the blame entirely on the artist, as Houston does. Although Basil may be guilty of an artistic *faux pas* in his failure to realise the aesthetic ideal, it is his own personal failure for which he is appropriately punished--killed by the corrupt Dorian, who represents his aesthetic failure.

one outlined in *The Renaissance*, but he fails to achieve the self-realisation of either Marius or Wilde's sage-dandies:[15] "[The New Hedonism] was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. . . . it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment" (*Dorian Gray* 104). In his decadent aestheticism, Dorian sacrifices a whole part of experience by concentrating upon purely sensual and corrupt sensations at the expense of his soul. In his search for self-realisation Dorian fragments himself, rather than finding unity through constant change as the aesthetic critic defined in "The Critic as Artist" does (1048). Dorian's fragmentation occurs because he experiences sensations in a discontinuous manner, rather than reaching a synthesis through the mediation of divergent experiences as Marius does. Dorian avoids synthesis because his portrait absorbs and registers the consequences of his actions, allowing him to escape the consequences of self-realisation.

In contrast with Dorian, Lord Henry Wotton (who has the critical and creative relation to language of the sage-aesthete) seems to represent the perfect embodiment of Wilde's "contemplative" aesthetic ideal. He is, after all, the only one of the three who remains alive and unscathed at the end of the novel. And indeed, Wilde did see him as "an excellent corrective of the tedious ideal shadowed forth in the semi-

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[15] In his pursuit of the merely sensual in life, Dorian illustrates one of the many different and potentially negative forms that a hedonistic form of aestheticism can take, depending on the temperament of the individual. See chapter nine of *Marius the Epicurean* in which Pater clarifies Marius's brand of hedonism, which has, as its aim, not only pleasure, but "fullness of life" (87) also. Pater is highly aware of the many different forms that an adherence to the same doctrine can take. He points out that the hedonistic doctrine, which is based on the proposal, "[l]et us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die . . . differs immensely, according to the natural taste, and the acquired judgment, of those who sit at the table" (83). While in *Marius*, then, Pater is at great pains to demonstrate how a superior temperament can lead to the development of an ethical hedonism, Wilde reveals how an inferior temperament can result in a decadent aestheticism.

theological novels of our age" (*Letters OW* 258). Henry does, however, have failings, one of which is related to his being "merely [a] spectator of life" (*Letters OW* 259). His appreciation of art does not lead him, as it does the aesthetic critic, "to witness with *appropriate emotions* the varied scenes that man and nature afford" (emphasis added--"Critic as Artist" 1042). Instead, he finds the tragedies of people's lives ugly and coarse in comparison with those in art, and so, he either ignores or aestheticises them. Hence, in one instance he denies Dorian's potential for crime and evil (160) and, in another, he romanticises Sybil's tragic death: "you must think," he tells Dorian, "of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl has never really lived, and so she has never really died" (86).

Henry's inappropriate aestheticisation of life demonstrates that he lacks the "imaginative sympathy" that enables the aesthetic critic to sympathise with others:[16] "I can sympathise with anything except suffering . . . It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing. There is something terribly morbid in the modern sympathy with pain. One should sympathise with the colour, the beauty, the joy of life. The less said about life's sores the better" (44). Henry's inability to acknowledge suffering, even if only to contemplate it, mars his self-realisation. Thus, even the type of aestheticism which seems to be the most strongly endorsed by the novel has its faults. Through Henry, Wilde demonstrates that it is possible to be too concerned with aesthetics, at the expense of all ethical sympathy.

The descriptions of the failures of the three protagonists to achieve an aesthetic ideal clearly indicate the "inherent moral" (*Letters OW* 292) of the novel that Wilde felt would satisfy his "corrupt" audience's desire for stories with morals. With the "inherent moral" in place, Wilde attempted to demonstrate the distinction between art

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[16] Henry's appreciation of beauty and his repugnance for suffering resembles the "innocent hedonism" of the Swallow in "The Happy Prince." However, Henry's inability to develop beyond this stage, as the Swallow does, has negative consequences.

and ethics without sacrificing either. Thus, in describing the mediation between ethics and aesthetics in the novel, Wilde wrote: "[the] moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but realises itself purely in the lives of the individuals, and so becomes simply a dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art itself" (*Letters OW* 263). Wilde avoids spoon-feeding his audience with a moral in a way that would interfere with the purely aesthetic appreciation of the novel. It is important to note that Wilde's desire to distinguish between ethics and aesthetics was not an attempt to *eliminate* ethical considerations. While Wilde clearly thought that there were more people guilty of making ethical judgments where aesthetic ones were appropriate in their confusion between the realms of art and life, his novel demonstrates the opposite, but equally problematic, tendency. But what seemed, at times, to Wilde to be a "too apparent" (*Letters OW* 263) moral, was, on the contrary, not apparent enough to many of his readers who were used to having morals spelled out for them. Thus, although Wilde anticipated less aesthetically inclined readers as part of his audience, he overestimated their ability to perceive the moral inherent his novel.

Wilde's attempt, then, to separate ethics and aesthetics in *Dorian Gray* failed in the eyes of the "corrupt" public. Whatever moral there was at the level of plot was undermined by the highly ornate, artificial, and aesthetic style of the narrative and the ambiguous stance of the narrator, both of which might be taken to suggest an endorsement of the very kinds of aestheticism that Wilde refutes at the level of character. His other works were saved from charges of immorality because of their ability to present an ideal that was aesthetically as well as socially acceptable.[17]

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[17] In Gagnier's account of the reaction to *Dorian Gray*, she attributes its unpopularity to the fact that Wilde excluded the middle class in his presentation of "the moral in an 'aesthetic' and aristocratic environment," as opposed to the stories which "presented it in bourgeois households or fairyland" (58): "With *Dorian Gray*, which seemed to smack too much of art-for-art's sake, the reviewers felt that Wilde violated the social function of art--that is, to present the normative values of society, to present the middle class. . . . *Dorian Gray*'s decadence lay in its distance from and rejection of middle-class life. This, not stylistics, is how decadence in British Literature should be

