The Many Functions of Taste: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century England

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To the women of Deborah’s Place
The first question I ask myself when something doesn’t seem to be beautiful is why do I think it’s not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.

—John Cage
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The catalogue of such contrary definitions of aesthetics can be continued almost without end. Sometimes it is to concern the sensuous, sometimes the beautiful, sometimes nature, sometimes art, sometimes perception, sometimes judgement, sometimes knowledge; and “aesthetic” should mean in alternation sensuous, pleasurable, artistic, illusory, fictional, poietic, virtual, playful, unobligating, and so on.

—Wolfgang Welsch, *Undoing Aesthetics* (8-9)

The word “aesthetic” did not make its way from German philosophy into common English usage until about 1800. In the 1820s, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle were among important early users of the imported term (OED). Of course, the English had written about art before the nineteenth century. They used categories like beauty, sublimity, picturesqueness, and—the topic of this study—the elusive category of “taste.” *De gustibus non est disputandum*, “there is no disputing about taste,” the proverb goes, but eighteenth-century British thinkers disputed it in texts ranging from David Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757) to Archibald Alison’s *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790). Evidently realizing the elusive nature of his topic, Edmund Burke proposed to “communicate to taste a sort of philosophical solidity” (6). To do so, he added an “Introduction on Taste” (1759) to his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Despite Burke’s best intentions, taste remained a fluid category. Throughout the nineteenth century, British writers used and revised the terms of this older taste discourse. Largely-forgotten treatises
on the subject include Richard Payne Knight’s *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), Ralph Wornum’s “The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste” (1851), J. Gardner Wilkinson’s *On Colour: And on the Necessity for a General Diffusion of Taste Among All Classes* (1858), Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), and William Loftie’s *A Plea for Art in the House with Special Reference to the Economy of Collecting Works of Art, and the Importance of Taste in Education and Morals* (1878).

Though there is a great deal of scholarship on eighteenth-century taste discourse, taste’s Victorian afterlife has gone relatively unremarked. This study focuses on the uses of taste by three of Victorian England’s most important cultural critics: John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Oscar Wilde. Their theories of taste foreground the duality of aesthetic experience—the way it is a product of both formal characteristics and subjective reactions—in ways that illuminate current scholarship on aesthetics.

When it first appeared in English in the mid-1700s, “aesthetics” was a specialized academic term. It could designate either the study of art or the study of sensory knowledge. The possible division or overlap between these two domains of knowledge was controversial. Two hundred years later, in the late twentieth-century academy, the former definition had won out. However, “the aesthetic,” now identified with artistic form, was still a controversial category. In the context of the 1980s canon debates, defending aesthetic evaluation and defending a canon of dead white male authors seemed

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2 The earliest use of “aesthetic” recorded in the *OED* dates from 1764. The term was initially used in English by translators of German philosophy. Not until the turn of the nineteenth century did the term enter more common usage.
one and the same. Appeals to the aesthetic in order to legitimate literary studies seemed authoritarian or hypocritical: an attempt to intimidate non-scholars with the timeless value of literature without acknowledging the social processes involved in canon formation. Matters were further complicated by methodological tensions: the evaluative and formalist methodologies of traditional literary studies versus cultural studies’ seeming free-for-all approach and ideology critique’s hermeneutic of suspicion.

Yet even in the thick of the canon debates, some progressive literary critics agreed with conservatives that the aesthetic is an important part of our disciplinary identity. Today, that feeling is stronger and more openly expressed. There is an identifiable body of criticism constituting an aesthetic turn in literary study. We can trace the origins of the aesthetic turn at least to 1994, when George Levine edited the collection *Aesthetics and Ideology*. Levine’s introduction asks almost apologetically for permission to discuss aesthetic pleasure, not just politics, in literary criticism.¹ Eleven years later, Michael Bérubé’s introduction to another edited collection, *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (2005), insists that cultural studies, for all its leftist politics and its attention to popular culture, does not oppose the aesthetic. Indeed, Bérubé claims, cultural studies practitioners are already doing work that attends to the aesthetic. Drawing on Jan

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¹ For instance, Levine takes care to establish his progressive ideological purity, writing,

As with most of the colleagues I respect, my “anti’s” are impeccable: I am anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist, anti-universalist, and I do not believe in the possibility of that view from nowhere that gets one beyond contingency. . . . I am as comfortable as one can be with the necessarily uncomfortable inevitability of diversity and undecidability, whose absence in criticism always leaves me a bit suspicious. (2)

Though the passage now sounds overly defensive, such maneuvering evidently felt necessary for a writer wishing to be taken seriously by fellow academics in the wake of the polarized simplifications of the culture wars. Levine wants to suggest that the categories “literature” and “the aesthetic” are not identical with instrumentality or politics, but needs to ensure that this suggestion will not lead readers to group him with conservative thinkers on education like William Bennett and Lynne Cheney.
Mukařovský’s *Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts* (1936), Bérubé defines the aesthetic not as an unchanging property of objects, but as a socially contingent function. On this understanding, aesthetic analysis need not mean defending the superiority of the traditional canon. Similarly, Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) redefines the aesthetic in an attempt to make the concept more democratic. In Armstrong’s redefinition, the aesthetic does not reside in an object’s fixed or measurable quantity of beauty. Instead, the aesthetic resides “in the processes and practices of consciousness—playing and dreaming, thinking and feeling” (Armstrong 2). We all perform these affective and cognitive processes, even though we direct them toward different objects. Sianne Ngai offers an alternate approach. Rather than redefining the aesthetic itself, she asks that we reconsider “Our Aesthetic Categories” (2010). Ngai supplements venerable aesthetic categories like the beautiful and the sublime with categories like the zany, the interesting, and the cute, which offer analytic traction in late capitalist society where ubiquitous advertising and aesthetic commodities have rendered aesthetic experience “less rarefied but also less intense” (951). She treats aesthetic categories as double: “as rhetorical judgments and as objective styles: cute as a verbal evaluation compelled by subjective feelings called up by objects in a certain context and cuteness as a sensuous quality attributed to objects themselves” (952, emphasis in original). Ngai’s methodology highlights the enduring and puzzling duality of the aesthetic, the way that aesthetic discourse concerns both a subject’s experience and an object’s qualities. Victorian taste discourse, I will argue, foregrounds and explores this duality.
Why are literary critics proclaiming a return to “the aesthetic,” and not to “art” or “literature”? I suspect the answer is that literary critics today, myself included, are wary of making substantive claims about cultural objects. In his influential Cultural Capital (1993), John Guillory critiques the polarized simplifications on both sides of the canon debates. One of his main points is that we can talk about aesthetics and judgment without talking about “aesthetic value.” To support this argument, Guillory recovers the history of the concept of value, and the history of aesthetic discourse before Kant. My study pursues the challenge of thinking the aesthetic without “value” by elucidating how Victorian cultural critics used the rubric of taste to assert, challenge, and re-imagine the links between aesthetic object and perceiving subject, between art and life, and between individual and community,

Guillory indicates two important reasons to eschew the concept of aesthetic value. First, it invites the hierarchical ranking of artworks, an enterprise that is politically and intellectually dubious. Second, he argues, aesthetic value can only be conceived in (usually antagonistic) relation to exchange value. I would add a third reason: value is a particularly empty signifier, one that tends to stop inquiry rather than encourage it. Even the most sophisticated analyses of aesthetic value, analyses that seek to explicate aesthetic value rather than to validate a canon, can easily become an exercise in substituting one kind of “value” for another. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction (1979), a perceptive contribution to the hermeneutics of suspicion and one to which I will return in Chapter 5, equates aesthetic value with cultural capital. Aesthetic value turns out to be another kind of value, a kind that is more real because it provides an advantage in class struggle. Bourdieu persuasively identifies mechanisms whereby individuals and
classes use aesthetic judgment as a symbolic strategy to accrue social status. Yet there is something reductive in a theory that can only explain the nature of one kind of value by saying that it is another kind of value. Exchange value remains the implicit organizing term with or against which all other values are defined.\(^4\)

The tendency to substitute one kind of value for another is apparent even in the work of a critic like Mukařovský, who, unlike Bourdieu, attempts to identify the nature of aesthetic value rather than demystify it. Often citing empirical examples, Mukařovský argues that social contexts determine which objects are considered art, and which norms are applied to art at a given time. (Individual subjectivity also plays a role, he acknowledges, but is too unpredictable to form the basis of his analysis.) Mukařovský does not believe that the social constitution of aesthetic categories renders aesthetic value merely an illusion. Yet when he begins arguing that aesthetic value may be a real characteristic of material artifacts, Mukařovský changes the terms of his problem. For the initial question (is aesthetic value an attribute of objects?), he substitutes another: how does aesthetic value relate to other schemes of value? In Mukařovský’s account, not only does the viewer bring her own extra-aesthetic values to the aesthetic encounter, but “all elements of a work of art, in form and content, possess extra-aesthetic values which, within the work, enter into mutual relationships” (88). The work of art, both form and content, is a structure that holds extra-aesthetic values in relation and allows for new relationships among them (88-90). Social and historical conditions, not to mention the

\(^4\) There is a large body of critical theory, often drawing on Bourdieu, that critiques claims to intrinsic aesthetic or moral value. See for instance Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Contingencies of Value* (1988), to which Guillory responds in *Cultural Capital. The New Economic Criticism* (1999), ed. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, extends such critiques to economic value. See also Mary Poovey’s *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008) on the contingency of both economic and literary value in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.
viewer’s subjectivity, will alter those extra-aesthetic values. But, Mukařovský concludes, “the degree of independent value of an artistic artifact will be greater to the degree that the bundle of extra-aesthetic values which it attracts is greater, and to the degree that it is able to intensify the dynamism of their mutual connection” (91). Mukařovský’s definition of aesthetic value does not entail formal rules or principles, but he does favor complexity and multiplicity held in dynamic tension. The greater the internal tension among the extra-aesthetic values held together in an artwork, the greater the likelihood that the artwork will challenge, rather than confirm, the viewer’s values and society’s, and thus the better the artwork (92-93). In other words, for Mukařovský, aesthetic value is a relationship among other kinds of value. Once again, value is explained by . . . value.

If value is an outstandingly empty signifier, taste is an elusive one. However, its elusiveness is productive in that it foregrounds the inevitable interplay, in any aesthetic experience or judgment, between an object’s properties and a perceiver’s subjectivity. An object may be in good taste, or it may suit my individual taste. In contrast to the distanced senses of sight and hearing, the metaphor of taste suggests that aesthetic consumption affects us immediately and viscerally. It also raises the question of how we communicate or share aesthetic evaluations when they are grounded in experiences as intense and individual as the pleasure of biting into a perfect peach, or the displeasure of biting into a mealy one.

Writing a critical history of Victorian taste discourse frees me to pursue an aesthetic analysis that avoids making claims about the innate attributes of objects, and that registers an important insight from ideology critique: our aesthetic categories and judgments are socially mediated. Furthermore, tracking changes in taste discourse is an
analytic strategy that avoids explaining one kind of value only in terms of another, while at the same time it provides traction for exploring how central Victorian critics theorized the relationship between art and life.

