Victorian Aesthetics

Jonah Siegel

Want more papers like this?

Download a PDF Pack of related papers

Search Academia's catalog of 22 million free papers
Abstract and Keywords

Although the field of aesthetics was consolidated in the nineteenth century, its study has been shaped by two contradictory tendencies: (1) the insistence that the aesthetic realm needs to be autonomous, independent of the world of common experience; (2) the ethical or political insistence that autonomy is impossible. Starting from this characteristic antinomy, and tracing it back to early theoretical formulations in Kant and Schiller, this chapter illuminates the ways in which the constant pull between form and reality, or between art and experience, was a fundamental characteristic of aesthetics in the Victorian period. The writings of Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, George Eliot, Walter Pater, William Morris, John Ruskin, and others show the challenges of negotiating a concept that at times seems the only thing reconciling one to the world and at other times seems to be pulling one away to an impossible realm outside human existence.

Keywords: aesthetics, Arnold, art, autonomy, beauty, disinterestedness, Kant, play, Ruskin, Schiller

‘Aesthetic’

Discussions of beauty in the twentieth century were shadowed by the dominance of two powerful intellectual conventions, both ultimately derived from the debates of an earlier era: on the one hand, the modernist claim for autonomy as the fundamental value (if not the inevitable tendency) of the history of art, and on the other, the complimentary sense that to discuss beauty or its more rarefied cousin, the aesthetic, is to engage in an apolitical, and therefore morally suspect, project. This chapter will be interested in demonstrating the ways these attitudes are anticipated in earlier periods. But it is worth identifying from the outset the pressure on the historical and conceptual study of the aesthetic traceable to the dominance of these two strands in twentieth-century thought, the unstable situation in which beauty had to be entirely, and by necessity, autonomous—but could or should not be so.

Theodor Adorno offers one of the strongest and most sophisticated expressions of an influential line of thought about the aesthetic prevalent in the second half of the last century. The claim that there is nothing self-evident about art anymore is just one element in his particularly rigorous and erudite version of the political challenge to autonomy as a value, as well as to the category of autonomy itself (after all, how free is a thing that needs to change from one moment to the next?).1 It is a battle that was also joined by theorists such as Peter Bürger and Pierre Bourdieu, each of whom made deeply influential arguments for the historical nature of the claim of disinterestedness itself, while offering analyses intended to demonstrate some of the interests hidden in plain sight in the aesthetic as a category or in particular aesthetic objects. Critics wishing to return to beauty as a category and to engage with the problem of the aesthetic, or of form itself, had to make their way past the rugged obstacles set by authors such as these and their followers.2 Hence the boldness of work such as Elaine Scarry’s On Beauty, and Being Just or Isobel Armstrong’s The Radical Aesthetic—and even of Jacques Rancière’s project in Aisthesis
and elsewhere—efforts to reclaim the political and ethical force of a concern that for much of the twentieth century was felt almost by definition to be either divorced from politics and ethics or in an unhappy partnership with the worst versions of both. But that is in the future of our period. Let us begin with that definition at its outset.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) identifies aesthesis as ‘rare before the 19th cent.’ And indeed, even aesthetic, its more popular adjectival form, is one of those keywords that had no life of note prior to the eighteenth century but which nineteenth-century culture found it could not do without. The term sounds technical, and in a way it is: it is an announcement that something requiring conceptualization or abstraction is being advanced, even though the tendency of that abstraction may be—as it is in this case—to bring us back to our senses. Like every concept of interest, aesthetics has been of particular influence insofar as it has been a subject of debate, and even confusion. The word has perception at its core, and certainly the British were aware when they used this still novel term of its source in the ancient Greek word meaning ‘sense perception, sensation, perception’.

From the beginning, the margins of the term were so ill defined, however, that they quickly reached important points of contradiction, particularly as the word came to take on a number of new and more specialized meanings—which it soon did—while never fully shedding its first sense. The 1875 Encyclopaedia Britannica, also cited in the OED entry, correctly notes that Immanuel Kant, ‘under the title Transcendental Ästhetik, treats of the a priori principles of all sensuous knowledge’. But the philosopher’s rigorous commitment to both modifiers, to the a priori and the sensual, is unusual. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Kant’s principal influence, and the figure generally seen as the founder of the field, described aesthetics as the ‘science of sensitive cognition’ in his Metaphysica (1739), but before the century was out, he himself had glossed the term as ‘the science of the beautiful’, thereby writing the key conceptual uncertainty about the topic right into its founding document. After all, perception may be of any sort of object, while beauty is one particular quality, and generally ascribed to a limited set of objects.