Thus, despite the cynical wit of the sage-dandies in the dialogues, their flippancy is redeemed by a certain intuitive sense in the ideas as well as an ethical idealism that is visible beneath the veneer of cynicism. In the critical dialogues, as Pater well appreciated, aesthetics and ethics were complementary: "[Wilde's] genial laughter-loving sense of life and its enjoyable intercourse, goes far to obviate any crudity there may be in the paradox" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 83). Likewise, in the fairy tales, Wilde establishes a connection between ethics and aesthetics at two levels --at the simple level of the moral narrative (for his audience of children and the "public"), and at the higher level of symbolic meaning (for his "cultivated" audience). But in *Dorian Gray*, while there are plenty of examples of negative aestheticism, there is no indication of a positive idealistic aestheticism on either the part of the characters or the narrator to make up for the superficiality of the novel in the eyes of Wilde's "corrupt" audience. Even Pater, who praised both the fairy tales and *Intentions*, was misled by Wilde's seemingly insincere style:[18]

> Clever always, this book, however, seems to set forth anything but a homely philosophy for the middle class--a kind of dainty Epicurean theory rather--yet fails, to some degree, in this; and one can see why. A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing so speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development. (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 84)

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understood" (65). Although I am in accord with Gagnier in her explanation of why certain readers disliked the novel, Gagnier interpretation reflects her ideological-oriented criticism, while I am more concerned with the aesthetic and stylistic issues that Gagnier rejects.

[18] Pater's was one of the few reviews of the book version of *Dorian Gray*.

While in *Marius*, Pater had supported a strongly moral delineation of character with a reinforcing ethical narrator, Wilde, in *Dorian Gray*, deliberately subverts the moral plot through the use of a highly ambivalent narrator[19] and narrative style which reinforce rather than critique the negative models of aestheticism that the characters represent. As such, the narrator is as much a "puppy" as the characters are, making it extremely difficult for the "corrupt" reader to understand exactly what a positive aestheticism might consist of.

One of the main sources of narrative ambivalence is the shift in point of view from omniscient to objective which occurs throughout the novel. Through free indirect discourse, the omniscient narrator reveals the intimate thoughts of the characters, most particularly those of Henry and Dorian. But at times, such as in Chapter Eleven when Dorian's gradual corruption is described, the narrator's omniscience becomes limited and he is only able to describe Dorian's debauchery through hearsay, as in the following example: "It was rumoured that he [Dorian] had been seen brawling with foreign sailors in a low den in the distant parts of Whitechapel, and that he consorted with thieves and coiners and knew the mysteries of their trade" (112). In addition, the narrator qualifies his report in this chapter with turns of phrase like, "in the opinion of most people," "it was remarked," and "in the eyes of many" (112). Because of the narrator's complete penetration of the characters' thoughts at some points, this limited and objective perspective seems less a function of the narrator's inability to know the truth, than an unwillingness to tell what he knows. This suspicion is further aroused in the scene in which Alan Campbell refuses to help Dorian dispose of Basil's body, which is followed by this description of Dorian's blackmail of Campbell:

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[19] A number of critics have commented on the ambivalence of the narrator in *Dorian Gray*. In a psycho-biographical reading of the text, Philip Cohen suggests that the "self-conscious" and "obtrusive" (117) narrator is ambivalent because the voice is that of Wilde himself, who "cannot maintain a detached, judgmental relationship with his evil characters" (120). Michael Molino, on the other hand, offers a purely narratological and text-based interpretation of the narrator's ambivalence in his essay "Narrator/Voice in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: A Question of Consistency, Control, and Perspective."

> [Dorian] stretched out his hand, took a piece of paper, and wrote *something* on it. He read it over twice, folded it carefully, and pushed it across the table. Having done this, he got up, and went over to the window.
>
> Campbell looked at him in surprise, and then took up the paper, and opened it. As he read it, his face became ghastly pale, and he fell back in his chair. (emphasis added--131)

The narrator's ability to describe the encounter in such detail without revealing information which he surely knows undermines the reader's sense that the narrator represents a wholly detached point of view. To the "corrupt" audience, who look in vain for a narrative condemnation of Dorian's reprehensible actions, this withholding of information suggests a complicity with, and an endorsement of, Dorian and his decadent aestheticism.

An increasing sense of the narrator's ambivalence is enhanced by the shift between an objective and a subtly partial voice. In the objective voice, the narrator reserves judgment on the shallowness of the characters' views as he reports them through free indirect discourse. Because of the superficial nature of the characters, we might expect that, if a bias were to emerge in the narrator's voice, it would be in condemnation of the characters. The narrator's bias works in quite the opposite way, however, his voice bearing a striking similarity with the witty cynicism of Lord Henry. This switching results, at times, in what Philip Cohen describes as "narrative schizophrenia" (120), the most obvious instance of which occurs in Chapter Eleven:

> Even the cardinal virtues cannot atone for half-cold *entrées*, as *Lord Henry remarked once*, in a discussion on the subject; and there is possibly a good deal to be said for this view. For the canons of good society are or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that make such plays delightful

> to us. Is insincerity such a terrible thing? *I think not.* It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.
>
> *Such, at any rate was Dorian Gray's opinion.* (emphasis added--112)

In this passage, it is difficult to tell whose views are being expressed. Although the first and final sentences seem to refer directly to Dorian's thoughts as influenced by Lord Henry, the narrator's intervention, "I think not," suggests an agreement with the views expressed, a bias which is then obfuscated by the final statement. At other times, however, the narrator's partiality for Dorian is more clear cut:

> [Dorian's] own nature had revolted against the excess of anguish that had sought to maim and mar the perfection of its calm. With subtle and finely-wrought temperaments it is always so. Their strong passions must either bruise or bend. They either slay the man, or themselves die. Shallow sorrows and shallow loves live on. The loves and sorrows that are great are destroyed by their own plenitude. (152)

This endorsement of the superficial nature of Dorian is stated in an aphoristic manner that resembles Henry's style. Indeed, it is Henry's artificial aestheticism that dominates the novel right from the introductory preface. And if, as Patrice Hannon notes, "the preface is 'authorized' by Wilde as some sort of key to reading the novel," it serves, therefore, as a "hint that Lord Henry's critical voice--his style and method--should be attended to" (148). The fact that the narrator often echoes Henry's superficial style merely reinforces this point.

The narrative endorsement of the shallow ideals of the protagonists is, indeed, indicative of an artistic and deliberate suppression of the moral (*Letters OW* 263). Although the characters are punished, their punishments are not endorsed by the narrator, and the moral is therefore as Wilde wanted it to be, a "dramatic element" rather than a governing law (*Letters OW* 263). As such, the novel *does* embody all the negative qualities that the "corrupt" reviewers charged *Dorian Gray* with.