In an age of capitalist expansion, democratic reform, and increased access to consumer goods, Victorian cultural critics wrestled with, in Linda Dowling’s words, a “continually repressed suspicion” that people lack an innate aesthetic or moral sense, and are in fact “mere creatures of appetite and unreason” (24). Taste is a fruitful category for wrestling with this problem precisely because it is ambiguous. As a category of aesthetic reception, does it denote a judgment, a perception, or a desire? Judgment is easily associated with rule-following, proper deliberation, and responsible decision-making. Desire is more easily associated with unreason and lack of control. Yet desire can also be associated with an alternative account of virtue, one in which virtue is a matter of being, of subjectivity and relationship. Because it can be read as an index of either the individual or of her social environment, taste can be used to associate aesthetics with ethics by writers who have opposing visions of the good life. For Ruskin, Arnold, and Wilde, these ambiguities make taste an attractive framework for connecting aesthetics to ethics while wrestling with the role of individual desire within visions of larger social goods.

This study examines how Ruskin, Arnold and Wilde link the aesthetic to the social and the ethical. In exploring the nature of these imagined relationships, I show how these three critics use the rubric of taste to assert, challenge, and re-imagine the relationships between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, between art and life, and between individual and collective. As we will see, “disinterestedness” is a contested key term describing the relationship of subject to aesthetic object. It means significantly
different things for the devout young Ruskin, for the older agnostic Ruskin, for the Anglican humanist Arnold, and for the Aesthete Wilde. When these three critics reconfigure the relationship between subject and object, they also reconfigure the relationship between art and life in the service of three disparate ethical visions.

In very general terms, Ruskin maintains an uneasy balance between claims about objective properties and claims about subjective pleasures as he links art to a paternalistic, communitarian ethics that emphasizes both interdependence and hierarchical authority. Arnold swings the balance in favor of the aesthetic object. In his liberal individualist view, art must be an arena of objective judgments if it is to serve any social or ethical use in a world where individual desire, if it goes unreformed, sows anarchy. Reacting against Arnold’s moralistic aesthetics and object-centered criticism, Wilde treats the aesthetic encounter as defined by subjectivity and individual taste. His subjectivism is in tension with his claims about the objective properties of the abstract category “Art.” Wilde articulates an anti-conventional, individualist ethics in which human flourishing requires supreme autonomy.

One of the larger purposes of this project is simply to demonstrate how multivalent the aesthetic can be. In the late twentieth century, when literary critics branded the aesthetic as one more mystification supporting bourgeois hegemony, they were treating a single simplified post-Kantian strand of aesthetics as if it subsumed all aesthetic theory and experience. This strand defined the aesthetic as uniquely disinterested. Only if disinterestedness and autonomy are regarded as necessary attributes of the aesthetic—and only if inutility is then taken as the guarantee of disinterestedness—can we discredit the aesthetic merely by pointing out that it often serves utilitarian and
ideological functions. As this study will show, “disinterestedness” was a contested term in Victorian aesthetics. The fact that thinkers with opposing individualist or communitarian ethical models both deploy taste to configure their ideal relationship between the individual and society demonstrates that the aesthetic is not a monolithic category with a single ideological impulse. Its flexibility made taste useful to Victorians for naturalizing and challenging an array of ideological positions.

Although I need a working range of definitions of taste in order to do any analysis, one of my points is that taste, like the aesthetic generally, does not have a fixed definition or stable ideological orientation. My working definition of taste is that it is a function of both social and aesthetic conditions, a function that structures personal experience and mediates between individuals and imagined communities. The perceiving and desiring subject is implicit in taste in a way that she is not implicit in abstract aesthetics. As a lived experience of the aesthetic, taste can shape how both self and community are imagined. We distinguish among people based on their preferences for George Eliot or Charles Dickens, for Budweiser or craft beer, for Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Picasso. On an almost daily basis, we read taste as if it can tell us not just about objects, but also about subjects and the groups to which they belong, whether by socioeconomic class, education, or lifestyle. Thus taste unites aesthetics, material culture, and self-expression or self-fashioning while locating them within time, place, and social space.

I do not regard either taste or the aesthetic as defined by disinterestedness. However, because taste mediates between individual and shared perceptions, desires, and judgments, it (and the aesthetic more broadly) is an arena in which subjects may come
not to disinterestedness or to universally shared judgments, but to a self-reflective augmentation or alteration of perception, interest, and judgment. I use the aesthetic to name that dimension of experience in which relationships of form and content give us pleasure that can become shared with others. I treat aesthetics as heterogeneous and impure, not as a realm separate from daily experience or socioeconomic structures. Thus, “the aesthetic” is a larger category than “art.” However, when I speak of Ruskin’s or Arnold’s or Wilde’s aesthetics, I am designating their specific theories. In Ruskin’s case, his aesthetics encompass both natural and manmade artifacts. Arnold’s and Wilde’s aesthetics are limited to art.

When I refer to Ruskin’s, Arnold’s, or Wilde’s ethics, I am interested in their theories of human flourishing. I focus on what they respectively consider the optimum relation between individual and collective. Thus my analysis of the ethical overlaps with an analysis of how these Victorian critics imagined the social. A crucial point of disagreement among them concerns what constitutes self-development, and whether or not individual self-development is at odds with collective welfare.

I argue that Victorian cultural critics from Ruskin to Wilde used taste to connect aesthetics to ethics as they alternately participated in and resisted two powerful trends: the increasing tendency to imagine aesthetic production and reception as an autonomous realm unconnected to other kinds of production and consumption, and the increasing tendency to treat aesthetic desires as individualized preferences unconnected to larger issues or norms. Influenced by Guillory’s history of aesthetic discourse and by Regenia Gagnier’s theory of individuation, Chapter 2 traces changes in taste discourse between the early 1700s and the late 1800s in order to provide background on these two trends.
Eighteenth-century theories of taste usefully defamiliarize aesthetic autonomy and disinterestedness. Under these earlier conceptual frameworks, it is possible to read individual tastes in the register of broad concepts like social interaction or even human nature, not in the narrower registers of aesthetics or personal preference. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, taste goes from denoting a category of judgments, perceptions, or rules considered to have general validity to denoting a category of individual perception or desire. The eighteenth century also witnesses the breakup of moral philosophy into the specialized discourses of aesthetics and political economy. The concept of disinterestedness plays an increasing role in differentiating aesthetic from appetitive pleasures. Very often, as in Coleridge’s case, writers promoting aesthetic disinterestedness attempt to prove that art or beauty must be disinterested because it is useless. A series of overlapping binary oppositions underwrite each other on the way to the supreme autonomy of “art for art’s sake”: disinterestedness vs. interestedness, the aesthetic vs. utility, intrinsic value vs. instrumental value.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the ramifications of these oppositions for John Ruskin’s evolving ethical aesthetics. I read Ruskin’s early The Poetry of Architecture (1837-38) along with better-known works like Modern Painters (1843-60), The Stones of Venice (1851-53), and Unto This Last (1860/62). It is the contradictions of taste—its ability to signify idiosyncratic pleasure and impartial judgment—that makes taste discourse so amenable to a thinker who, like Ruskin, has conflicting loyalties to order and to particularity, to external reality and to internal emotional experience. Initially, Ruskin’s desire to prove art’s moral utility leads him to deploy an opposition between beauty and

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5 A date range indicates serial periodical publication or the publication of multiple volumes. Two dates separated by a slash indicate periodical publication followed by publication in volume form.
utility that has the unintended effect of suggesting that art exists on some separate, transcendent plane apart from social life. Over the course of his long career, Ruskin’s notion of art’s utility changes as his ethical thinking becomes less theocentric and more anthropocentric. The opposition that Ruskin’s early work sets up between useful and beautiful objects, and between interested and disinterested viewers, is undermined by his later reliance on a methodology that foregrounds interdependence as a structural principle in everything from artistic composition to human society. As his aesthetic theories increasingly foreground interdependence, Ruskin reads taste as an expression not just of individual personality or moral status, but as an expression of the individual’s social environment.

Ruskin’s aggregate approach to taste resists the central, and enduring, assumptions of Victorian liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism: the assumption that the socioeconomic order is composed of discrete individuals who should be free to pursue their own interests as long as they do not harm others, and the illusion that being able to pay for goods and services means that we are independently capable of satisfying our own needs. At the same time, although Ruskin resists the idea that individual taste is an adequate guide for aesthetic preferences or economic choices, he nonetheless uses taste to carve a space for individual desire and subjective perception within his vision of a society where beauty has a special moral utility because it transforms our capacity to feel. Although Ruskin does try to claim some kind of disinterestedness for aesthetic perception, his work as a whole both asserts and interrogates the crucial opposition between utility and beauty’s intrinsic value, between an interested encounter with art and the disinterested contemplation of it.
Ruskin receives two chapters both because his body of work is remarkably large and self-contradictory, and because, despite his prominence in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, a twenty-first century American audience is unlikely to know his work. Chapter 5 turns to a figure who is more familiar to contemporary literary critics: Matthew Arnold. I argue that Arnold finds taste an inadequate framework for connecting aesthetics to ethics because he fears the untrammeled expression of individual preference while at the same time, unlike Ruskin, he sees individuals rather than pre-existing relationships as the basic units of society. Disinterested evaluation is much more important for Arnold than it is for Ruskin. By reconfiguring how aesthetic discourse positions the perceiving subject’s relation vis-à-vis the aesthetic object, and by defining criticism as a practice of making claims about an object’s intrinsic properties, Arnold impoverishes his vocabulary for analyzing the subjective processes and social contexts that condition aesthetic preferences. As a result, despite his belief in literature’s moral and social utility, many of his statements influentially promote the idea that literary texts have intrinsic value. With claims to intrinsic value come claims to autonomy.

It is only because Kant has been so influential in philosophical aesthetics and because Arnold has been so influential in professional literary criticism that critiques of post-Kantian and Arnoldian aesthetic disinterestedness can appear as successful attacks on the aesthetic and literature per se. However, I am not interested in casting Arnold as the cardboard villain in either Victorian taste discourse or twentieth-century canon debates. To a remarkable and rarely acknowledged degree, we literary critics are the heirs
of Victorian aesthetic and educational thought.\textsuperscript{6} Or rather, we acknowledge our inheritance mainly by dismissing (or in a few cases, defending) Arnold’s dictum about “the best which has been thought and said.”\textsuperscript{7} I place Arnold’s declarations about objective aesthetic evaluation in the context of the longer arguments he develops in works like \textit{On Translating Homer} (1861), and I contextualize his notorious “touchstone” method against the backdrop of publishing innovations in poetry anthologies. My chapter concludes with a reading of what Arnold gains and loses by preferring “culture” to “taste” as a framework for connecting aesthetics to ethics in \textit{Culture and Anarchy} (1867-68/69). A more nuanced historical appreciation of how Victorians like Arnold inherited and altered eighteenth-century taste discourse can give us a better grasp of questions about the role of the aesthetic in today’s literary profession. Even though the objectivist rationale for Arnold’s practical agenda has been discredited, literary critics typically accept, and even defend, his agenda itself: the inclusion of the humanities, especially literature, in school curricula.

\textsuperscript{6} See Dinah Birch’s \textit{Our Victorian Education} (2008) for a recent analysis of how much modern educational thought owes to the Victorians.