The Metaphysica was only translated into English in 2013. For centuries Baumgarten’s texts remained in Latin, and in that powerful realm of the not fully considered. Ultimately, and this gets to the heart of the history of the term, the original meaning of aesthetic has become obsolete (OED: ‘Of or relating to perception by the senses; received by the senses. Obs’), while the focus largely (and confusedly) on beauty has come to dominate (OED: ‘Of or relating to the perception, appreciation, or criticism of that which is beautiful. Of all sensuous knowledge’). Little wonder, then, that as a term and as a historical phenomenon aesthetics has been characterized by productive instability (‘of that which is beautiful’ versus ‘of all sensuous knowledge’), which is vividly manifested in key texts of the Victorian period.

The development of aesthetics in the eighteenth century helped begin a conversation about beauty that has never been fully resolved, because from the outset it aimed to do something quite difficult: to identify faculties or qualities that make the experience of the world through our senses valid evidence of beauty without abandoning other kinds of claims for the validation of beauty—notably ethical or religious—that have often mistrusted those very senses. And then, a great deal of the cultural force of the concept is traceable to associations and values that have been understood at various times but not consistently to be important or even necessary to its existence, including such heterogeneous or contradictory phenomena as autonomy, ideal nature, artifice, or even reality itself.

Kant, who used the fourth edition of the Metaphysica as a text when he taught, relayed the term to later generations, along with a general sense that his predecessor had got things wrong, because his emphasis on the sensual left out the kinds of a priori determinants that were central to concerns of a more stringent philosophy. Students of Kant’s seminal Critique of judgment (1790) learned that something more than the judgement of the senses was required for a judgement of beauty to take place, that a formal suggestion of purpose without an actual purpose (Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck) would be the sign that we are face to face with beauty. Kant’s rigour left as unbeautiful a vast realm of the lovely things that call to us from the world—the face across a room that draws us into conversation; the smell of a baking dish we fully intend to eat; even the music that makes us dance. All phenomena with a purpose or that generate or arise from a human interest are not beautiful in Kant’s use of the term. The question of form did not arrive directly in Victorian Britain from Baumgarten, nor even in most cases via Kant, whose reputation in the Anglo-Saxon world has never been fixed, and certainly was not in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as Kant’s analysis of the aesthetic cannot take history into account, and is not principally concerned with art but rather with the experience of beauty in the world, there was a limit to how broadly applicable his claims
could be. Arguably formulations shaped by Friedrich Schiller and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel were more influential on British culture because of the ways they expanded the reach of what in Kant is an important but rigorously constrained topic. For all three authors, however, it bears saying that influence in the English speaking world is often indirect, unstated, or even manifested as a kind of resistance.  

**Autonomy or the Senses?**

In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant aims to understand the experience of beauty as more than an accident of the senses, or as different from the recognition or anticipation of their satisfaction. In the course of his argument, as throughout his transcendental system, he identifies a split between the senses and reason, and it is at this gap that Schiller locates the special power of art. In his influential works of the 1790s, *The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) and *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–6), Schiller presents art itself as the element that mends the division between the realms of reason and of the sensuous, thereby reconciling man to the world. In *The Aesthetic Education*, Schiller famously introduced the concept of *play*, his term for the reconciliation within the aesthetic of the limits of experience with the boundless drives of form. A notoriously slippery concept built on a few hints from Kant, *play* is when the sense impulse, which ‘requires variation, requires time to have a content’, is reconciled with the form impulse, which ‘requires the extinction of time, and no variation’. A great deal of weight is naturally placed on a process that ‘would aim at the extinction of time in time and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity’. Given the absolutes he is attempting to harmonize, the significance of the phenomenon, which we may understand as the full experience of disinterested beauty, becomes evident: ‘In every condition of humanity it is precisely play and play alone that makes man complete and displays at once his twofold nature.’ But the boon Schiller describes is hardly of ready access: ‘in actual life we should also seek in vain for the Beauty of which we are now speaking’ (79).

While terms and arguments first developed in *The Aesthetic Education* are unavoidable throughout the nineteenth century and after., *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* was possibly an even more pervasive influence. Adding a new conceptual rigour to formulations anticipated in a number of Enlightenment predecessors, Schiller developed a historicization of style, in which an essentially reductive system opens up into sophisticated claims about both period and form. The approach has been emulated ever since, if seldom with sophistication of the dialectical process Schiller describes. The valorization of the naïve as the privileged site of unselfconscious original creativity, appears to leave the *sentimental*, the self-reflective modern form of literature, as the weaker of the pair. But in the course of the argument it emerges that the unavoidable failure of the later mode is the very thing that fuels the forward motion of culture. This dynamic, historicizing view of the place of the aesthetic is subsequently given its richest development by Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and in his lectures on aesthetics (1818–35, compiled 1839).