Wilde's characters, as he himself admits, are "puppies," and, as Hannon points out, "the novel's prose *is* often frivolous, insincere, theatrical, cynical, and flippant" (145 --Hannon's emphasis). And although the reactions of the "corrupt" indicate that they have taken the cues of the narrative to attend to the superficial style, they also indicate their complete misunderstanding of the positive function of cynicism. To the "corrupt" audience who could not separate aesthetic and ethical judgments, the superficial style denoted, not a "suppression" of the moral, but rather a complete subversion of it. The apparent affinity between the narrative voice and Lord Henry led the reviewer for the *Daily Chronicle* to believe that the moral inculcated by the novel was Lord Henry's philosophy--"nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul" (31). After quoting this phrase, the reviewer writes: "Mr. Wilde's book has no real use if it be not to inculcate the 'moral' that when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than to rush out and make a beast of yourself" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 72).

In taking the superficial style of the narrative literally, the "corrupt" are reading uncritically. The reviewer for the *Daily Chronicle* reacted to the superficial and immoral views of the novel as if they represent "real" views of "real" people. He reacts realistically and, as a result, is understandably appalled.[20] But this realistic, ethical reaction is an inappropriate response to the superficiality of the novel, which clearly demands an aesthetically critical response. In their uncritical acceptance of the style and language of the novel, the "corrupt" are as corrupt as

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[20] In the "Preface" to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde describes the "realistic response" of the "corrupt" audience to two types of art--romance and realism:

> The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.
>
> The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass. (17)

Both reactions, in their narcissism, demonstrate the "corrupt" audience's prosaic and unimaginative attitudes towards art.

Dorian, who also views Lord Henry's language uncritically.[21] The difference is that while the "corrupt" reject artificial language outright, Dorian wrongly accepts Henry's language and superficial theories as formulae to be put into practice. The reactions of both Dorian and the "corrupt" are inappropriate because they fail to account for the function of paradox and artificiality, aspects that are a crucial element of an aestheticism that reacts against the "crude brutality of plain realism" (*Letters OW* 264)--realism both as an artistic movement and as an incorrect and non-aesthetic manner of perceiving art.

The "realistic" reactions of the "corrupt" may have been a result of the elements of realism that could be found in the text, as Anne Wharton, one of the contemporary "cultivated" reviewers noted: "Mr. Wilde's romance resembles the production of some of the writers of the French school in its reality and tone" (qtd. in Mason 166). Nonetheless, the novel certainly does not purport to imitate reality, nor does it invite a realistic reading. In their search for a reflection of reality in Wilde's novel, the "corrupt" are "going beneath" the surface of the text, a reading that is clearly discouraged in the "Preface":

> All art is at once surface and symbol.
>
> Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
>
> Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.
>
> It is the spectator, and not life that art really mirrors. (17)

In highlighting surface and artifice, the novel plainly distinguishes itself as anti-realist art--fantasy and not life. And as fantasy, or a tale of the "impossible,"[22] *Dorian*

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[21] In "Theatre and Theory in the Language of *Dorian Gray*," Patrice Hannon offers a detailed analysis of the characters' (including Sybil's and James Vane's) relations to language in *Dorian Gray*. Of Dorian, Hannon writes: "Dorian's relationship to words is entirely passive. He is completely susceptible to their power and 'magic,' but he has no sense of using them for expression or creation, as Henry has. He is overcome by the words of others . . ." (150).

[22] Both Anne Wharton and Julian Hawthorne use this term in their reviews of the novel.

Gray requires a different mode of attention, as Julian Hawthorne, another of Wilde's "cultivated" readers, indicated in his review: "The pursuit [of the Impossible in literature] is interesting and edifying, if one goes properly equipped, and with adequate skill" (qtd. in Mason 175). While Hawthorne is referring here to the writing of anti-realist literature, the same could easily be said about the reading of it. It was precisely this kind of skill that Pater and Wilde were attempting to inculcate in their audiences in their promotion of aesthetic perception.

That "skill" might be required in an aesthetic appreciation of art was a notion not taken seriously by many Victorians. The popular misconception of aestheticism as perpetuated in the pages of *Punch* suggested that the aesthete was a frivolous worshipper of the "beautiful," an image that Wilde certainly exploited in his attempt to get noticed, but was quick to abandon when he wanted to be taken seriously.[23] No doubt part of the "corrupt" audience's resistance to taking Wilde seriously was a result of his earlier, commercial image. This *Punch*-inspired conception of aestheticism is reflected in the *St. James's Gazette* review of *Dorian Gray*--the one that referred to Wilde's characters as "puppies": "The puppies appear to fill up the intervals of talk by plucking daisies and playing with them, and sometimes drinking something with strawberry in it" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 69). Wilde's own admission of the "puppydom" of the characters is an indication that he was exploiting the popular conception of the aesthete in the novel. But beyond the exploitation of a fashionable trend, there is also a more serious aestheticism being proposed that can only be understood in a "cultivated" reading. This reading takes into account the more intellectual aspects of the aesthetic philosophy outlined in the critical essays. It is in his criticism that Wilde suggests that aestheticism consists of more than a mere appreciation of the beautiful: an aesthetic attitude also demands

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[23] Perhaps the most obvious indication of Wilde's changing interests was reflected in his style of dress. As Moers describes, Wilde adopted the "costume" of the aesthete in the 70's and 80's, but changed his "style of dress . . . as he achieved the double status of financial security and creative accomplishment" (Moers 299), changing from the flamboyant aesthete to the formal dandy.

critical awareness. Thus, while the "Preface" prepares readers to attend to the voice of Lord Henry and the narrator, who endorse superficiality and an aestheticism that regards only the beautiful, it also suggests to the "cultivated" that they be critical and not literally accepting of these voices: "Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art" (17). The ideas and language of the novel are part of the realm of art, not the realm of life, and are therefore about aesthetics, not ethics. A knowledge of the difference between these two realms, which means knowing the attitude appropriate to each, is a well-informed aestheticism. The "cultivated" who read critically recognise that this type of aestheticism is lacking in the characters in *Dorian Gray*, even in the supposedly critical Lord Henry.