\textsuperscript{7} But what exactly was that dictum? For reference, here is the entire sentence from which his famous words are lifted:

\begin{quote}
The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. (\textit{C&A} 5)
\end{quote}

Perhaps Arnold’s reputation is the victim of his own needle-sharp prose. It is all too easy to lift snappy passages from his writing and turn them into slogans without attending to their context. If his prose were more ponderous, we might limit ourselves to disagreeing with, rather than vilifying him.
Intervening in the longstanding debate over whether Oscar Wilde’s aesthetic theory entails ethical or social commitments, Chapter 6 briefly analyzes Wilde’s early journalism and public lectures before turning to his more substantial work in *Intentions* (1891) and *The Soul of Man* (1891/95). Wilde’s impressionist criticism grants the validity and inevitability of subjectivity and desire in the aesthetic encounter. Consequently, Wilde’s theory requires a new incarnation of disinterestedness. He locates disinterestedness and autonomy neither in the perceiver’s attitude nor in the artwork’s formal attributes, but in the abstract category “Art.” Though Wilde’s subjectivism and “art for art’s sake” attitude represent a departure from Ruskin’s and Arnold’s thinking, the older men cleared the way not just for Wilde’s declaration of aesthetic autonomy, but even for the strategies he uses to make that declaration.

I argue that Wilde intertwines claims for the priority of subjectivity with claims for the disinterestedness and autonomy of “Art” in a way that erases the social context of any given aesthetic encounter and suggests that the individual’s ethical development depends upon a similar removal from the social. Partly because of the perceived relativism and performativity in Wilde’s writings, late twentieth-century criticism treated him more kindly than it did Arnold. However, any celebration of Wilde’s anti-essentialism should acknowledge the paradox that even as Wilde theorizes an unstable aesthetic subjectivity, he simultaneously models the perceiving subject on a category of objects for which he makes essentializing claims: Art with a capital “A.” The subject partakes of Wilde’s claims for the autotelic artwork’s self-sufficiency, erasing social context and rendering the subject grandly isolated. Wilde’s ethical goal differs from that of earlier theorists, who saw the aesthetic as a means to imagine (or, more cynically, to
defuse) tensions between individual desire and group consensus. Instead of using the aesthetic to reconcile individual to society or to model a non-coercive consensus, Wilde uses the aesthetic to configure an ethical vision of the individual’s freedom not just from constraint, but even from interdependence and relationship. Nonetheless, Wilde never quite succeeds in erasing the possibility that the individual’s ethical development might be bound up in, rather than antithetical to, the social. At the end of the Victorian era, even for a writer like Wilde who declares art’s autonomy, the aesthetic remains a powerful resource for the ethical imagination.
CHAPTER TWO
THE HISTORY OF TASTE

In order to understand how Victorian critics used taste to configure the relationship of aesthetics to ethics and of individual to society, we need to explore the concepts and problems that they inherited under the rubric of taste. Outlining the history of British taste discourse from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, this chapter focuses on two trends that Ruskin, Arnold, and Wilde would both contribute to and contest: the increasing tendency to imagine aesthetic production and reception as autonomous, and the increasing tendency to treat aesthetic desires as private preferences unconnected to social issues or ethical norms. As we will see, the histories of aesthetic autonomy and of individuated taste overlap.

The concept of aesthetic autonomy is not a necessary attribute of either art or aesthetic discourse. In the eighteenth century, moral philosophers grouped economic, ethical, and aesthetic concerns together as aspects of human social behavior. As I trace the disaggregation of these concerns, I rely on primary sources and on critics who have begun reevaluating aesthetic history, often through an interdisciplinary lens: Martha Woodmansee on eighteenth-century German aesthetics, John Macarthur on architecture and the British picturesque, Guillory and Gagnier on the intertwined histories of aesthetics and political economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, developments in education and publishing meant that aesthetics, ethics, and economics were well on their
way to being separate, professionalized discourses. In the sphere of high culture, avant-garde Victorian artists like Wilde declared art’s autonomy from social and moral concerns, its superiority to merely instrumental or economic value. Inspired by French literary and artistic movements, these artists and their consumers summarized their position in the slogan “art for art's sake.” In universities, the new discipline of English legitimated itself by demonstrating a quasi-scientific philological rigor and by invoking the non-instrumental, intrinsic value of national literature (Graff 81). An evolving theory of “disinterestedness” played a crucial role in separating art from life by enabling nineteenth-century writers to differentiate between subjective desires and objective judgments, between appetitive and aesthetic pleasures, between utility and intrinsic aesthetic value.

As disinterestedness became more central to cultural understandings of taste and the aesthetic, the social stakes of taste consequently changed. During the nineteenth century, what Gagnier has called a “narrative of Individuation” became increasingly hegemonic (2). Individuation means something more than the attitude “each to his own taste.” It involves three related ideas: that taste expresses individual personality, that individual preference is the only valid norm governing choices about what to consume, and that the individual is the proper unit of analysis for explaining taste. Between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, taste goes from denoting a category of judgments, perceptions, or rules considered to have general validity to denoting a category of individual perception or desire. In the eighteenth century, it was possible to interpret differences in taste as evidence not just about individuals, but about society or human
nature. Understanding taste as private preference tends to dissociate it from larger social or ethical questions. However, the concepts of individuated taste and aesthetic autonomy did not appear overnight. Aesthetic discourses including taste discourse have a rich history of connecting to social and ethical concerns. Ruskin, Arnold, and Wilde would draw on this history as they used and revised the rubric of taste to connect art to their respective visions of the good life.

**From Moral Philosophy to Aesthetics**

To refer to the aesthetic concerns of eighteenth-century British writers is to assume a distinction that they themselves did not make. Founded in 1754, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce exemplifies this attitude that treats art as a category of human production much like any other (Denvir 11). As suggested by its name, this society was dedicated to a range of human activities that we now see as unrelated, perhaps even opposed. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, aided by the development of differentiated markets for artistic and literary commodities, the idea that art is a separate, free sphere of production and consumption became increasingly hegemonic.¹ Importantly, this autonomy was not instantaneous and was never complete.

For most of the eighteenth century, artistic judgments, virtue, politics, and economic activity were grouped together in the study of moral philosophy. The British

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¹ For a fine study of the developments in the literary marketplace in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Germany and England, see Martha Woodmansee’s *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (1994). Dianne Sachko Macleod’s *Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of Cultural Identity* (1996) is an in-depth study of how the British middle class took up the formerly aristocratic pastime of art patronage and collecting. Bernard Denvir’s series for Longman on “A documentary history of taste in Britain” reproduces primary sources, including some that describe the details of buying and selling visual art. See *The Eighteenth Century* (1983), *The Early Nineteenth Century* (1984), and *The Late Victorians* (1986).
tradition of moral philosophy discussed in this chapter includes Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), David Hume (1711-76), and Adam Smith (1723-90). These writers, especially Hume and Smith, understand all manmade objects as “works of art.”

Over the course of the eighteenth century, moral philosophers demonstrated an increasing interest in empirical sensation, and this interest eventually led to a new framework for understanding art. Older ideas of beauty relied on harmony, morals, and/or the “the immanence of the ideal” in the phenomenal (Macarthur 3). The new sensuous or “aesthetic” approach to art focused on sensation and perception rather than on traditional theories of mimesis, beauty, or the hierarchy of genres (Macarthur 4). Previously “a matter of perfection,” beauty was becoming a matter of pleasurable sensation (Macarthur 3-4).

Francis Hutcheson was the first English-speaking philosopher to offer a systematic, philosophical account of taste (Dickie 3-4). In An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (1725), Hutcheson posits a universal internal sense of beauty (i.e., a universal capacity for aesthetic pleasure). Due to this internal sense, all humans can (indeed, must) feel pleasure at beauty, which he defines as the appearance of uniformity in variety. Crucially, the internal sense functions automatically, just as our external senses do. For Hutcheson, this immediacy guarantees that taste is unmediated by reflection, desire, or interest. Differences in taste occur when other factors become involved in our mental transactions, but these differences do not negate the fact that we all possess a capacity to be pleased by beauty. Hutcheson makes this argument largely so
that he can launch the claim that we have an analogous, innate moral sense that also operates disinterestedly. Thus, in the first English philosophical account of taste, aesthetic concerns are secondary to a moral sense theory. Victorian critics would continue to link taste to ethics. However, Hutcheson’s theory that a pleasure’s immediacy guarantees its ethical status would prove a problematic inheritance for a writer like Arnold. Arnold recognized that enjoying art might require effort, and worried that his contemporaries derived immediate pleasure from partisan newspapers and cheap novels, sources he considered unedifying.

By naming aesthetic response, terms like “taste” and Hutcheson’s “internal sense” helped disentangle art production and reception from hierarchies of genres, from the canons of models and rules that had constituted the arts as disciplines. Within a few decades, writers like Edmund Burke (1729-97) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) would further promote this emphasis on perception and pleasure. However, these terms do not separate aesthetic perception and judgment from a wider array of perceptions and judgments. In moral philosophy, taste was not confined to a reified aesthetic plane. It was part of a larger spectrum of preferences and judgments embedded in human social interactions. Taste retains some of this breadth or doubleness: we still conceive of taste as applicable to objects in a range of categories from fine art to housewares.

If Hutcheson’s account of taste as a universal mental faculty is unconvincing, Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) offers an illuminating example of how a more empirically-minded moral philosopher integrates art production into the spectrum of human production, and taste into the spectrum of human judgments. Although we now
remember him for his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith would not have thought of himself as an economist. He was a moral philosopher studying civil society, and he continued to revise the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* until his death in 1790.

Smith does not isolate the aesthetic from social and economic life. For Smith, fitness (that is, “the appearance of utility”) is “one of the principal sources of beauty” (*TMS* 209). He goes so far as to argue that we often admire an object’s fitness for a purpose more than we value the purpose itself (210). To prove this point, he offers a series of examples ranging from the frivolous to the weighty (210-12). A man who is “curious in watches” will sell a less accurate timepiece and purchase a more accurate one, but this change will not make him more punctual (210). What he values is not so much the end (punctuality) as “the perfection of the machine which serves to attain it” (211). A more serious example is the poor man who toils away serving people whom he hates in order to satisfy his ambition for wealth (211-13). According to Smith, the man’s ambition is not due to desire for wealth as such, but to his admiration for the fitness of the objects that belong to the rich. The wealthy possess “numberless artificial and elegant contrivances” that are perfectly adjusted for “promoting this ease or pleasure” (213).

Using his favorite metaphor of machinery, Smith continues,

Power and riches appear then to be, what they are, enormous and operose machines contrived to produce a few trifling conveniences to the body, consisting of springs the most nice and delicate, which must be kept in order with the most anxious attention. . . . If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light. We naturally
confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or oeconomy by means of which it is produced. (213-14)

Paradoxically, the figure of the beautiful machine unites utility and beauty while also treating them as disjunctive. On the one hand, Smith’s suggestion that our pleasure in beautiful objects derives from their orderly formal arrangement rather than from their “contemptible” material utility is a step toward a formalist account of intrinsic aesthetic value. On the other hand, “fitness” is hardly a criterion of intrinsic or autonomous aesthetic worth. By designating the suitability of an arrangement for a particular purpose, “fitness” necessarily refers back to utility, and thus connects aesthetic pleasure to production and consumption more broadly. Our pursuit of orderly beauty drives our productive activity, and Smith waxes slightly lyrical about the rise of agriculture and government, the subjugation of nature to provide for humanity, and the appearance of “all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life” (215). As I will discuss in Chapter 3, nineteenth-century industrial designers would continue to use the term “fitness” to express the coexistence of beauty and utility as they strove to improve the appearance and function of British manufactures. In Victorian cultural criticism, however, the potential opposition between beauty and utility would be a defining problem.