Aesthetics became more than theoretical when the experience of beauty was seen to present the opportunity of a fundamental return, of giving us back to the world we already have but fear we have lost. In that sense, the aesthetic is a project of knowing the world, and it touches on a number of questions that would have scientific and religious implications in the Victorian period for authors ranging from Ruskin to Hopkins. It bears saying that a powerful native tradition of aesthetic thought, including authors such as Shaftesbury, Addison, Smith, and Burke, which itself contributed to German idealist formulations, was bound to be a direct and indirect influence on British thinkers. In one of those peculiar turns that are familiar to any student of the vicissitudes of culture, however, the tendency in the nineteenth century was to identify self-conscious reflection on beauty not with the native, but with the German tradition. Indeed, throughout the Victorian period the suspicion of a foreign taint would be used to suggest the immoral quality of an excessive or just misaddressed preoccupation with beauty. Though *theoretic*—the term Ruskin offered in 1856 as an alternative safe from the sensuous confusions written into aesthetic—did not take, the critic’s presentation of this other faculty indicates the promise and dangers of a growing preoccupation with beauty as a value:

> the Theoretic faculty, is concerned with the moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty. And the error respecting it is, the considering and calling it Aesthetic, degrading it to a mere operation of sense, or perhaps worse, of custom; so that the arts which appeal to it sink into a mere amusement, ministers to morbid sensibilities, ticklers and fanners of the soul’s sleep.
When the aesthetic—understood as the area of human endeavour, reflection, or experience concerned with the encounter with beauty in the world, say with a bank of flowers or the song of a bird—met up with a related but not entirely homologous fascination with created beauty, with art, new complications were bound to emerge. And so, the beauty that is the truth that is all we need to know on this earth is represented in Keats by a vase, a made object. The question of what is beautiful and why comes necessarily to be entwined with what might easily have been understood as quite a distinct matter: the nature of the maker of beauty in the world. It is the new power ascribed to beauty—to validate our experience of the world, as opposed to tickling and fanning the soul’s sleep—that allows the figure of the creative genius to come to the fore. For the first time in the history of culture, the simple recognition of what is in the world has become a mark of uncommon achievement, hence Ruskin’s moving formulation in Modern Painters III (1856), which identifies the artist not as a skilled maker, but rather as a sublimely gifted perceiver:

the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion—all in one.

(Works, v. 34; emphasis in the original)

Ruskin participates in a late Romantic tradition that includes Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson in his celebration of perception as the fundamental quality for the artist. But we might also include Robert Browning in the list, as ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ (1855) is the story of the coming into being of the kind of individual who will see the way required in order to recognize and represent beauty. The painter’s childhood suffering, like that of Turner evoked by Ruskin in ‘The Two Boyhoods’ chapter of Modern Painters V (1860), is precisely what makes him into such a sensitive register of the beauty of the world (Works, viii. 374–388). The poem also provides a characteristic explanation of the process whereby the sensibility of the artist becomes a register on which the world’s beauty is inscribed and hence represented back for the world to witness. ‘For, don’t you mark?’, Lippo Lippi asks his auditor,

we’re made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted—better to us,
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.11

This is a vision of the artistic project that wants to see it as naturally social (we see the things the artist sees, as Lippo Lippi puts it: ‘Art was given for that’). It is in that sense a response to a counter-tendency in post-Romantic concepts of creativity, the idea that all art is at its heart the deeply personal expression of individual passion, a notion so important that it leads John Stuart Mill in 1833 to make a claim whose perversity has often been lost sight of, precisely because it has proved so useful for later attempts to negotiate the relationship between personal expression and public statement:

The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.12

Nearly a century later, Yeats is still working with this influential distinction when he writes that ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’.13 In this line of thought the identification of something as an aesthetic object depends on imagining that thing to be essentially personal. Although the measure of its effectiveness is ultimately its social reach, any attempt to acknowledge the need to make the reach risks taking poetry out of the realm of poetry altogether, into that of mere eloquence or rhetoric.

The religious account of the role of the aesthetic suggested by Browning’s Lippo Lippi (‘God uses us’) was one way to fill in with content what could otherwise appear to be far too abstract a structure. But the emphasis varied widely. Thus, Gerard Manley Hopkins (student of Walter Pater that he was) can write verse insisting on the identity of his
vocations as priest and poet precisely because of the ways in which the poet brings into view a world that is not simply evidence, but manifestation of the divine. Another extreme came to the fore later in the century: instead of the artist as priest, relying to others the benediction inherent in a world well perceived, the movement known as Aestheticism—itself also drawing on Pater—presented a vision of the artist as maker of the world. Art, in this view, does not return us to a world we have lost, so much as it creates a better one. Hence Oscar Wilde’s characteristic claim in his 1891 ‘Decay of Lying’ (note his outrageous use of ‘fact’) that ‘In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people’.14

Still, though we naturally associate Wilde with the process whereby the love of beauty combines with a fascination with artifice to absorb energies generally understood to be destined for life, it would be wrong to treat the phenomenon simply as a late reaction to a beauty-obsessed era. As early as 1833, we find Tennyson writing his cautionary allegory about the moral failure entailed in the attempt to live purely in a realm of beauty and culture. ‘The Palace of Art’ is, as the author explains, ‘a sort of allegory’ of