The "cultivated" audience, while agreeing with the "corrupt" that the style of *Dorian Gray* is insincere, accept rather than resist it, though not to the extreme and unwise extent that Dorian does. And, rather than looking ***below*** the surface for meaning as the "corrupt" realist does, the "cultivated" see meaning either *at* the level of style--which results in an appreciation of the "perfection within" the work without "judg[ment] by any external standard of resemblance" ("Decay of Lying" 982)--or ***beyond*** (rather than beneath as the "corrupt" do) the level of style, in what amounts to a meta-critical reading. Unfortunately for Wilde, few reviewers were "cultivated" enough to engage sufficiently with the aesthetics of the text at these levels.[24] As a result, the "cultivated" reading that I propose in my style-based analysis is largely conjectural, though strongly determined by Wilde's views on style and the aesthetic perspective as outlined in his critical writings. Far from being a superficial

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[24] None of Wilde's fellow "cultivated" aesthetes reviewed *Dorian Gray*, although both Symons and Le Gallienne referred briefly, but favourably, to it in their reviews of *Intentions*, and Lionel Johnson wrote a poem to the creator of Dorian (see Karl Beckson's ***Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's*** 116-17). The only reviews that engaged adequately with the aesthetic issues of the novel were Anne Wharton's, Julian Hawthorne's and, to a certain degree, Pater's. Wharton's and Hawthorne's reviews appeared in the September 1890 issue of ***Lippincott's***, while Pater's appeared in the November 1891 issue of the ***Bookman***, too late to have any potential impact on contemporary evaluations of the work.

endeavour, an appreciation of the surface or style of *Dorian Gray*, with all its shallowness, insincerity, and flippancy, is a rewarding aesthetic and intellectual experience for Wilde's "cultivated" audience, which, although not purposeful in a literally practical and ethical way, is useful in understanding how an aesthetic perspective enhances not only one's perception of beauty, but one's critical faculties as well.

Part of a meta-critical reading involves the ability to recognise the artificial style of the novel and paradoxes as artistic devices ("instruments of an art"--"Preface" 17), rather than as an expression of the actual beliefs of the author, a mistake that many of the "corrupt" frequently make. Hence, Julian Hawthorne, in his review, distinguished between Wilde and the philosophy put forth in the novel: "they [the views] are put into the mouth of one of the characters, Lord Harry, and Mr. Wilde himself refrains from committing himself to them" (qtd. in Mason 180). Even Pater, despite his disapproval of the "false" Epicureanism portrayed in the novel, saw Wilde as "impersonal" and wrote that he "seems not to have identified himself with any one of his characters" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 85). The "cultivated," then, are able to distinguish between the artist and his subject matter. They recognise that though artistic expression involves subjectivity, there is also an objective element to it. Art is not pure inspiration,[25] it is also a critical act. "[The artist] stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable and artistic effects. To

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[25] That the artist is inspired to create by his emotional state was a fairly widely held belief in the nineteenth century, one that Wilde opposed in his idea of the "critical artist." For those who believed that art came from emotion, such as Max Nordau, creation served for the artist "to free his nervous system from a tension" (*Degeneration* 324). To those who shared Nordau's beliefs, an expression of an abnormal state of mind, such as that of Dorian, was a direct reflection of an equally unbalanced mind in the author. Thus, Nordau, who launched a scathing attack against many of the important artists and art movements of the late-nineteenth century, saw no distinction between artists who treated immoral subject matter, like Wilde, and criminals: "The artist who complacently represents what is reprehensible, criminal, approves of it, perhaps glorifies it, differs not in kind, but only in degree, from the criminal who actually commits it" (326).

call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject-matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote *King Lear*" ("Soul of Man" 1093). This ability to separate the artist from what is expressed in his work is one aspect of the recognition of a distinction between aesthetic issues appropriate to art and ethical issues appropriate to life.

At the level of style, the meta-critical reading adopts a different attitude towards an artificial rather than realistic narrative. The presence of artificiality in what is otherwise a realistic setting functions in a way similar to Wilde's paradoxical inversions, which are also present (primarily in the language of Lord Henry) in the novel. The artificiality of the narrative style disrupts realistic expectations, just as Lord Henry's paradoxes challenge common assumptions. And just as the critical dialogues of *Intentions* ask not that we believe the preposterous suggestions of the sage-dandies, but rather that we attend to the intellectual dynamic created in the process of argumentation, so too, does *Dorian Gray*. To the "cultivated" critically and aesthetically-aware audience who have recognised the fantasy world of the novel as part of the realm of art with no bearing on life, the superficial and immoral behaviour of the characters does not evoke moral condemnation.

Although the "corrupt" audience might think that this non-judgmental reaction makes the "cultivated" readers as immoral as the characters are, it does not. The artificiality and paradoxes make the "cultivated" reader receptive, creating a sense of heightened awareness which allows the reader to focus on the effect of language. It also to a large extent prevents identification with any of the characters, an effect that the "corrupt" feared (hence, the many comments about the negative influence of the novel). Because they are receptive and do not blindly empathise with the characters, the "cultivated" are aware that ethical expectations are being subverted. Obviously the "cultivated" recognise that Dorian's heartless rejection of Sybil due to her sudden inability to act is indicative of a highly shallow nature, as is his aesthetic reaction to her death. These reactions are recognised by the "corrupt" and "cultivated" alike as

shocking and inappropriate.[26] Moments such as these challenge the audience because they force an ethical or aesthetic reaction and in the choice readers reveal themselves to be "corrupt" or "cultivated." The ethical reaction of the "corrupt" is inappropriate in that it is instinctual, and more emotional than critical. The "corrupt" insist that the standards that operate in their world should be represented in the realm of art, and they simply condemn Dorian's reaction and the author who depicts it.[27]

The aesthetic reaction, on the other hand, is cultivated and rather more critical than emotional.[28] The "cultivated," in their initial response, recognise that

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[26] In a somewhat extreme argument for a purely aesthetic approach to the novel, Hannon, in a language-based analysis of the characters, suggests that we are not encouraged to feel sympathy for Sybil because "[s]he uses language badly, mindlessly. The important judgment . . . is not moral but . . . aesthetic. The novel has trained us to pay attention to the way people speak, and by the novel's own standards, Sybil . . . fall[s] short. . . . Sybil . . . becomes so tiresome that the reader cannot feel much sympathy for her when she commits suicide" (156). While I find Hannon's argument extremely compelling, I am not entirely convinced that readers, even the "cultivated" ones, are meant to completely ignore moral considerations--give them secondary consideration maybe, but not ignore them.