The nineteenth-century political economists who looked to Smith as a forebear tended to forget that his political and economic analysis is part of a total theory of human behavior, a theory that defines admiration for beauty (i.e., fitness and order) as the force that drives civic and economic development. Political economy eventually became the field of professional economics, largely abandoning its initial investment in analyzing
political as well as financial systems. As a result, we now tend to think of Smith’s work in very reductive terms, imagining that he believed all human behavior to be driven by financial self-interest.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the disaggregation of moral philosophy into the separate and increasingly professionalized discourses of aesthetics and political economy. Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* persuasively argues that it required the eighteenth-century invention and subsequent specialization of “value” before art could seem autonomous and aesthetics could become a distinct discourse. Essentially, Guillory argues that eighteenth-century moral philosophers like Hume and Smith had a complex understanding of the relation between aesthetics and economics, and that more specialized discourses fail to account for the connections between these fields. Smith, for example, did not think of aesthetic and use values as opposites. But once Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* defines exchange value, aesthetic value and use value can be imagined in opposition to exchange value (Guillory 300-01). This specialization occurs in the context

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2 Guillory makes this historical argument in the service of a larger project. In the context of the 1980s canon debates, Guillory historicizes the category of value in order to argue that aesthetic pleasure and judgment do not have to involve either hierarchical ranking or opposition to use value. Guillory objects to the then-common critical tendency to dismiss the aesthetic as ideology. This dismissal is accomplished by reducing all of aesthetics to the concept of aesthetic value, which is then criticized as “a uniquely privileged kind of value” (271). Canon critique criticizes hegemonic values, but fails to interrogate the category of value itself (271).

3 Here is Smith’s canonical definition:

> The word VALUE, it is to be observed, has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called ‘value in use;’ the other, ‘value in exchange.’ The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use. (*WN* 28)

Exchange value is measured by money. It is an abstract category that flattens out any properties that cannot be expressed by price. Use value is much more varied. It can reside both in an object’s specific properties,
of a struggle to differentiate artworks from the growing number of commodities (xiii).

Aesthetics emerges as the theory of aesthetic value, now conceived in opposition to market value and imagined to be autonomous. Meanwhile, political economy analyzes exchange value. Practitioners of aesthetics and political economy promptly forget their previous connection (315-17). In Guillory’s words, “This mutual forgetting constitutes aesthetics and political economy as antithetical discourses, which between them divide the world of cultural production into works of art and commodities” (317). Aesthetic critics go on to develop “a theory of the incommensurability of aesthetic and economic values, on the basis of the inutility of the aesthetic object”—a far cry from Adam Smith’s simultaneously formal and utilitarian definition of beauty as fitness (317). The result, in Guillory’s opinion, is that political economy reduces its explanatory power by limiting its vocabulary for discussing “the complexity of social relations” (325).

My purpose in providing this overview of how specialized aesthetic discourse emerged is to point out that when we analyze Victorian avant-garde declarations of art’s autonomy, we need to locate them within a larger history of how economic and aesthetic discourses became differentiated and professionalized.\(^4\) Importantly, this process of separating art from society was not smooth or uniform. Chapters 3 and 4 show that Ruskin both supports and interrogates the idea that aesthetic production and consumption are unrelated to other kinds of production and desire. In contrast, Arnold and Wilde

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\(^4\) Mary Poovey’s *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008) offers a more detailed history of how aesthetic and economic writing became professionalized. Gagnier’s *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000) analyzes how the 1870s marginal revolution further separated economics from political economy’s civic investments.
largely take for granted that art’s intrinsic value renders it autonomous and disconnected from life. Arnold strives to overcome this disconnection, while Wilde celebrates it. Yet, as I show in Chapter 6, even Wilde’s individualistic aesthetic theories incorporate some commitment to the social and ethical.

**Historicizing Disinterestedness**

Tracking theories of taste’s purported disinterestedness through their permutations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will clarify how Victorian taste theories use and revise earlier aesthetic discourse. The disinterested mode of aesthetic perception takes the aesthetic object as an end in itself. It is impersonal in the sense that it puts the self and self-interest aside. This mode of attention contrasts with an ethical engagement with actions or wider social relations. It endorses a counter-ethic in which contemplation is a higher good than action.

Disinterestedness is a key concept because it allows critics to differentiate art and literature from interested, utilitarian production as well as from conventional morality. Yet because disinterestedness simultaneously and paradoxically implies that art and literature—not to mention artists, authors, viewers, and readers—should conform to some moral standard of impartiality or even altruism, the exact ethical function of taste’s disinterestedness is a contested topic for Victorian cultural critics. Disinterestedness is also a keyword for twentieth-century ideology critique because exposing the aesthetic’s “interested” functions was a central strategy for discrediting the aesthetic wholesale.

As one facet of aesthetic autonomy, aesthetic disinterestedness has a long history that can shed light not only on Victorian cultural criticism, but also on how we define
twenty-first-century literary study in relation to the aesthetic, pleasure, and judgment. The concept of disinterested judgment emerged, not from aesthetic discourse proper, but from a definition of virtue in moral philosophy. In the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, disinterestedness became increasingly aligned with the aesthetic. A crucial figure in this process is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who influentially formulated the idea that taste judgments are disinterested. Because they are disinterested, taste judgments are universally valid. Influenced by Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) introduced the idea that taste as aesthetic pleasure (not just taste as aesthetic judgment) is disinterested. He set aesthetic pleasure against appetitive pleasure, articulating an opposition between art and utility or human need.

By formulating the related ideas that aesthetic judgment and pleasure are both disinterested, Kant and Coleridge promote the belief that art is an autonomous, higher realm and that aesthetic judgments can be universally valid, unmediated by social, political, or economic power. In this paradigm, aesthetic pleasures are ends in themselves, while appetitive pleasures are merely a means to an end. To understand why the aesthetic need not be equated with Kantian and Coleridgean theories of disinterested taste, I will subsequently turn to the work of Edmund Burke (1729-97) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), along with the lesser-known associationist writer Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824). Rather than assuming the purity of taste, these writers grapple with the possibility that aesthetic pleasure is subjective, relative, and mixed with appetitive pleasure.
Notably, taste’s purported disinterestedness did not have a single, predictable ideological valance between 1700 and 1900. How could it, given how drastically British society changed between those dates? In the span of two centuries, a conservative defense of the status quo went from meaning defense of aristocratic agricultural interests to defense of middle-class industrial and mercantile interests.

I provide the following short history of disinterestedness to establish three points. First, taste can (and in the eighteenth century, did) involve processes of perceiving, knowing, and judging that negotiate between the individual and the group, and that are not limited to the aesthetic. Second, by showing how taste became identified with disinterestedness, I establish that, as a category of aesthetic reception, taste need not make grand claims to disinterestedness. Here I am contradicting the proposition (dating back to Hutcheson and continuing through Kant and his followers) that taste is disinterested, a proposition that tends to define the aesthetic realm against the social and the economic, where self-interest presumably rules. Finally, I suggest that we need not treat aesthetic pleasure as opposed to utility, need, and desire. It seems more accurate to think of pleasures as potentially addressing a range of human faculties and needs at any given time.

Disinterestedness emerges in early eighteenth-century ethical and religious debates and only gradually comes to name a specifically aesthetic mode of perception (Stolnitz 132). Previously, there was no single model of appropriate aesthetic response, let alone a single model centered on disinterested contemplation of an artwork. Indeed, as
I stated, it is anachronistic to speak of an identifiably and uniquely “aesthetic” experience or theory in eighteenth-century Britain.

In the 1960s, Jerome Stolnitz pointed out that it is the Whig moral philosopher Shaftesbury who introduces the concept of disinterestedness in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Stolnitz tracks how Shaftesbury develops the meaning of “disinterestedness” in contrast to other terms. For Shaftesbury, “interest” refers not only to a desire for one’s individual good, but also to the concept of individual and social good generally. “Interestedness” is a practical term. It implies action taken to accomplish a goal, particularly an individual goal (Stolnitz 132). Due to Shaftesbury’s optimistic belief in human sociability and an orderly universe, public interest is always ultimately compatible with true private interest in *Characteristics* (Shaftesbury 193, 200). Though it is possible to take private interest too far, and thus to abandon one’s true interest, Shaftesbury treats private interest as legitimate (216-17, 225). In other words, he does not equate private interest with selfishness.

What Shaftesbury does find selfish is a Christian account of virtue that stresses future rewards and punishments. He has a Whiggish distaste for religious zealotry, and considers Christian emphasis on the afterlife tantamount to bribery. A “mercenary” calculation of one’s own gains in the afterlife replaces virtue’s “intrinsic worth or value” (Shaftesbury 46). For Shaftesbury, a rational creature cannot be virtuous until “he has come to have any affection towards what is morally good and can like or affect such good for its own sake, as good and amiable in itself” (188, emphasis mine). In this model,
virtue involves cultivating an internal disposition, not calculating the consequences of one’s actions.\footnote{Shaftesbury writes, For wrong is not such action as is barely the cause of harm (since at this rate a dutiful son, aiming at an enemy but, by mistake or ill chance, happening to kill his father, would do a wrong), but, when anything is done through insufficient or unequal affection (as when a son shows no concern for the safety of a father or, where there is need of succor, prefers an indifferent person to him), this is of the nature of wrong. (174)}

Stolnitz helpfully highlights the way that Shaftesbury’s account of virtue begins to shift the definition of virtue away from actions and consequences, toward perception, affection, and contemplation—in other words, towards reflective experiences like those that will come to be designated as aesthetic (Stolnitz 132-33). As Shaftesbury puts it, virtue consists not just in telling the difference between right and wrong, but in having “a real affection or love towards equity and right for its own sake and on the account of its own natural beauty and worth” (178). He writes,

The case is the same in the mental or moral subjects as in the ordinary bodies or common subjects of sense. The shapes, motions, colours and proportions of these latter being presented to our eye, there necessarily results a beauty or deformity, according to the different measure, arrangement, and disposition of their several parts. So in behaviour and actions, when presented to our understanding, there must be found, of necessity, an apparent difference, according to the regularity or irregularity of the subjects. (172)

According to Stolnitz, Shaftesbury here suggests “that genuine moral and religious concern are with what is intrinsic and that they are therefore terminal” (132, my emphasis). This proposition does tend to isolate aesthetic perception and art from the social relations in which they are embedded.

However, that separation was only nascent in the eighteenth century. My purpose in rehearsing Shaftesbury’s theories is to demonstrate just how moralistic and even civic-
minded the discourse of taste could be. Shaftesbury’s ideal of polite cultivation slides very easily between taste in manners and taste in morals, all in the service of a gentlemanly vision of responsible participation in civil society—participation that was, of course, limited to men of property. Shaftesbury goes so far as to assert that “To philosophize . . . is but to carry good breeding a step higher” (6). Taste discourse is concerned not simply with personal preferences, but with processes of judgment and with how judgments become communicated and shared. Macarthur even argues that in Shaftesburian Whig social thought, “The ability to judge art, or more precisely, to have judgements of art that can be displayed and negotiated, was thought to require the same faculty as political judgement” (74).