A sinful soul possess’d of many gifts,  
...  
That did love Beauty only, (Beauty seen  
In all varieties of mould and mind)  
And Knowledge for its beauty; or if Good,  
Good only for its beauty, seeing not  
That Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters  
That doat upon each other, friends to man,  
Living together under the same roof,  
And never can be sunder’d without tears.15

While the connection between Beauty and the Good is a theme of long standing, the inclusion of Knowledge in the trio of sisters may be taken as characteristic of a period widely committed to the idea that a clearer view of the world would result in better art, or even—as Lippo Lippi will suggest—that the aesthetic has an epistemic value. Still, for all the celebration of improved perception, the turn to realism that characterized the nineteenth century presented an important challenge to nineteenth-century aesthetic thought. Influential formulations inherited from the eighteenth century had tended to emphasize formal values moving towards generalization. But the ideal forms that were such a central tenet of neoclassical aesthetics came to appear fundamentally impoverished in the nineteenth century, which saw a broad turn to the real in its most contingent manifestations, both in painting and poetry, and eventually, and most powerfully, in narrative fiction.16

The Nature of Modernity

The aesthetic appeal of realism (as opposed to its moral or political work) is still a difficult question in criticism, so there is little wonder that, with a few important exceptions, it was not typically addressed in its own day. More common was a tendency that can appear to be in contradiction to the achievement of the novelists: the sense that there was something ingloriously prosaic about contemporary life, that the representation of modernity was precisely what would not yield great art. The aesthetic failure of modern life, an idea also given force by various kinds of movements of historical revivalism, ranging from neoclassicism to the Gothic Revival, is addressed directly in the ars poetica that is book V of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh (1857): ‘Aye, but every age,’ notes Aurora, ‘Appears to souls who live in’t (ask Carlyle) | Most unheroic’.17 Aurora Leigh’s wide-ranging aspiration to make the current time worthy of being itself historical—that is, of mattering to later eras—is an open challenge to the period-hyperopia that cannot see the merits of its own days. Aurora represents the aspiration to move away from nostalgic disdain of the present, to a bold interest in the moment. To ‘catch | Upon the burning lava of a song | The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age’ (v. 214–216) is to be able to make a claim on the future of the sort the past has made on modernity.

George Eliot stands out for her typically self-reflexive, informed, and bold claims for the value of realist representation. But it is striking how much her oft-cited polemic on the topic in Adam Bede (1859) stakes its claim on the evocation of a kind of sympathy that routes the new aesthetic through an ultimately Wordsworthian ethical claim that, as she knows, will always be at an angle to claims for formal beauty:
All honor and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children—in our gardens and in our houses; but let us love that other beauty, too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy.¹⁸

The moving vision of realism Eliot lays out in her long digression on the topic is probably the clearest demonstration of the conceptual challenge presented by key developments in mid-century Victorian culture: does the insistence on the moral force of representing imperfect nature amount to a newly energized aesthetic project, or is it an ethical refutation of formal concerns? Put another way, is sympathy, which Eliot describes as ‘delicious’ (163) in this excursus, a manifestation of disinterestedness, or the highest form of interest? Eliot’s impassioned evocation of the achievement of Dutch painting allows her to reach for a middle ground: a beautiful depiction of the fall of light will borrow something of the moral charge accruing to the object on which that light falls when that object is a poor Dutch woman at a simple meal or at work. For all its conceptual irresolution, the achievements of realism and the moral drives with which it was associated were undeniable in the period. And both the formal achievement and the broadening out of the claims for ethical responsibility came to be part of the characteristically Victorian aesthetic.

The Moral Life of the Consumer

His ever more urgent belief that art involved the entirety of the values and culture that shaped a society meant that all of Ruskin’s work from the middle of the century on would be addressed to the nexus of desire, consumption, and manufacturing that we call economic. This element in his work leads directly to the Arts and Crafts movement associated in particular with William Morris. Thus, in the famous chapter on the ‘Nature of Gothic’ in the second volume of Stones of Venice of 1853 (which Morris reprinted as a free-standing volume at the Kelmscott Press in 1892), Ruskin not only addresses himself to the creative force of the craftsman slighted in earlier aesthetic formulations, he works hard to identify the proper relationship to nature in which great art is producible. The element that is particularly modern about this line of Victorian thought is its insistence on the responsibility of the consumer in shaping the form of art and its moral effects.

The beauty of the art object—say a capital carved by a medieval craftsman—arises from (and is therefore evidence of) the freedom of the mind at work. The loss of joy in creation characteristic of modernity is directly linked to a failure in the desires of the public, the practical manifestation of values on which they have never reflected. It is a topic Ruskin raises dramatically in ‘Nature of Gothic’ with a sudden address to the reader:

And now, reader, look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often, because the work of it was so good and strong, and the ornaments of it so finished. Examine again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel. Many a time you have exulted over them, and thought how great England was, because her slightest work was done so thoroughly. Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek.