[27] The "corrupt's" insistence that art reflect their ethical standards is related to Vivian's comment in "The Decay of Lying": "The public imagine that because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter" (976).

[28] While I do believe that an aesthetic reaction can involve emotion, I have chosen to focus on the critical aspect of the aesthetic perspective because I think that it is frequently overlooked. Certainly the nineteenth-century stereotype of the aesthete emphasises the highly sensitive (and therefore emotional) nature of the artistic temperament. But the aesthetic reaction, even if emotional, is still critical. Even if the "cultivated" reader were to identify emotionally with Dorian or any of the characters or situations in the novel, this emotional reaction would not necessarily indicate either a degenerate or moral character on the part of the reader. The emotions we feel in response to art do not have consequences as they do in life. We are not necessarily moral if we respond to situations in art with moral rectitude. Art offers a controlled environment in which we can indulge in emotions that might be inappropriate in life. In art, "[t]here is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and *we can choose the time of our initiation and the time of our freedom also*. . . . Art does not hurt us. The tears we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of art to awaken. We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve,

instinctually, one would be repelled by the inversion of conventional standards and the superficial attitudes represented in this episode. But having acquired the skill to distinguish between the views of the author and the views of the character, and between art and life, the "cultivated" respond aesthetically, even if that involves disregarding ethical considerations for the duration of the reading, because they are attuned to the demands of the novel. They may (or may not) condemn Dorian for his actions, but if they do, they do not let ethical judgments that belong in the realm of life affect their aesthetic appreciation of the novel. Their understanding of the distinction between art and life means that their aesthetic reactions to immorality in art do not reflect the way they would respond to a similar situation in life. A "cultivated" reading of *Dorian Gray* at the level of style results in an aesthetic and ethical success, for it acknowledges the consequences of the confusion between ethics and aesthetics in ***both*** art and life.

III

"The Soul of Man Under Socialism," which was published in February 1891, just prior to the release of the book version of *Dorian Gray*, though purporting to be an essay in social and political criticism, is also a reflection on the public as an audience for various forms of art. Although the marked antipathy towards the public that followed the publication of *Dorian Gray* in 1890 continues in "The Soul of Man" (1891), as Wilde criticises the public's taste in art, he nonetheless seems to be searching for a medium in which he can be an uncompromising artist and yet still appeal to a broad audience. In "The Soul of Man," Wilde expresses his belief that the theatre offers the best conditions for a mediation between the demands of artist and audience:

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but our grief is not bitter" (emphasis added--"Critic as Artist" 1038). The aesthetic critic, in responding emotionally to art, never wholly sacrifices critical awareness, and can thus choose to have an emotion and be free of it also.

> In the case of the drama, things are a little better: the theatre-going public like the obvious, it is true, but they do not like the tedious; and burlesque and farcical comedy, the two most popular forms, are distinct forms of art. Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions, and in work of this kind the artist in England is allowed very great freedom. (1091)

Despite his claim that the most freedom was to be found in burlesque and farce, Wilde turned initially to social comedies (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*),[29] which, although successful, demonstrated a compromise between the "corrupt" public's desire for stories with morals, and Wilde's for a pure and stylistically perfect aesthetic work. Unlike in the critical dialogues and *Dorian Gray*, where the dandy-aesthetes--who represent the dominance of form and aesthetics over matter and ethics--rule, in the society plays, the dandies, Lord Goring, Lord Illingworth, and Lord Darlington, are somewhat out of place in the philistine world which values matter and ethics (even if only superficially and hypocritically) over form and aesthetics. As such, in the society comedies Wilde mediates between ethics and aesthetics with a somewhat incongruous result.[30] As Arthur Ganz notes:

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[29] These plays were produced in 1892, 1893, and 1895 successively. Wilde also wrote *Salomé* during this period, a play that was perhaps too uncompromising. It was refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain, supposedly for its depiction of Biblical characters, but when it was published in 1893, the reviews were as nasty as they were for *Dorian Gray*. *The Times*, for example, called it "an arrangement in blood and ferocity, morbid, *bizarre*, repulsive, and very offensive in its adaptation of scriptural phraseology to situations the reverse of sacred" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 135).

[30] The tension between the stylistic and ethical elements of these plays has been noted by many critics, both contemporary and modern. In his review of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, A.B Walkley suggested that Wilde's previous plays "failed to give unalloyed pleasure, either because [they] adopted serious postures or [were] out of harmony with an environment of seriousness" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 196). Modern critics who have discussed the incongruities in these plays include Edouard Roditi, Ian Gregor, and Arthur Ganz.

> Each of these plays contains two worlds, not only contrasting but conflicting. One is the world of sentimental plots . . . . This is the world I will call Philistine. Opposed to this is the dandiacal world, where witty elegants lounge about tossing off Wildean epigrams and rarely condescend to notice, much less take part in, the impassioned actions going on about them. The tension between these two worlds gives to the society comedies their peculiar flavor, their strength, and unfortunately their weakness. (16)

Although these plays constituted something of a triumph for Wilde due to their popular success with the public, aesthetically they fall short of Wilde's insistence that "Art never expresses anything but itself" ("Decay of Lying" 987), or that "Art is not a mirror but a crystal. It creates its own forms" (*Letters OW* 415). The society plays, with their strong moral emphasis, are too close to being didactic instead of merely "beautiful" and "useless" ("Preface," *Dorian Gray* 17), as aesthetic creations should be. Real life is far too present in these plays, and as a result they are more "imitative" than "ideal."

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, however, Wilde created a commercial as well as aesthetic success, by experimenting with the dramatic forms he had praised in "The Soul of Man"--farce and burlesque--forms that were not only "popular," but also artistically satisfying, "distinct forms of art" which "allowed . . . great freedom" for the artist ("Soul of Man" 1091). In *Earnest*, Wilde manages the perfect mediation between art and life as outlined by Vivian in "The Decay of Lying": "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment" (978). So although there is a certain amount of social critique in *Earnest*, it is presented in a "fanciful form" similar to the fairy tales that "attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality--to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative" (*Letters OW* 237). In *Earnest*, Wilde no longer mediates between ethics

and aesthetics, either to demonstrate the inherent morality of an aesthetic attitude as he does in the critical dialogues and the fairy tales, or to demonstrate why they must be understood as distinct, as he does in *Dorian Gray*. Instead, he creates an aesthetic masterpiece in which ethical concerns are made irrelevant, and in which the "corrupt" are *forced* to attend to aesthetics, becoming, at least for the duration of the play, "cultivated" perceivers, though without the full critical capabilities of the aesthetic "critic".