Shaftesbury’s influence makes disinterestedness a common concept in eighteenth-century British thought (Stolnitz 134). In order to make room for disinterestedness in their discussions of aesthetic perception, eighteenth-century thinkers tend to rely on the concept of mental faculties that operate automatically (140). Notably, this reliance on mental faculties implies that aesthetic perception is removed from action and from the conscious operation of interest. As mentioned previously, Hutcheson’s “internal sense” is a mental faculty analogous to the external senses precisely because it operates without the mediation of interest or reflection. Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* provides an example of how aesthetic discourse adopts disinterestedness from Hutchesonian moral sense theory while continuing to rely upon immediacy as the guarantee of disinterestedness.
Burke defines beauty as the “quality or qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (83). Specifically, he means “sensible” qualities that affect us immediately on sight (83). Burke defines this beauty-driven disinterested love in opposition to desire and lust, which incorporate a drive for possession and use (83).

Burke participates in a venerable tradition of defining beauty as a quality in women that attracts heterosexual men. He offers a remarkable parable: where male animals choose any available member of “the sex” without distinction, beauty helps men differentiate and choose among possible mates (39).

Burke’s account of beauty and love raises questions of how we get from unmediated biological desires and dislikes (desire for a mate, disgust at rotting meat) to culturally mediated desires and dislikes. Furthermore, connecting beauty to mate selection and reproduction complicates the meaning of disinterestedness. Beauty is playing an instrumental function (arousing love and social bonds, leading to reproduction) that cannot be said to serve the subject alone (it creates new relationships and people). Perhaps we are hearing an echo of Shaftesbury’s faith that the common good cannot contradict true private interest. Burke is willing to imagine that disinterested, beauty-provoked love can coexist with desire (83). In this tolerance for impurity, he differs from late-twentieth-century opponents of the aesthetic for whom the taint of interest and utility proved that the aesthetic is a tool for maintaining hegemony, and can be nothing more.

According to Woodmansee, disinterestedness appears much more abruptly in German aesthetics. There, by 1735, the young Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-62)
was calling for a new “‘science of sensuous knowledge’” (Woodmansee “Moritz” 26). He coined the term “aesthetic” to mean “‘received by the senses,’” indicating “an empirical account of perception prior to the feelings and thoughts that attach to perceptions” (Macarthur 3). In response to specific conditions of professional authorship, Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–93) became the first to systematically formulate art’s disinterestedness, its self-containment and autonomy (Woodmansee “Moritz” 22-23). In doing so, he departs from Baumgarten’s emphasis on sensuous knowledge. In Woodmansee’s persuasive account, German aesthetic disinterestedness is originally “a displaced theology” in which the artwork takes on the characteristics of God (33). Art is an autonomous object to be contemplated disinterestedly, a process analogous to the disinterested contemplation and love that Moritz’s Pietist upbringing had taught him to direct toward God. In Moritz’s words, artworks are “‘self-sufficient totalities’” that we can contemplate “‘for their own sake’” (qtd. in 22). Moritz’s aesthetic theory responds to problems that increased literacy and a growing print market posed for the emerging class of professional writers. Faced with his own poor sales and with those of other serious German writers when compared to sensational and supernatural tales, Moritz locates art’s value beyond the reach of market demand (46). In other words, he has a real stake in theorizing aesthetic disinterestedness.

Moritz’s thought breaks with traditional mimetic theories of art. It also breaks with the instrumentalist, affective theory of his teacher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). Mendelssohn theorized that what unifies the fine arts is their ability to move audiences (Woodmansee “Moritz” 27). Moritz’s claim that art has intrinsic value contrasts with
earlier perceptions of art “as intervening directly in human life” and thus as something that can be judged instrumentally, on how it performs “broad human purposes” like communicating belief (23). As a result, Moritz produces an aesthetic theory that treats art as a discrete realm of human activity and that rejects the possibility that art’s value could have any grounding in audience reactions (30, 46).

Both Shaftesbury and Moritz help to make possible the idea that art is disconnected from life and action. Moritz’s descriptions of disinterested contemplation of God and of art are both models of non-instrumental reflection. Similarly, Shaftesbury’s theory of virtue involves loving virtue for its own sake, not for the sake of positive consequences. Both men align aesthetic disinterestedness with virtuous disinterestedness, but Moritz goes much further. In Shaftesbury’s theory of disinterestedness, the aesthetic analogy remains subsidiary to an argument about the nature of virtue. He also seems to focus on how the spectator or virtuous man should be disinterested. Moritz demands that the spectator, the art object itself, and the artist or writer all be disinterested. To the artist, he declares, “But if the actual purpose of your work was the pleasure you wished to effect rather than the perfection of the work itself, then the approval of the one or the other [audience] will for that very reason be suspect to me” (qtd. in Woodmansee “Moritz” 46).

British writers take much longer to become so hostile toward public taste, perhaps because the concept of sympathy remained central to British literary criticism for much of the nineteenth century.

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7 Even if he had not read Characteristics, Moritz almost certainly knew of Shaftesbury’s work through Mendelssohn (Woodmansee “Moritz” 31n14). However, his Pietist background would presumably have been a greater influence on his theories (31-33).
After Moritz, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) formulates aesthetic disinterestedness in a spectacularly influential way. Kant uses disinterestedness to solve a problem: the puzzling thing about judgments of taste is that they require assent (we expect others to agree with us that an object is beautiful) but they are not based on reason. Kant states this problem in the form of an antinomy. On one hand, taste *is not* based on concepts, i.e., everyone has his own taste. On the other, taste *is* based on concepts, i.e., it follows universal rules (Kant 210-11). When we look at an object, we do not judge that it is beautiful because our understanding has evaluated the object and subsumed it under an identifiable concept of beauty. Instead, taste judgments are nonconceptual and immediate, accompanied by (or perhaps grounded in) feelings of pleasure or displeasure. Kant observes that we judge something to be beautiful on the basis of our own pleasure, which is necessarily subjective. In other words, an object is beautiful *to me*. Yet we act as if beauty is a property of the object itself, thus implying that other people ought to recognize it. This object *is* beautiful, and anyone who does not feel its beauty is missing something (Kant 62-63). Why do we expect others to assent to a judgment that springs from an individual’s subjective experience of a particular object? By exploring taste judgments, Kant suggests that there are non-rational forms of knowledge:

If judgments of taste had (as cognitive judgments do) a determinate objective principle, then anyone making them in accordance with that principle would claim that his judgment is unconditionally necessary. If they had no principle at all, like judgments of the mere taste of sense, then the thought that they have a necessity would not occur to us at all. So they must have a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than by concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked. (87)
That subjective principle is the sensus communis. Rather than being an outer sense, the sensus communis is “the effect arising from the free play of our cognitive powers” (87). The sensus communis provides taste judgment with universality, but it is a “subjective universality” (54). Taste’s universality is not based on properties of objects. It is based on the assumption that aesthetic pleasure and displeasure are communicable, and that we all have the capacity to feel them (53-54, 57-60).

In order to be subjective, aesthetic pleasure/displeasure must be based on feeling. But in order to be universal, aesthetic pleasure/displeasure cannot be based on utility, interest, materiality, or anything socially or culturally specific to a particular encounter between subject and object. Kant puts this proposition in extreme terms:

> Everyone has to admit that if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it. (46)

Aesthetic pleasure/displeasure does not arise from our relationship to the object itself, and certainly not from the ways we might use it. Instead, aesthetic pleasure/displeasure arises from something internal to the act of judgment, from the balance or play between imagination and understanding as we contemplate the object. Thus taste’s disinterestedness guarantees the universality of judgments of the beautiful while allowing them to remain subjective rather than conceptual. Taste judgments are based on feeling, but not on anyone’s particular feelings.

Even though Kant’s overall goal is to critique the idea that all knowledge must be rational (subsuming particulars to abstract concepts) and to provide a more nuanced
description of human cognition and judgment, the overall effect of the third *Critique* is to provide taste judgments with a magnificent insularity from any concerns not contained within the moment of disinterested perception, pleasure/displeasure, and judgment. As Terry Eagleton points out in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), the price of this subjective universality is an account of aesthetic experience that evacuates it of sensuousness and particularity. This account differentiates aesthetic pleasure from other pleasures by negating the possibility that aesthetic pleasure/displeasure can have a basis in anything beyond the bounds of the moment of contemplation. From Kant onwards, philosophical aesthetics, art criticism, and popular thought tend to take for granted that there is a certain mode of perception or attention appropriate to beauty, and that this mode is characterized by disinterestedness (Stolnitz 131).\(^8\) One way to guarantee disinterestedness is to define art against utility, and Kant goes so far as to argue that we are not even concerned with the aesthetic object’s existence, let alone its use.

When critics object to aesthetics as a middle-class form of discipline or an ideological ploy, they are usually objecting to this Kantian formula of autonomous art objects plus self-regulating, “disinterested,” bourgeois subjects. For Kant, the judgment of taste is unique because, rather than subsuming particulars to an a priori law of beauty as a rational judgment would, it discovers the unstateable law in the aesthetic object itself. This distinction makes aesthetic judgment productive and free: taste makes *and* applies a law, rather than merely applying it. Thus autonomy and self-regulation characterize

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\(^8\) The concept of disinterestedness was not limited to moral philosophy. According to Macarthur, disinterestedness appears in applied aesthetic theory, specifically, in late eighteenth-century landscape gardening. Many landowners understood their picturesque improvements as disinterested and thus unrelated to an economic interest in land. It became fashionable to create views that erased signs of labor and commerce (Macarthur 75-76).
Kant’s aesthetics. Once disinterestedness and autonomy are regarded as necessary attributes of aesthetic production and reception—and once inutility is taken as the guarantee of disinterestedness—it is easy to discredit the aesthetic by pointing out that it often serves utilitarian and ideological functions.

Disinterestedness was formulated within a specific philosophical debate about virtue. Then the concept migrated to taste discourse as art faced pressures from a new range of commodities. My purpose in historicizing disinterestedness has been to demonstrate that both the discourse of taste and the range of human aesthetic responses are too varied to be reduced to the simplified post-Kantian model of disinterestedness. Furthermore, the *Critique of Judgment* uses taste to explore the possible reconciliation of a laundry list of oppositions: unity vs. multiplicity, reason vs. sensibility, necessity vs. contingency, legislation vs. production, identity vs. difference. Beauty is philosophically compelling because it can seem to reconcile these oppositions, holding out the promise of “a different order” (Caygill 17). Even though it homogenizes all aesthetic response to disinterestedness, the Kantian formula still points to taste’s most intractable and fruitful conundrums. How is it that beauty seems to be both a subjective feeling and a property of objects? How does pleasure inform judgment? How do aesthetic pleasures and judgments become shared?

The last of these questions reminds us that the aesthetic is an apt arena for figuring the relationship between the individual and the group. As Eagleton points out, the relationship between individual and group is built into the aesthetic as a relationship between the part and the whole (25). Kant’s formula imagines this relationship as a
harmonious one in which the parts regulate themselves and each other to produce an 
orderly whole, and Eagleton influentially argues that “The construction of the modern 
notion of the aesthetic artefact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant 
ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human 
subjectivity appropriate to that social order” (3). Kant’s autonomous aesthetic object that 
discovers its lawfulness within itself provides bourgeois society with a model of self-
regulating subjectivity that allows individuals the autonomy necessary to pursue their 
own economic ends without plunging the nation into chaos. Though Eagleton critiques 
the way that the autonomous artwork provides a model for bourgeois subjectivity, he 
remains committed to a romantic strain of Marxism that envisions art as a liberatory 
arena of affective and embodied pleasure. He examines German aesthetics, the 
Enlightenment, and liberal humanism in order to ask what of their legacy is usable for 
radical politics. I agree with Eagleton that something of aesthetics can be salvaged for 
liberatory political projects, though my idea of liberatory politics would probably differ 
from his specifically Marxist sense.