(Works, x. 193)

The desire for perfection is an enslaving desire on the part of the consumer. Taste, rightly trained, will recognize that the thing to be valued is not polished execution, which is an indication of the limits of what is being attempted, but those imperfections that indicate the presence of fallible human life. The perpetual change Ruskin finds in Gothic design and execution, he traces to the workman set free to imagine. In modernity, the power to determine the degree of freedom of the worker resides in the desires of the consumer, which are precisely what need to be trained. ‘If you want a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it,’ Morris would declare in a lecture in 1871, in a phrase the political tendencies of which have frequently been lost sight of: ‘Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.’¹⁹ This is a prescription for better interior decoration, certainly, but its ultimate motivation is the ambition to make the taste of the public a support for the spiritual life of the craftsman, rather than its opposite.

Historicism, the Body, and Aesthetic Criticism
At first sight, Walter Pater appears to offer an important counter-argument to the line of criticism that would see the aesthetic as a route back to the world. ‘[I]n aesthetic criticism,’ he writes, ‘the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly.’ And yet, the critic’s invitation to self-reflection, while powerful in its celebration of the self, is weak in its acknowledgement of the limitations of that self’s relationship to the world, in part because of the deeply physical sense of the world that drives Pater’s thought. That a profound scepticism underlies Pater’s project will be clear to any reader of the famous Conclusion to the Renaissance, but the place of the aesthetic in that doubt is already evident in the Preface. ‘[H]e who experiences these impressions strongly,’ he writes about the phenomena he has identified as the primary data of the aesthetic critic,

and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere. He may pass them all by as being, answerable or not, of no interest to him.

(Renaissance, 1981, xx)

The historicism characteristic of the era returns in Pater, given new force by what is probably the richest response to German idealist philosophy of any British critic of the period, in particular to a line of thought running from the great art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann to Hegel. But in Pater the physicality always immanent in the work of his predecessors comes to the fore, and itself enters history. Pater tracks the place of the body in various historical dispensations, alive always to the complexity and contradiction of any period: classical asceticism and Epicureanism both interest him, the abnegations of the medieval period as well as its passions. And it is his emphasis on the individual body, itself a modern characteristic for Pater (following Hegel), that takes his historicism to different places than those aimed at by Hegel or Schiller while absolutely challenging the disinterested model of aesthetic experience in Kant. ‘What is this to me?’ is not an aesthetic question in Kant, but neither is the quickened sense of life, which is the effect of the experience of beauty for Pater, the goal of the philosopher.

The year 1867 saw the publication in the Westminster Review of Pater’s seminal treatment of Winckelmann, the longing Austrian schoolmaster who became the founder of art history and the champion of a vision of classical antiquity as the location for unimpeachable classical perfection characterized by ‘Noble simplicity and still grandeur’ (‘Edle Einfalt und stille Grosse’). Winckelmann’s desires, and the influence of his thought on Hegel, become opportunities for the critic to take on a favourite theme, the limitations of perfection in modernity. What makes art modern for Pater is a characteristic sense of the vulnerability of the beauty it manifests, something quite distinct from what Winckelmann found in classical antiquity.

Pater continues his rich treatment of beauty in history in his very next publication, the essay on the poetry of William Morris, in which the movement from the medievalizing Defence of Guenevere and other Poems (1858) to the classicizing Death of Jason (1867) allows the critic ample opportunity to reflect both on the historically contingent nature of beauty and on the complex nature of cultural revivals within historicism. Still, the title poem of Morris’s first collection, as much a performance of the effectiveness of beauty as a defence of the adulterous queen in its title, sounds the keynote of the piece. Confronted by proofs and testimonies about her illicit relationship with Lancelot, the only counter-argument the Queen offers is an extraordinary insistence on the experience of her own beauty:

will you dare
When you have looked a little on my brow,
To say this thing is vile? or will you care
For any plausible lies of cunning woof,
Where you can see my face with no lie there
For ever? am I not a gracious proof?—

Morris’s poem revolves in fascination around a woman performing her own desirability, and her own recognition of that desirability. In the Queen’s nostalgic and proud confession of her passion an emotional urgency emerges that has moved beyond the classical, in ways at once formal and thematic: ‘The poem which gives its name to the volume,’ Pater writes, ‘is a thing tormented and awry with passion, like the body of Guenevere defending herself from the charge of adultery, and the accent falls in strange, unwonted places with the effect of a great cry.’ The
The experience of beauty in Pater is accompanied by a bracing sense of risk. While it may offer some compensation for the brevity and uncertainty of life, it leaves little room for a deluded sense of permanence, and no time at all for generalities. The love of art becomes the highest form of compensation for the transient nature of all other experiences, hence Pater’s location of its claim within an emotional context owing everything to human affective relations; art comes to one like a generous knowing lover offering sensations all the more to be prized for the anticipation of their brevity:

High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the ‘enthusiasm of humanity.’ Only, be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, then, the vivifying quality of the arts that had been suggested in Schiller had ramified in extraordinary ways. Ruskin and Morris stand at the head of a movement calling for the full realization of the living individual through the experience of creative work, for the free play of imagination to be licensed and supported instead of dulled by the demands of the public. Pater’s invitation to live (not to sleep before evening) is of necessity a more self-involved one, but not for that reason less poignant.