Wilde brings the "corrupt" to accept the philosophy of the play--"we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" (qtd. in Mikhail 250)[31]--by creating a context in which this law is made true in a way that has no repercussions in the real world. The action of the play takes place in what Richard Foster describes as an "'as if' world in which 'real' values are inverted, reason and unreason interchanged, and the probable defined by improbability" (19-20). These inversions disturbed the literalising "corrupt" audience of the critical dialogues because they seemed to demand the adoption of an artificial perspective on the world. Likewise, the inverted values depicted in *Dorian Gray* were disturbing to the "corrupt" because the characters who held these values received the apparent endorsement of the narrator. In the fantasy realm of *Earnest*, however, neither the inversions nor the characters are upheld as ideals. Instead, they are ridiculed. The "corrupt" enjoy the play, then, for its intrinsic merits because they are asked not to accept its philosophy as a philosophy of life, but rather to "suspend their disbelief" in order to accept the inverted values solely within the context of the play. In the singular instance of *Earnest*, the "corrupt" are led to adopt (though perhaps not fully understand) the appropriate attitude to take towards art, an attitude that the "cultivated" take towards all Wilde's works.

One of the ways in which Wilde induces this type of receptivity in the "corrupt" audience is to lessen their apprehension by making the inversions absurd rather than subversive. In contrast with the immoral attitudes and reprehensible

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[31] From an interview published in the *St. James's Gazette*, January 1895.

named and unnamed sins of *Dorian Gray*, those in *Earnest* are trivial, and can be given social sanction if necessary. Jack's and Algernon's "Bunburying" supports the social system by making them better citizens in their real lives. Jack is able to fulfil his role as a guardian because he is occasionally allowed to escape his responsibilities through his posing as Ernest:

> When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness if carried to excess, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest . . . (326)

Any potential disturbing elements that might be associated with the deceptions and double lives explored in the plot are mitigated as the characters discover that they are telling the truth. In their poses as Jack's younger brother Ernest, Jack and Algernon are being, in some ways, truthful, though at first they do not realise it: Jack really is Ernest, and Algernon, though not Ernest, is indeed Jack's younger brother. Even Cecily's own form of lying, her self-deception that she is engaged to Jack's younger brother (Ernest), who has never heard of her and whom she has never met (and who very nearly doesn't exist), becomes true in the end.

The discovery that they have been telling the truth all along is a source of mixed emotion for the characters. Although the revelations of the truth mean that Jack and Algernon "get the girls," the act of telling the truth is also somewhat disconcerting, as the following exchange between Jack/Ernest and Gwendolen reveals:

> JACK. Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
>
> GWENDOLEN. I can. For I feel that you are sure to change. (383)

As Gwendolen's response to Jack indicates, lying has a glamorous appeal in *Earnest*. The lying practised by these characters, however, is "the graceful side of lying" that is described by the sage-dandy Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" (990), rather than the

sordid secrets and lies of Dorian. Although the characters in *Earnest*, like those in *Dorian Gray*, adopt an insincere aesthetic attitude towards life, Wilde explores the comic rather than the tragic consequences of an aesthetic attitude in the play. In this case, Wilde's depiction of characters with absurdly skewed values makes it obvious to the "corrupt" that they are being presented with "puppies" who are not meant to be regarded literally, a point that was unclear to most of the "corrupt" audience of *Dorian Gray*.

In their capacity for lying, the young lovers in *Earnest* embody one of the qualities revered by the sage-dandy, Vivian, in "The Decay of Lying." In a related vein, the characters also have a highly changeable or "insincere" nature, as is noted by Gwendolen above. Mutability is, in fact, the one consistent feature of all the young lovers, and in this respect, they are parodic representations of Wilde's aesthetic critic who abides by a philosophy of change: "Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he [the aesthetic critic] will find his own unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions. . . . What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities" ("Critic as Artist" 1048). While this philosophy has an unwholesome connotation in *Dorian Gray* (where the phrase is restated on page 112), in which Dorian uses it as a justification for his sins, in the world of *Earnest* it is a positive quality for the "aesthete" characters, making them infinitely adaptable to any situation. Algernon's quip that "it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't" (324) goes for everything. The "aesthete" types in *Earnest* do not have rules about anything, not even about going against the rules. Rather they are led by circumstances, adapting their beliefs to fit these circumstances. Gwendolen, for example, is perfectly resigned to have her engagement with Jack broken: "But although she [Lady Bracknell] may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you" (338); Algernon, who declares in Act One that "[n]othing will induce me to part with Bunbury" (327), "kills him" in Act Three. Because of the

great flexibility of their values, both Jack and Algernon adopt conventional attitudes almost as frequently as they overthrow them. Ultimately, the dandy characters in *Earnest* are not committed to disturbing the status quo, because the status quo frequently justifies their behaviour. Thus, Algernon's propensity for gluttony is explained away in terms of social ritual: "I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock" (322). Despite some shared characteristics with the "aesthetic critics," Algernon, Jack, Cecily, and Gwendolen represent a curious mixture of ***both*** conventional and aesthetic attitudes, and as such, they serve as parodies of "corrupt" as well as "cultivated" ways of thinking, both of which are portrayed as equally shallow.