Once again, the larger point here is that the aesthetic, whatever it might be, does 
not consistently or predictably support a single ideology, whether conservative or 
progressive. As a metaphor modeled on a sense that supplements bodily sustenance with 
potential pleasure, taste provides a sensuous and particularized register for negotiating 
these questions of individual and group, subject and object, pleasure and judgment. 
Subsequent chapters will tease out some of the variety and complexity of the taste 
discourse that Victorian cultural critics produced as they attempted to make sense of a
world in which politics, technology, and emerging consumer capitalism were changing even more rapidly than in the eighteenth century.

Via both the Shaftesburian tradition and Kant, Victorian cultural critics inherited the idea that taste judgments can be disinterested. Yet as we have seen, taste implies not just an act of judgment, but also an experience of pleasure. It was left to the Romantics, specifically Coleridge, to spread the idea that aesthetic *pleasure*, not just aesthetic *judgment*, can be disinterested. Disinterested aesthetic pleasure functions to promote aesthetic autonomy. It differentiates art from other manmade objects, especially instrumental ones. Woodmansee persuasively argues that in using disinterestedness to differentiate the tastes of the palate from those of the intellect, Coleridge is articulating a novel idea. She writes,

> Coleridge seeks to discredit the practice that from Joseph Addison to Francis Jeffrey had seemed both natural and rational of treating all of our pleasures as continuous in the sense at least that, whether they derive from the palate or the intellect, we deem their effect—their satisfaction of our desires and needs—a relevant consideration in deciding their value. (Woodmansee *Author* 139)

This differentiation from utility makes the aesthetic vulnerable to being discredited when critics rightly point out that aesthetic objects do have social functions and do promote particular interests.

**The Mixed Pleasures of Taste**

The history of taste as a theory of pleasure indicates that theorizing aesthetic pleasures—for they are surely plural—is an important direction for the aesthetic turn. How might we theorize aesthetic pleasures while acknowledging the pre-Coleridgean insight that they exist on a continuum that accommodates intellectual, affective, and
sensory pleasures derived from objects that cater to the range of human needs and desires?

I propose that we theorize aesthetic pleasures in a way that acknowledges difference (I agree that the pleasures of eating and reading are qualitatively different) while also acknowledging that categories of pleasure overlap. By historicizing disinterested aesthetic pleasure, I am not trying to prove that aesthetic, specifically literary, pleasure is identical to the pleasures of, say, Frontiniac, Sherry, or rope-dancing. Much less do I wish to propose that categories of pleasure must be hierarchically ranked, or that a particular experience becomes polluted if it belongs to more than one category. What I do propose is that we theorize literary pleasure not as purely intellectual or emotional, but as existing on a continuum of intellectual, emotional, and sensuous pleasures. These pleasures overlap and enable each other, endlessly and messily.

This project takes Burke, not Coleridge, as precedent. What did a theory of aesthetic pleasure look like before Coleridge differentiated aesthetic pleasure on the basis of disinterestedness? Although Burke’s *Enquiry* recognizes that pleasures differ, the text also recognizes that these differences are not absolute, and that a single object may engage more than one of our mental and physical faculties. Burke wavers on whether taste is mediated (by knowledge, if not by interest). He does imply that the pleasure of taste is separate from other, more suspect pleasures (like self-congratulatory connoisseurship). At the same time, he does not claim that taste is wholly immediate and unmediated by expertise. He is able to depict taste as both mediated and unmediated because he attributes it to the understanding (which involves reflection and knowledge) as well as to the senses and imagination (which operate with immediacy). This
combination of faculties creates an ambiguity that allows him to declare that taste is universal and immediate, while still asserting that some people have better taste than others (Burke 24-25, 84-85, 96-99).

Where Coleridge will work hard to distinguish aesthetic pleasure from all other pleasures, Burke sees the pleasures of taste as stemming from the senses, imagination, and passions, all of which can be affected by non-aesthetic objects and experiences. Some of his remarks which seem disconcerting today are evidence that he regards taste as existing on a continuum of pleasures derived from imaginative acts of sympathy (40-45).

Much like Adam Smith, Burke defines sympathy as “a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man” (41). Sympathy makes us interested in whatever people do; it leads us to take pleasure in imitation, whether in art or in life. Sympathy is probably the means by which “poetry, painting, and the other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another” (41). Mysteriously, this sympathetic transference allows us to derive pleasure from depictions of unhappy subjects. Thus we enjoy watching tragedies. Sympathy for real pain is also pleasurable, though it is a mixed pleasure. Indeed, tragedy in life trumps tragedy in art when it comes to evoking sympathy—thus Burke’s notorious explanation that most people would rather attend an execution than a play (43-44)! Via the concept of sympathy, a continuity between matters of taste and of social life lingers in one of the first English texts to treat aesthetics as an independent area of inquiry. Nor does Burke mind admitting that there is social utility in his study of the passions and how they are aroused by beauty and sublimity. Studying the

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9 Burke himself identifies taste as a distinct area of research: through his quasi-scientific investigation, “we may not only communicate to taste a sort of philosophical solidity, but we may reflect back on the severer sciences some of the graces and elegancies of taste” (6).
passions constitutes an act of worship directed at the Creator God. More pragmatically, it will teach readers how to affect other people’s passions consistently (48). Himself a gifted rhetorician, Burke does not fail to note the political function of art’s ability to move audiences.

For my purposes, Burke’s *Enquiry* is useful because it provides a model, however naïve, of an aesthetics that is concerned both with artistic form and with audience reaction, and that registers the mutual imbrication of social and aesthetic experiences and judgments. However, there is another reason why Burke is important to the history of taste discourse: Burke emphasizes taste’s universality while, simultaneously, his emphasis on sensibility contributes to an aesthetic discourse that treats the production and consumption of art as individualized, expressive operations.

In contrast to neoclassical norms and literary models, Burke’s discussion of the sublime makes space for affective and irrational artistic elements. His division of the sublime and the beautiful seems to speak to a tension between society and self (Sertoli). This individuation of art consumption parallels the way in which the increasingly important concepts of originality and genius served to individuate the work of art production. Compared to earlier taste theories, Burke’s *Enquiry* exhibits a new emphasis on subjectivity, psychology, and the individual reader or spectator—an emphasis that would be taken up by British Romantics like Wordsworth.

Although Burke’s emphasis on subjectivity paves the way for the full-blown individuation of taste, he is far from affirming that aesthetic preference is only the sign of individual personality or that an analysis of taste can ignore social causes or effects. As I
indicated previously, individuation involves overlapping ideas that together erase the connection between individual taste and social environment: taste expresses individual personality, individual preference is the only valid norm governing consumption, and the individual is the proper unit of analysis for explaining taste. As we will see, these ideas were contested but became more prevalent by the late nineteenth century. In Burke’s day, however, it seemed perfectly natural to interpret an individual’s tastes as providing information not just about that individual, but about his social environment.

When Burke connects individual tastes to the social, and when he stresses taste’s universality, he draws on earlier taste discourse. Hutcheson and Hume are at odds over whether taste is a sense or a judgment. For Hutcheson, taste is a non-individuated, innate, universal sense, and beauty is a combination of uniformity and variety. In “Of the Standard of Taste,” the more empirically-inclined Hume argues that rules for artistic composition are not fixed by reason. Instead, they are empirically-based descriptions of what has continued to please over time. Rather than defining beauty as a specific physical characteristic or combination of characteristics that will always please, Hume concludes that the standard of taste can be located in a social process: the cumulative taste judgments of qualified men. The problem of how to locate these qualified judges of taste, he admits, is “embarrassing” (17). He has done his job if he has convinced us that true standards and judges exist, and that taste is not an entirely relative matter of individual sentiments (18). Thus, despite their differences, Hutcheson and Hume both treat aesthetic perception and judgment as processes that do not individuate people. Hutcheson in
particular exhibits the eighteenth-century fascination with establishing a universally valid standard of taste.

Although Burke, too, attempts to argue for a universal standard of taste, his methodology contributes to taste’s individuation in a way that Hutcheson’s and Hume’s do not. Burke’s method involves studying not just aesthetic objects, but one’s own, individual aesthetic reactions. He assumes that, in order to define categories like the sublime and the beautiful, we should proceed by examining our passions as well as the objects that excite those passions. In this way, we will discover the “laws of nature” governing the properties that excite our passions, and then be able to apply those laws “to the imitative arts” (Burke 1). In practice, Burke frequently proceeds by identifying objects acknowledged to be beautiful, then asking what qualities they share and what qualities render them beautiful.

Burke’s study of aesthetic reactions still pursues a universal standard of taste. If there were no natural laws of judgment, taste, and beauty, how, he asks, could society carry on (Burke 11)? Here Burke imagines that we must all share a standard, or all have entirely different standards. He does not recognize that there could be a continuum between a universal standard of taste and an absolute heterogeneity that would make society impossible.

Burke’s definition of taste is cautiously worded. Taste is “no more than that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts” (Burke 13). Later, he elaborates on how taste combines sensibility and judgment:
On the whole it appears to me, that what is called Taste, in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions. All this is requisite to form Taste, and the ground-work of all these is the same in the human mind; for as the senses are the great originals of all our ideas, and consequently of all our pleasures, if they are not uncertain and arbitrary, the whole ground-work of Taste is common to all, and therefore there is a sufficient foundation for a conclusive reasoning on these matters. (22, my emphasis)

Imagination is crucial to this theory of taste. For taste to have laws or rules, it must be possible for the imagination to be “affected according to some invariable and certain laws.” Otherwise Burke would be engaged in “an useless, if not an absurd undertaking, to lay down rules for caprice, and to set up for a legislator of whims and fancies” (12). For Burke, the empirical existence of unpredictable tastes can be explained by environment or character, and does not negate the possibility that natural tastes follow observable laws (14-15). Differences in taste are due to differences in experience, knowledge, and attention, not to basic differences in how we are affected by the pleasures of the senses and imagination (18). We may possess different degrees of knowledge or observation, but taste always operates by the same principles (20-21). For example, two men are admiring three polished marble tables. Each table is pleasing, but the smoothest is the most pleasing. Due to differences in their “acuteness of the sense” the two men disagree about which table is the smoothest. Yet both men are employing the same principle: smooth equals pleasing (21).

The question of how individual aesthetic judgments can exist without invalidating aesthetic norms would also concern Wordsworth. Published forty-three years after
Burke’s *Enquiry*, Wordsworth’s *Preface* (1800) to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) also includes a weak version of individuation that helps pave the way for later, stronger versions.\(^\text{10}\)

Specifically, the *Preface* valorizes reader reactions to literature, but without making them the sole measure of poetry’s worth. Wordsworth finds that some individuals are more qualified to make good judgments than others are. Qualification depends on emotional and mental capacity and exposure to good models of composition. However, it is individual reactions, not genres or models, that are to be the measure of literature. “I have one request to make of my Reader,” writes Wordsworth, “which is that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others” (85-86). Yet individual taste cannot have sole or unguided authority. Immediately after appealing to his readers’ individual feelings, Wordsworth quickly reminds them that taste is “an *acquired* talent” (86, emphasis in original).