Modernity, Politics, and the Play of Mind

The critical work of Matthew Arnold has sometimes been taken to represent a fundamental antithesis to Pater’s relativism, most notably by Pater himself, who, in the Preface to the Renaissance, notoriously rings the changes on the earlier writer’s critical project of seeing the object ‘as in itself it really is’. The force of the aspiration for Arnold lies in the possibilities of an escape from the limitations of the self that such a clarified perception might bring in its wake, along with an attendant access to the experiences of others (all of us seeing—or trying to—the thing as in itself it really is). Such an escape is entirely impossible for Pater, so he routes the process of seeing things as they really are back to the practice of reflecting on the self. Still, even without Pater’s sceptical challenge, it is worth noting that Arnold’s desire to use the aesthetic as a means of social improvement is more remarkable for the ways that aspiration fails in his own poetry than for the ways it may be said to work out. Arnold’s renunciation of ‘Empedocles on Etna’ (1852) is a key moment in his poetic practice and theorization; the poet-critic’s refusal to republish this ambitious work is the sacrifice that mobilizes his arguments in the important Preface to Poems of 1853, a text that offers a formal, ethical, and historical description of failures meant to be understood as more than personal.

The ethical problem Arnold identifies in his poem is the absence of the significant moral action he considers necessary for any work of art. And, certainly, by this standard a poem limning the uncertainty and ultimate suicide of a Greek philosopher is likely to be found wanting. The insight would be of limited application, however, if it were not for Arnold’s aim to present the failings of the poem as symptomatic of his era. The creative weakness the work reveals is a condition Arnold shares with some of the greats of his period; the poem’s inadequacy is characteristic of the modern inability to create great wholes. The sources of the problem, which Arnold traces at least as far back as Keats, are ultimately historical: the modern era has become so full of potential models that it does not allow the possibility of an informed and committed choice of form. Lovely fragments are the results of poets attempting to come to grips with the weight of possibilities that is the inheritance of modernity.

The historical claim underpinning the necessary aesthetic failure of the era is laid out forcefully in The Function of Criticism at the Present Time (1864), in which Arnold argues that Romanticism was doomed to produce work that would not last because the poetry of that period, swept up in the political enthusiasm of the French Revolution, emerged prematurely, in the sense that it had been produced in a time not adequately prepared through the prior consolidation of knowledge required to produce great work. ‘[T]he burst of creative activity in our literature,
through the first quarter of this century,’ he argues ‘had about it in fact something premature; and […] from this cause its productions are doomed, most of them, in spite of the sanguine hopes which accompanied and do still accompany them, to prove hardly more lasting than the productions of far less splendid epochs.’27 Ultimately, in this argument, it is criticism that will create the conditions for a new era of poetic invention.

Arnold himself worked to establish the idea of the autonomous role of criticism to which Wilde would address himself with such relish in texts such as ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891). But the earlier critic had social aims in mind when arguing for the value of autonomy, as is evident from his returns to play, Schiller’s term for the process by which the aesthetic reconciles two incommensurate things: the limits of experience and the boundless drives of form. Writing eighty years after Schiller, Arnold translates the philosopher’s play into a vision of disinterestedness that is mundane nearly to the point of unrecognizability. That Arnold’s play of mind inherits the world only at the cost of losing the soul of Schiller’s concept, is evident from the remarkably concrete context in which the term becomes useful to him. A complaint about the political tendencies of critical journalism in one’s own day is a long way from the reconciliation of being in time:

Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first thing and the play of mind the second; so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted. […]Every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism, but the notion of combining all fractions in the common pleasure of a free disinterested play of mind meets with no favor.28

Instead of the aesthetic as a salve for the wound inevitably to be found at the division between nature and reason that characterizes the human condition described in Schiller, Arnold offers criticism as a cure for the factionalism of nineteenth-century politics. This is evidently a loss of sophistication even as it is a widening out of the applicability of Schiller’s notoriously vague category. But it bears saying that Arnold’s strategy also opens up to a question for which there is little room in the philosopher’s system, the relation of distinct kinds of socially determined selves to the aesthetic.