Because the "aesthetic pose" is not, as it is in Wilde's other works, made superior in *Earnest*, the "corrupt" do not feel that their conventional values are overly threatened. As they are no longer the direct object of contempt and scorn, the "corrupt" can laugh at both the values of the aesthetes and their own values with a laughter that, as one contemporary reviewer noted, "is absolutely free from bitter afterthought" because "Wilde makes his personages ridiculous, but . . . he does not ridicule them" (A. B. Walkley for the *Speaker*, qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 197). Both Victorian earnestness and artificial aestheticism are consistently reduced to the same ridiculous level. One of the best examples of the equation of equally shallow aesthetic and conventional ideals is Gwendolen's statement, "[w]e live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has now reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest" (330). This statement can be read in two ways: as a critique of Gwendolen's artificial and aesthetic interpretation of the ideals of the age, which is indicated by her shallow aim to "love someone of the name of Ernest," and/or as a critique of Victorian ideals, and more particularly "earnestness," through the superficial Gwendolen. In neither instance, not even in the case of the social critique, is the status quo threatened in the way that it is in the attacks on the "corrupt" in Wilde's other works. Gwendolen, and indeed all the other characters, are so patently absurd,

that the "corrupt" audience can at once recognise and distance themselves from the critique. The play allows the "corrupt" to acknowledge the existence of hypocrisy, in which case Gwendolen is seen as an exaggerated type of what actually [obtains] in Victorian society, without feeling directly implicated in the attack. The "corrupt" can deflect the criticism onto their neighbours, rather than seeing the faults in themselves.

The example of the equation of Victorian ideals with Gwendolen's shallow one is but one concrete instance of the way in which Wilde uses a unique dialectical strategy to draw attention to style. Thesis and antithesis are represented in the contrasting systems of values and ideas in the play, a feature which is most valuably demonstrated in the dialogues of Jack and Algernon. In these dialogues, Jack frequently represents normative values, while Algernon is generally more anarchic. Their banter is characterised by a constant overturning of each others' thesis statements, as in the following example:

> ALGERNON. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.
>
> JACK. That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen . . . I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.
>
> ALGERNON. Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.
>
> JACK. That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.
>
> ALGERNON. Yes; and that the happy English home has proved in half the time.
>
> JACK. For Heaven's sake, don't try to be cynical. It's perfectly easy to be cynical.
>
> ALGERNON. My dear fellow, it isn't easy to be anything nowadays. There's such a lot of beastly competition about. (327)

This alternation of thesis and antithesis does not lead to a gradual synthesis, as it does in the critical dialogues between Vivian and Cyril, and Gilbert and Ernest. Despite the axiomatic style of their statements, neither Jack nor Algernon (unlike Gilbert and

Vivian) has a point to make in their negations and inversions: quite often they themselves do not even believe in what they are saying. What is important, as Algernon says, is the fact that his statements are "perfectly phrased . . . [a]nd quite as true as any observation[s] in civilised life should be" (335). Their wit, though also something of an intellectual exercise, is primarily, as Christopher Nassar suggests, "wit-for-wit's sake" (138). Instead of a smooth and gradual progression towards synthesis, these dialogues represent a continuous violent juxtaposition of thesis and antithesis, which defies logical cohesion.[32] The combination of the characters' serious reactions to trivial things and trivial reactions to serious things increases the difficulty of achieving synthesis. Ultimately, the audience is led to view the opposing values of "earnestness" and "triviality" as equally nonsensical and meaningless within the realm of the play, because the characters' commitment to either set of values is so superficial.

As in the case of *Dorian Gray*, the "corrupt" audience of *Earnest* is denied the presence of a normative perspective within the work from which to judge the characters. But because of its absolute absurdity, the play resists the imposition of the extra-textual ethical systems of the "earnest" and "corrupt." *Earnest* is a work which "dominates" the spectator as Gilbert suggests art should ("Critic as Artist" 1047). Wilde achieves this domination by anticipating and countering the objections of his "corrupt" audience. While the themes treated in the play are similar to those treated in his other works, Wilde manipulates them in such a way as to lessen the subversive potential. Aesthetic attitudes lead to happily-ever-after, rather than to sin and degradation, and Wilde flatters his "corrupt" by poking equal fun at aestheticism as well as conventionality. With their ethical objections rendered irrelevant, the "corrupt" have no choice but to respond aesthetically, and not ethically and "earnestly," to *Earnest*. The degree to which Wilde was successful in his

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[32] In his essay, "Wilde and the Importance of Sincere and Studied Triviality," Harold Toliver describes the relationship between opposing values as a sort of "yoking by violence" in the sense of Samuel Johnson's definition of the use of metaphor by the metaphysical poets (397).

"domination" of the "corrupt," through which he forced them to become at least momentarily "cultivated," was acknowledged, though negatively so, in George Bernard Shaw's review (one of the few negative ones) of the play:

> I cannot say that I greatly cared for *The Importance of Being Earnest. It amused me, of course*; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to be *tickled* or *bustled* into it. . . . If the public ever becomes intelligent to know when it is really enjoying itself and when it is not, there will be an end of farcical comedy. (emphasis added--qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 195)

In this review, Shaw recognises the coercive tactics employed by Wilde to engage his audience, and even grudgingly admits to being slightly susceptible to them himself. Shaw, in his "amusement," is momentarily dominated by the play, forced to react aesthetically. Upon leaving the theatre, however, he laments the lack of emotional elements that "move" one to further thought, perhaps even to ethical considerations.

Regardless of Shaw's reservations about the play, it must be admitted that through farce Wilde managed to turn his "corrupt" audience, at least superficially, into "cultivated" perceivers, though not necessarily fully critical ones. The manifestation of his aesthetic philosophy in the guise of farce does not actually make the public understand it any better (though they think they do), but at least they do not feel threatened by it and are prevented from finding objections to it. Instead of attacking the "corrupt," Wilde lets the "corrupt" have a laugh at him, making them feel "cultivated," though in so doing he has the last laugh. As Freedman notes: "Each participant in this drama is perfectly fulfilled because each is enabled to become a version of the other: the childish theatrical audience imagines itself to be as *raffiné* as [and possibly more than] the decadent dandy who addresses them; and the would-be dramatic artist is confirmed in his superiority by the pretensions of his gullible audience" (174). Wilde's ability to establish this relationship with his public irritated Henry James who wrote: "there is so much drollery--that is 'cheeky' or

paradoxical wit of dialogue, and the pit and gallery are so pleased at finding themselves clever enough to 'catch on' to four or five of the ingenious--too ingenious --*mots* in the dozen, that it makes them feel quite '*décadent*' and *raffiné* . . . " (qtd. in Freedman 173). What irritates James is Wilde's ability to satisfy the "corrupt" audience that he needs as a commercial artist, while still communicating with his "cultivated" audience who understand the full dozen "ingenious mots."[33]