Burke defined taste as a combined function of the senses, imagination, and reason. Wordsworth’s defense of colloquial poetry likewise grapples with the mixed nature of aesthetic pleasure. The results are somewhat inconsistent. On one hand, throughout the *Preface*, Wordsworth connects poetry and literary pleasure to the spectrum of human emotional life and to what he calls “moral relations” (57). Eighteenth-century associationist psychology provides him with a framework that connects poetry to human emotional and moral life, and he sometimes asserts the continuum of pleasure in very

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\(^{10}\) *Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1798. Wordsworth's *Preface* first appeared in the second edition (1800). Wordsworth revised and enlarged the volume in 1802. The 1805 edition, the last which Wordsworth revised, included the 1802 version of the Preface. My quotations are from Michael Mason’s 1992 Longman edition, which is based on the text of 1805.
strong terms. Producing pleasure through poetry, writes Wordsworth, is “an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe” as well as “homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves” (73-74). Moreover, he identifies “excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure” as “[t]he end of Poetry” (80). The representation of passionate feeling within the constraint of metrical form provides “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude,” which is one of the main causes of poetic pleasure (82). Importantly, this particular cause of pleasure connects poetry to social life:

This principle [similitude in dissimilitude] is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin: it is the life of our ordinary conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings. (82)

This is not a theory of fully autonomous art. On the one hand, poetry’s success is measured by a pleasurable interaction with readers, not by a poem’s intrinsic qualities. Furthermore, the reader’s pleasure in literature exists on a continuum with the pleasurable excitement provided by “moral sentiments” and “animal sensation” (78). On the other hand, Wordsworth does differentiate and rank pleasures when he complains about “men who speak of what they do not understand; who talk of Poetry as of a matter of amusement and idle pleasure; who will converse with us as gravely about a taste for Poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontiniac or Sherry” (73, emphasis in original).
Although Wordsworth sometimes fails to distinguish the pleasure of good poetry from other pleasures, he does distinguish the pleasure offered by his poetry from the pleasure offered by most contemporary poetry, of which he has a poor opinion. Near the end of the Preface, he states that he does not have the time to define the kinds of pleasure that people get from conventional poetry, but he implies that those pleasures are inferior. Readers who are persuaded by his theory will end up losing the pleasure they formerly took in inferior poems, but they can console themselves with the knowledge that the pleasures offered by Wordsworth’s own lyrics are “of a purer, more lasting, and more exquisite nature” (86-87). Presumably they are of a purer nature because they give pleasure through representations of nature and general human life, not through neoclassical rhetorical flourishes. Here we see Wordsworth trying to locate the value of art in its connection to human life, though at the same time he needs to distinguish his art from other, inferior art.

In addition to differentiating his poetry on the basis of its more colloquial, less ornate style, Wordsworth emphasizes that his poems differ from literature that makes incident, drama, and narrative the source of excitement. There is “one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (Wordsworth 64). He goes on at some length about the current “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” that his poems attempt to “counteract” (65). What is important here is that Wordsworth tries to make the pleasure of reading more contemplative by arguing that poetry should focus on representing
feeling and not on representing incident (Woodmansee Author 116). Thus, even as much of the Preface connects poetic pleasure to society, ethics, and action, Wordsworth begins to associate poetic pleasure with contemplation.

For Coleridge, a connection to social life is too ambiguous to serve as grounds for poetry’s value. Instead, his Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism (1814) pursues a strategy of differentiating aesthetic pleasure from other pleasures. Essentially, Coleridge’s Genial Criticism elaborates on Wordsworth’s complaint that a taste for poetry is not identical to a taste for alcohol or rope-dancing. Borrowing freely from Kant, Coleridge produces a hierarchical taxonomy of pleasure in order to prove that the pleasure we derive from beauty is disinterested and thus unlike those pleasures that address human needs and desires.

The function of Coleridge’s taxonomy will be clearer if we understand how common it was for his contemporaries to treat taste as relative and subjective, rather than as a species of judgment that could be right or wrong. The result was an approach that treated aesthetic pleasure as existing on a continuum with, and perhaps even overlapping with, other pleasures. In particular, Coleridge’s taxonomy is an attack on the relativist taste theory put forth by associationist psychology. Though now largely forgotten, associationist taste theory was a force to be reckoned with at the turn of the nineteenth century. In his younger days, Coleridge himself had been intrigued by the work of David Hartley (1705-57), a physician and early associationist philosopher. Archibald Alison’s Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790) and Richard Payne Knight’s An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste (1805) went through multiple editions.
Associationism privileges the spectator. Wordsworth’s affective theory of poetry, which draws on associationism, similarly privileges spectator reaction as a measure of aesthetic success. In contrast, by the time of _Genial Criticism_, Coleridge prefers an aesthetic theory centered on the producer and on formal composition. In _Biographia Literaria_ (1817), Coleridge would expand his critique of associationist psychology, specifically objecting to what he saw as its mechanistic materialism. I am more interested in his earlier objections, expressed in _Genial Criticism_, to associationism’s aesthetic relativism.

Payne Knight’s _Inquiry_ can serve us as a representative example of the taste theory that Coleridge opposes. Payne Knight proposes an immediate, sensory level of pleasure. For Payne Knight, visual perception is, as Macarthur observes, “unmediated, and is pleasing or displeasing to the nervous system before any idea of the object” (Macarthur 10). However, Payne Knight’s taste theory also posits a mediated level of pleasure: our minds subsequently connect objects with ideas and prior associations. This chain of associations, which will be influenced by our environment, produces pleasure or distaste. Connoisseurship can make new pleasures available, because the connoisseur’s access to and knowledge about art provides a wider range of associations to draw on when looking at art or nature. Thus aesthetic pleasures depend at least partly on our non-aesthetic experiences. Associationist taste theory recognizes that social status and cultural difference will affect the range of associations that art can evoke for us. Aesthetic relativism results. For instance, Payne Knight assumes that African men have their own standards of female beauty based on experiences and associations that are different from his own, and that he cannot share (Payne Knight 13-15).
In a review of the 1811 second edition of Alison’s *Essays*, an enthusiastic Francis Jeffrey makes this taste relativism explicit:

If things are not beautiful in themselves, but only as they serve to suggest interesting conceptions to the mind, then every thing which does in point of fact suggest such a conception to any individual, *is beautiful* to that individual; and it is not only quite true that there is no room for disputing about tastes, but that all tastes are equally just and correct, in so far as each individual speaks only of his own emotion. (qtd. in Woodmansee *Author* 134, emphasis in original)

All tastes may be equally correct, but associationists like Jeffrey, Alison, and Payne Knight posit that we can extend the range of associations available to us (for instance, by reading) and thus have more opportunity to experience beauty. Woodmansee describes this position as taste’s “*comprehensiveness*” (135, emphasis in original).

*Comprehensiveness* implies an attempt to expand one’s tastes by encountering a portion of the almost infinite variety of objects and pleasures available to our sensuous and intellectual tastes. If the problem of aesthetics is how individual subjective reactions become shared, associationism refuses the Kantian solution of disinterestedness. Instead, aesthetic reactions come from individual subjectivities (referring to their own desires and needs) that are formed by social environment. Such taste relativism goes hand in hand with the continuum of pleasure.

*Genial Criticism* suggests that Coleridge’s objection to taste relativism is that it militates against a foundational, intrinsic quality in art that sets aesthetic pleasures apart. He had already complained in *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry* (1808) that Payne Knight was too willing to allow beauty to remain a vague concept, one that made no distinction among appeals to the senses, to the intellect, or to the imagination (5.I: 32-33).
Drawing heavily on Kant, Coleridge proposes that we classify objects according to the sensuous, moral, or intellectual faculty to which they appeal. Kant’s goal was to analyze and categorize human mental faculties, but Coleridge uses his categories to map distinctions onto classes of objects. In Coleridge’s classification scheme, objects are not divided on the basis of whether they please or whether they are manmade or natural. Instead, we should reserve “Beauty” to describe instances where we pleasurably perceive an object’s multiple parts unified into a whole (5.I: 35-36). Coleridge compactly expresses this criterion for beauty in Genial Criticism’s famous formula, “Multëity in Unity” (11.I: 372).

In Genial Criticism, Coleridge adapts Kantian disinterestedness to distinguish “immediate” aesthetic pleasure from appetitive pleasures. According to Coleridge, “all objects of mere desire constitute an interest” and are “therefore valued only as the means to the end” (11.I: 362, emphasis in original). Coleridge argues that the distinctions he makes have “a foundation in nature and the noblest faculties of the human mind” (11.I: 375). These foundational terms are absolutely “indispensable” for “rational enquiry concerning the Arts” (11.I: 375, emphasis in original). Taste is a matter of general principles, of right or wrong judgments (11.I: 375). If beauty resides in an object and not in our reactions, then an inability to appreciate it argues a deficiency in the beholder. By extension, disagreements about beauty indicate intellectual underdevelopment. Coleridge’s example, again borrowed from Kant, is of an Iroquois who considers the “cook’s shops” to be the most beautiful thing in Paris. For Coleridge, this opinion proves the man’s “savagery of intellect” (11.I: 381).
In this taxonomy, beauty is different from other pleasures because it is formal. “Multëity in Unity” offers pleasure on the basis of an object’s internal relations and thus its intrinsic value. This formalist account of pleasure functions to guarantee taste’s disinterestedness.¹¹ Any pleasure that “is not pleasing for its own sake” cannot constitute beauty (11.I: 375). Coleridge is essentially saying that many of the pleasures we feel in reaction to an artwork or a natural object are not properly aesthetic reactions. Sentimental associations with a flower given by a lover are a prime example of such non-aesthetic pleasures (11.I: 376). Having defined beauty, Coleridge defines the mental sense of beauty:

_The sense of Beauty subsists in simultaneous intuition of the relation of parts, each to each, and of all to a whole: exciting an immediate and absolute complacency, without intervenience therefore of any interest sensual or intellectual._ The BEAUTIFUL is thus at once distinguished both from the AGREEABLE, which is beneath it, and from the GOOD, which is above it: for both these have an interest necessarily attached to them; both act on the WILL, and excite a desire for the actual existence of the image or idea contemplated: while the sense of beauty rests gratified in the mere contemplation or intuition, regardless whether it be a fictitious Apollo, or a real Antinous. (11.I: 378-80, emphasis in original)¹²

In his conclusion, Coleridge lists examples of beauty, most of them from nature. The examples emphasize that neither interest, utility, fitness, nor proportion are the

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¹¹ Although my focus is on aesthetic pleasure, there is a compelling complementary history of how aesthetic disgust functions as a guarantee of disinterestedness. Bourdieu observes that disgust can function even more powerfully than does pleasure to maintain hierarchies of taste. An upper-class _habitus_ that includes dislike of crowds will protect one from mixing with the hoi-polloi at sporting events, for instance (Bourdieu 249, 486-87).

Bourdieu’s sociology is primarily concerned with a post-Kantian understanding of the aesthetic. See Macarthur for a more historicized account of how disgust functioned to differentiate art from nature as the eighteenth-century framework for understanding art shifted from mimetic theory to sensation-focused aesthetic theory (57-109).

¹² Antinous, the emperor Hadrian’s handsome favorite, was believed by some to be the model for the Apollo Belvedere (Coleridge 11.I: 380n2). Would the rhetorical effect on the implied male reader be different if Coleridge compared a beautiful statue to a famously attractive woman?
determining qualities of beauty. He makes this point so emphatically that he begins to cast beauty as dangerously opposed to utility: “The shell of the Oyster, rough and unshapely, is its habitation and strong hold, its defence and organ of loco motion: the Pearl, the beautiful ornament of the Beautiful, is its disease” (11.I: 384). The possibility that too much aesthetic pleasure is not only impractical but unhealthy will be one of the charges leveled against Victorian Aestheticism.