The most striking gap that concerned the nineteenth century was not, after all, the one identified in transcendental philosophy, the one that occurs whenever the mind attempts to come to grips with a world that it needs, and of which it forms a part, but with which it finds itself not fully commensurate. For most of the period, the space between classes of people seemed a far more pressing worry. Still, the aesthetic could also be drafted into service in the attempt to repair this social break. Thus, when parliament took up, barely a month after the first Reform Bill was passed in 1832, a bill to fund the construction of a building to house the National Gallery (to replace the private home that had been pressed into that service at its founding in 1824), among the arguments advanced was that the institution would serve as a place where distinct classes, riven by economic differences and irreconcilable political aspirations, might find a new kind of harmony. This is precisely the point Robert Peel makes in support of the expense, and risk, of locating the gallery in central London:

He therefore trusted that the erection of the edifice would not only contribute to the cultivation of the arts, but also to the cementing of those bonds of union between the richer and the poorer orders of the State, which no man was more anxious to see joined in mutual intercourse and good understanding than he was.29

The achievement of class harmony through the shared practice of disinterested aesthetic contemplation was not the sole basis for government support of art institutions, of course. A more practical and directly interested claim was made throughout the century based on the widely perceived shortcomings in taste inhibiting the development of trade in British goods. In spite of the clear lead the British nation had when it came to technologies of manufacture, it was said, the design of its merchandise suffered in comparison to that of Continental competitors. Design schools and museums were places where the artisan could imbibe principles that would add grace to the power of British industry, and thereby make its dominance absolute. The argument, which drove the founding of Government Schools of Design starting in 1837, took on particular force after the triumph of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Indeed, one of the principal projects that emerged as a result of that epochal event was the opening of the South Kensington Museum in 1857 (now the V&A), which had design in its purview. As the Parliamentary Commissioners wrote in an important report of 1849,

as soon as the public obtains plain manufactures cheap, it seems to desire, almost by a law of nature, to
have them decorated, and thus creates an employment for that labour which otherwise would appear for the time to be superfluous. Again, in proportion as the design is excellent, so is a taste generated on the part of the public, which becomes inevitably a necessity, and multiplies advantages to all parties.30

Desire and Autonomy

As these brief instances from its history will have illustrated, the place of the aesthetic in Victorian culture can appear at once central and unfixed. Like any powerful idea, it was liable to a number of emphases as it was taken up for practical application in literature or in life. Nevertheless, while the longevity of the concept was in part due to its motility, it is also evident that there were specific and important roles it consistently filled. Given the speed of social change attributable to technology, the growing disparity in wealth in the nation, and the expanding power of a middle class able to feel and identify that disparity, it is more than simply reductive to suggest that if it had not inherited the aesthetic realm, the nineteenth century might well have needed to invent something like it—a space in which to locate the hope for a higher reconciliation, for things that were disinterested in the sense of being unconstrained by a world ever more bent on getting and spending. In an era in which every development in technology or political organization seemed to open up another schism, the aesthetic emerged as an opportunity to provisionally overcome otherwise unbridgeable distances.

As we have seen, however, the solution of the aesthetic tended not to close off debate so much as to open it up. The forms of beauty, never, disinterested for Pater and those who followed him, become in their works opportunities to address concerns that are often mundane and not infrequently disturbing. The intricate play of desire and influence shaping the relationship between artist and art object—not to say between model and viewer—in Wilde’s Dorian Gray (1890) makes impossible for that novel the idea of disinterested creativity. And then, the decay of the painting at the heart of the book throws the work of art back into the stream of time from which Schiller would have pulled it. It would be inaccurate and reductive to say that at the end of the century we find a widening conceptual resistance to the claims of disinterested appreciation that are central to post-Kantian aesthetic thought. On the one hand, these come to be adapted, revised, or distorted in order to create a realm of pure artifice, as in Dorian Gray, or in Wilde’s giddy comedies, notably The Importance of Being Earnest (1895). On the other hand, the theoretical separation of the aesthetic from the practical made room for the exploration of realms of transgressive desire, for the representation of pleasures that were indeed interested in their satisfaction, though they might not be routed towards licit objects of desire the way, for example, that heterosexual passion may be said to achieve its goal in the social bond of marriage or the biological goal of reproduction.

In the hypertrophied decadence of Victoria Cross’s short story ‘Theodora’ in The Yellow Book (1895), we find the narrator reflecting on what we might call his natural desire to possess the androgynous object of his passion as a peculiar sort of moral failure:

As we admit of works of pure genius that they cannot claim utility, or motive, or purpose, but simply that they exist as joy-giving and beautiful objects of delight, so must we have done with utility, motive, purpose, and the aims of Nature, before we can reach the most absolute degree of positive pleasure.31

As is the case for many of the authors we associate with fin-de-siècle decadence, Cross’s treatment of transgression is flavoured with more than a little arch humour. Nevertheless her narrator does give expression to an important line of nineteenth-century thought with sources in Swinburne, and ultimately Gautier and Baudelaire, that found in the model of aesthetic theory a pattern for the violation of normative desire. While adding an affective charge to the question of interest (and disinterest) raised as far back as the eighteenth century, the aesthetic comes to offer same-sex and other forms of non-normative sexuality an important language for longings, which might otherwise have been only unspeakable.32