In bringing to the play their understanding of Wilde's attempts to mediate between ethics and aesthetics in his aesthetic philosophy, the "cultivated" recognise the added value of Wilde's effort. While *Earnest* is a seemingly absurd play, it does engage with some of the key issues of Wilde's philosophy in a humorous way. Though the play does not demand an understanding of these issues to be enjoyed, the "cultivated" derive more intellectual enjoyment from the farce by appreciating Wilde's creation of a perfect aesthetic work--a work which, as William Archer pointed out in a contemporary review of the play, is like music in that it "imitates nothing, represents nothing, means nothing, is nothing, except a sort of *rondo capriccioso*, in which the artist's fingers run with crisp irresponsibility up and down the keyboard of life" (qtd. in Beckson, *Critical Heritage* 190). Though the "cultivated" and "corrupt" alike see the play as an absurd farce about "nothing," the "cultivated" share with Wilde the knowledge that "nothing" is what artists are reduced to writing about if they want to appeal to the "public." Wilde's skill is that he can appeal to the "corrupt" within the farce, while continuing his dialogue about aestheticism with his "cultivated" audience.

Wilde's triumph over his "corrupt" audience was, however, short-lived. *Earnest* was pulled from the stage when Wilde was sent to prison for acts of "gross

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[33] James's mixed attitude of envy and contempt was motivated by the fact that his theatrical failure coincided with Wilde's enormous success. On the opening night of his play *Guy Domville*, James attended Wilde's play, *An Ideal Husband*, after which he returned to the theatre where his own play was being performed. Here he was greeted with a jeering and hissing audience. To add insult to injury, *Guy Domville* was pulled from the stage to make room for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. For an account of these events, see Ellmann's essay, "Henry James Among the Aesthetes."

indecency." Unfortunately, the scandal reaffirmed what the "corrupt" public initially suspected about the worship of form and style--that aesthetics were *opposed* to ethics, and that a "fanciful form" was merely a disguise for "corrupt" material. In yet another instance of a confusion between art and life, Wilde's aestheticism was misread in light of his personal life. As a result, Wilde's contribution to the continuation of Pater's intellectual aestheticism has often been overlooked. Faced with an audience of "corrupt" readers who were largely resistant to "Aestheticism," Wilde attempted to develop a purer aesthetic by exploring the interaction between aesthetics and ethics in his attempt to distinguish the two. Beginning where Pater left off, with a demonstration of the ethics of an aesthetic perspective in the fairy tales, Wilde surpassed his master by establishing the independence of ethics and aesthetics first, though less successfully, in *Dorian Gray*, and finally in *Earnest*.

Conclusion

In beginning this thesis, I was presented with two challenges. On the on hand, how to make a study of the artist's interaction with audience relevant to a figure like Pater, whose solipsistic philosophy and hermit-like existence seem to deny any interest in his readers or concern with his reception; and on the other, how to say anything new about Wilde's very obviously engaged relationship with the Victorian public. The answer to the challenge seemed to lie in a comparative study. How did Aestheticism, which in Pater's hands was a rather private, subjective phenomenon, become, under Wilde's treatment, such a flamboyant movement? In addressing this question, I began to realise that there were a number of misconceptions about Pater, Wilde, and their versions of aestheticism. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, Pater was far more engaged with his audience in his presentation of aestheticism than a cursory glance might seem to suggest. While his conception of this audience might hve been limited, particularly in the writing of *The Renaissance*, his developed awareness of his actual audiences led him to define his aestheticism with the needs of his readers in mind. In addition, though Wilde expresses his aestheticism in a much more popular fashion than Pater, causing it to appear superficial, his critical essays ("The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist") illustrate Wilde's solid understanding of Pater's more intellectual aestheticism, an aestheticism which represents not simply a devotion to beauty, but a *critical* and *receptive* state of mind also.

By concentrating on aestheticism first as a mode of perception, and examining how this concept developed its other connotations in the interaction between Pater, Wilde, and their respective audiences, I have demonstrated a continuity in the thinking of these two men, which has often been asserted but rarely fully substantiated. This continuity of thought includes Pater's and Wilde's developing conceptions of audience and the way in which they present their ideas as a result of these conceptions. Wilde's broader understanding of audience which derived from his

desire for popular success has, until recently,[1] devalued his status as an artist worthy of serious consideration. As such, Wilde has been referred to derogatorily as a populariser of Pater. But this label need not be disparaging. Wilde's works do popularise Pater, but in so doing they demonstrate a properly "aesthetic" critical and receptive reading and development of Pater's ideas. Wilde engages even more vigorously than Pater with some of the major problems and issues of aestheticism, even acknowledging the limits of the philosophy in his novel *Dorian Gray*. Despite his desire both to advocate aestheticism and achieve popular success, Wilde does not appease his "corrupt" audience by providing pat solutions to their objections concerning aestheticism. In fact, Wilde's works often raise more questions than they answer, hence the difficulty in determining whether *Dorian Gray* is an immoral, Decadent novel, or a critique of certain kinds of aestheticism. Wilde, then, is an important figure in the intellectual and critical context of aestheticism, a place that has often been denied him as a result of the popular form and style of his work.[2]

In my exploration of the ways in which Pater and Wilde anticipated certain types of ideal audiences and in turn reacted to the limits of their actual audiences, I have offered a new perspective from which to consider the development of aestheticism. Despite the purported aim of aestheticism (to establish and inculcate a pure mode of perception and heightened awareness so as to view art in a non-didactic, non-moral, and non-political manner), aestheticism never quite achieved this end. The reception of Pater's *Renaissance*, a work in which he attempted to demonstrate a properly "aesthetic" viewpoint, began an ongoing dialogue between aesthetic artists and their audiences that prevented the possibility of pure aestheticism. Aestheticism,

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[1] Wilde studies have benefited from the increasing emphasis on artists' relations to the ideologies and social histories of their times. Gagnier, for example, sees Wilde's work as a serious engagement with an emerging consumerist economy and culture.

[2] Serious consideration of Wilde as a critic was rare until the late 1970's when Bruce Bashford published his essays on Wilde's critical writing. Since then there have been a numerous essays treating Wilde in this vein. See Watson and Buckler's essays on "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist."

in the hands of Pater and Wilde, became, in many ways, didactic, moral, immoral, and political in reaction to the audiences who played a large role in determining the manifestations of the aesthetic philosophy throughout the careers of these two men.

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