I have tried to suggest some of the reasons it is imperative to recognize the aesthetic aspirations of the Victorians, but also why we should not be surprised to keep finding ourselves disappointed by not discovering the living problem of Victorian aesthetics to resolve into any one thing. Recent attempts to ally the beautiful and the political by means of attention to form or the aesthetic, some of which recruit Schiller to their projects, or Kant himself, are notable instances of a return to a field that has never been more significant than when it was not fully coherent.33 These efforts may meet no more success than mere formalism when confronting the nineteenth century, but in the rhythm created when the desire to keep pulling art into a space outside that belonging to our day-to-day needs...
meets the inevitable tendency for art to sink back into the realm from which we have plucked it, we may find more than failure. We may begin to recognize the form of our inherited Victorian aesthetics.

**Select Bibliography**


**Notes:**


(4) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. ‘aesthetics’; my emphasis.
(5) Baumgarten’s apparently simple definition—‘The science of knowing and presenting with regard to the senses is AESTHETICS’—is complicated not only by the immediate introduction of an elaborate parenthetical gloss which the philosopher expanded over the editions of the work, ‘(the logic of the inferior cognitive faculty, the philosophy of graces and muses, inferior gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason)’, but also by a footnote in German redefining the term in a surprisingly straightforward way as ‘die Wissenschaft des Schönen’ (the science of the beautiful). Alexander Baumgarten, Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant’s Elucidations, Selected Notes, and Related Materials, trans. and ed. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), § 533. Baumgarten introduced German footnotes for key terms starting with the 4th Edition. (I am grateful to John Hymers for his clarification of the history of the textual changes in an email exchange.) See also Baumgarten, Aesthetica (1750), § 1. For useful context, see Frederick C. Beiser, Diotima’s Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing (Oxford University Press, 2009), 118–152. See also two books by Paul Guyer: Kant and the Claims of Taste (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17–28, and Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–128.

(6) On the necessity of disinterest, see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 44–53; on purposiveness without a purpose, see 64–84. The literature on Kant is of course vast, and outside the scope of this chapter, but Guyer’s texts are extremely useful on the topic of taste in the philosopher.


(8) Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, trans. Richard Snell (Minoa, NY: Dover, 2004), 74; emphasis in the original. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.

(9) Guyer’s Values of Beauty is particularly interesting on the important and still understudied British backgrounds to influential German formulations. See also Timothy M. Costelloe, The British Aesthetic Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–134. For a thorough and sophisticated account of the developments in culture and society driving the emergence of the aesthetic as a category in eighteenth-century Britain, see Michael McKeon’s Secret History of Domesticity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), esp. 337–87.


Walter Pater, ‘Winckelmann’, *Westminster Review*, 87 (1867), 36–50, p. 49. The article was reprinted in *The Renaissance* (1873), with some small changes. Further references will be to the Hill edition, and made in the text.


The critical aspiration, ‘to see the object in itself as it really is’, is first proposed in Arnold’s ‘On Translating Homer’ (1862), and returns in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1864). See Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. xix and also Hill’s useful notes, pp. 296–297.


See also another important government text on these topics, *Report, Proceedings and Minutes of Evidence of the Select Committee on Arts and Their Connexion with Manufactures* (House of Commons, London, 1836).


**Jonah Siegel**

Jonah Siegel, Rutgers University
During the Victorian era, there was a strange hypocrisy about sexuality and activities. Many heterosexual relationships were looked upon as not only normal, but often also a public front for the more superior members of society. And, somewhat unsurprisingly, this was how things actually were. However, it was mainly the men who were romanticised for this; you don't often read about female homosexual relationships during this era. See more ideas about victorian, aesthetic, princess aesthetic. Steampunk is the style that incorporates the British Victorian aesthetics, steam engines and fantasy.

Gothic Aesthetic. Aesthetic Women. Witch Aesthetic. Aesthetic Girl. Victorian Era Dresses. Victorian Women. Aesthetics and decadence shocked the Victorian establishment by challenging traditional values, foregrounding sensuality and promoting artistic, sexual and political experimentation. Dr Carolyn Burdett explores the key features of this unconventional artistic period. Many Victorians passionately believed that literature and art fulfilled important ethical roles. Literature provided models of correct behavior: it allowed people to identify with situations in which good actions were rewarded, or it provoked tender emotions. The large body of Victorian art literature, some by canonical nineteenth-century literary figures (such as William Thackeray and Henry James) and already heavily mined, provides the focus of Rachel Teukolsky’s book. She contextualizes Victorian art writing within an evolving modernist aesthetic in Britain from circa 1840 to 1910. Questioning scholarly commonplaces, Teukolsky