Thus Coleridge creates a rupture in what had been a continuum of pleasures that could be judged not only according to their intrinsic qualities, but according to how they met desires and needs. Coleridge’s attack on the continuum of pleasure contributes to art’s autonomy. Art production and consumption both become marked off from more instrumental activities, and aesthetic pleasure becomes marked off as different in kind from other pleasures. If it sounds implausible to assert that there was ever such a continuum of judgments on pleasure, we should recall that Coleridge’s immediate context includes not only associationism but also Benthamite utilitarianism. Utilitarianism does tend to treat pleasures as undifferentiated, even if it is only a legend that Bentham equated poetry with pushpin. Furthermore, a certain Whiggish tradition of independent judgment militated against the authority that Coleridge claimed for the aesthetic. In this democratic-leaning and bluffly Philistine view, John Bull’s own taste is a fine standard for what to hang on his walls, keep on his bookshelves, or serve on his table. My earlier

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13 John Armstrong’s poem, “Taste: An Epistle to a Young Critic” is a delightful example of this attitude. Dated 1753, the poem was being republished as late as 1795, when it appeared in volume 10 of Robert Anderson’s The Works of the British Poets. With a gusto that would disgust Coleridge, Armstrong combines a refusal to distinguish between sensuous and intellectual pleasures with a pre-Bourdieu critique of how taste produces social distinction.
analysis of Burke and Wordsworth indicates that even taste discourse and literary
criticism could at least partially assume that human pleasures exist on a continuum.

In addition to his taxonomy, one of Coleridge’s strategies for breaking up the
continuum of pleasure is to heap scorn on those vulgar people who fail to distinguish
between the tastes of the palate and the tastes of the intellect (11.I: 363-64). Lest we
dismiss Coleridge out of hand, let us recall that even the most rigorous critics among us
likely subscribe to some of the distinctions that Coleridge promotes. Even if we do not
respond with Coleridge’s degree of disdain, we no doubt find it at least somewhat
incongruous that Payne Knight’s Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste can cover

Judge for yourself; and as you find report
Of wit as freely as of beef or port.
Zounds! shall a pert or bluff important wight,
Whose brain is fanciless, whose blood is white;
A mumbling ape of taste; prescribe us laws
To try the poets, for no better cause
Than that he boasts per ann. ten thousand clear,
Yelps in the House, or barely fits a peer? (986)

14 Coleridge probably had Jeffrey, Alison, or Payne Knight in mind when he pronounced this
sentence on associationist aesthetics.

An English critic, who assumes and proceeds on the identity in kind of the pleasures
derived from the palate and from the intellect, and who literally considers taste to mean
one and the same thing, whether it be the taste of venison, or a taste for Virgil . . . this
taste-meter to the fashionable world gives a ludicrous portrait of an African Belle, and
concludes with a triumphant exclamation ‘such is the ideal of beauty in Dahoma!’ (11.I:
363-64)

In assuming that his readers will automatically consider black women repulsive or farcical, Coleridge offers
us a reminder that there are very good reasons why aesthetics and disinterestedness have been criticized as
window-dressing for inequality. See Simon Gikandi’s Slavery and the Culture of Taste (2011) for an
important argument that blackness and slavery were constituent exclusions in eighteenth-century British
“manners, civility, sense and sensibility,” and indeed in transatlantic modernity (xiii). Gikandi also
discusses the ways that people of African descent forged their own “counter-culture of taste” (xv).

Though Coleridge’s racism may seem too blatant to have any credibility today, it would be remiss
not to mention that, with appalling frequency, Western discourses surrounding black women’s bodies still
take a derogatory tone. In May 2011, for instance, Satoshi Kanazawa, a regular contributor to Psychology
Today’s blog, published a post in which he purported to prove that black women are objectively less
attractive than women of other races. See Arturo R. García’s “Voices: The Satoshi Kanazawa Study”
(2011) for coverage of the episode.
topics as disparate as “Fights of Gladiators,” “Stoic Opinion of the Deity,” and “External Stimuli in Plants.”

As is always the case in the history of ideas, the Coleridgean differentiation of aesthetic pleasure was never uncontested or complete. Although it remains powerful even today, it has not stopped people from enjoying and evaluating literature in utilitarian, ethical, affective, or otherwise interested registers. Coleridge himself begins *Genial Criticism* with an appeal to his readers’ pragmatic interests. The fine arts, he states, can improve “the more immediate utilities of life”: as evidence, he points to British manufactures that show a “superior beauty” with “as honorable a rank in our archives of trade, as in those of taste” (11.I: 358).

Coleridge leaves us without a satisfying approach for wrestling with two of the most compelling problems of taste. First, his theory of disinterested pleasure obscures the messy nature of human pleasure. Second, it reduces the complexity of forming, communicating, and negotiating judgments, aesthetic or otherwise. What is actually interesting about taste is the Kantian question of how something grounded in subjective reactions can become shared. Coleridge is less interested in the process of negotiating shared aesthetic agreements than he is in asserting that there are general principles of beauty that should automatically produce a recognition that some aesthetic judgments are correct and some are wrong.

Disinterested judgment, as introduced by Shaftesbury, suggests that we have the capacity to encounter objects and people as ends in themselves. Although it seems naïve to think that we can consistently ignore our own desires, Shaftesbury develops his model
of disinterested judgment within a civic-minded theory of virtue that attempts to resolve tensions between individual and communal goods. Surely tensions and disagreements have lower stakes when it comes to judgments of taste. Yet disagreements in taste are liable to provoke as much emotional investment as political disagreements. Just think how heated we can become when arguing over the relative merits of our favorite musicians or authors. My point in comparing taste and politics is not to bewail American political apathy or to claim that reading literature will make us better citizens. Rather, the political analogy highlights the ongoing processes of perception, negotiation, and conflict that are involved in forming and communicating judgments that have affective, intellectual, social, and ethical valences.

Coleridge’s taxonomy of pleasure calls attention to the variety of human pleasures without addressing their difference and multiplicity in a convincing way. Many people, myself included, would agree that literary pleasure differs from the pleasures of drinking, conversation, or sex. The nature of this difference is something that literary critics might wish to theorize, particularly since we have a stake in defending the specific contribution that our discipline makes to the university and to society. The idea that literary pleasure is a particular kind (or, more likely, a constellation of kinds) of pleasure does not require us to return to a Coleridgean understanding of art and disinterestedness. Rather, much as Burke’s love can coexist with desire, literary pleasures can coexist with other pleasures that address our needs and desires. Furthermore, literary pleasure is itself a hybrid. Literary pleasures range from emotional identification with realistically represented characters, to sensuous response to verbal rhythms, to the seemingly austere intellectual
gratifications of literary analysis. The rubric of taste, which links affective and intellectual gusto to physical appetite, reminds us of both the continuity and the heterogeneity of pleasure.

**Individuation and Aesthetic Autonomy in the Nineteenth Century**

Art’s gradual emergence as an autonomous cultural field, bolstered by the idea that taste (whether judgment or pleasure) can be disinterested, plays a crucial role in configuring what Victorian critics can do with the concept of taste as they use it to connect aesthetics to ethics while grappling with the question of how individual tastes and desires can connect to the common good. In summarizing the history of how art became autonomous, I have sought to show a new side to the familiar story that aesthetic theory has a hegemonic function. Though aesthetics and taste do play an important role in interpellating the liberal bourgeois subject, it is unforgivably reductive to interpret eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taste discourse only as a discipline serving the emerging nation-state and middle-class hegemony. Victorian cultural critics could draw on a tradition of taste discourse that was rich and contradictory in its treatment of judgment, pleasure, and disinterestedness. In addition to autonomy and disinterestedness, increasing individuation was a defining characteristic of aesthetics and taste theory in the nineteenth century.

The idea that taste is primarily a matter of expressing individuality and personality would have made little sense to Hutcheson, who regarded differences in taste as accidental deviations produced by external circumstances. The identification or construction of self through taste and possessions was the product of nineteenth-century
social mobility, urban anonymity, and consumer capitalism. Historian Deborah Cohen aptly summarizes the situation: “The question, as late nineteenth-century observers noted, was no longer merely who you were, but what you had” (xi). Earlier, more aristocratic discourse on taste (or “grace”) was predicated on the assumption that some people have taste and are naturally superior to everyone else (Garson 11). In the nineteenth century, the middle class appropriates and reconfigures taste into a potentially universal capacity that nonetheless needs to be cultivated. This formula of the natural taste that can be cultivated was useful for rationalizing a certain degree of social mobility but not too much (10).¹⁵ Shared taste, not kinship, provides a slightly more flexible social glue for the new social order and its non-feudal dominant class (48-50). The individuation of taste, and the increasing belief that anyone can cultivate it, introduce new tensions and ambiguities into taste discourse. As I will discuss in the following chapters, Victorian cultural critics exploit these ambiguities.

The most detailed account of Victorian individuation is Gagnier’s The Insatiability of Human Wants (2000). As part of a larger project of using the aesthetic to problematize dominant economic discourses of value, Gagnier traces how economic and aesthetic models of taste (here defined as desire) both became increasingly individuated in the late nineteenth century. In Gagnier’s account, individuation and art’s autonomy mutually reinforce each other. A century after political economy became unlinked from the broadly civic and aesthetic concerns of moral philosophy, its explanatory power was

¹⁵ Jane Austen’s novels, which valorize self-improvement while also implying that some people are simply too vulgar to be capable of such improvement, epitomize the way that this formula of natural-taste-that-needs-cultivation functions to promote and limit social mobility. Chapter 3 in Marjorie Garson’s Moral Taste (2007) uses this insight to produce interesting readings of Emma and Mansfield Park.
further reduced as political economy shed its civic commitments to become the study of economics alone. As implied by its name, classic political economy as practiced by Adam Smith and later John Stuart Mill did treat the economic as connected to the political and social and thus to the ethical. Some of its central tenets—like the division of labor and the labor theory of value—included a theory of social relations and of human needs. In the 1870s, marginal utility theorists like William Stanley Jevons (1835-82), Karl Menger (1840-1921), and Léon Walras (1834-1910) redefined value as price, based on consumer demand instead of on labor.

As a result of the marginal revolution, economic value became more subjective, and economic decisions could be read as individual and individuating, not as inscribing social relations. The ideas put forth by marginal utility were not entirely new, but they had never been so dominant. Part of the way that marginal utility erased the social was by studying consumption (readable as individual tastes) instead of production (which more obviously entails social relations). As a result, Gagnier persuasively argues, “Consumer choice ceased to be a moral category. Value ceased to be evaluative across persons: it became individual, subjective, or psychological” (93-94). Thus neoclassical economics uncoupled wealth (GDP or growth) from welfare (the distribution of wealth) (32). This methodological individualism in turn led twentieth-century free-marketeers to analyze economic markets as if all individuals had equal power to participate in them, or as if the market efficiently erased any power differentials that did exist (27).

In a parallel to the narrowing of political economy into economics, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic theorists began to relinquish the vocabulary that they
had once possessed for analyzing how art might motivate human action or address needs and desires, rather than being merely an object of contemplation. Gagnier argues that political economy’s rejection of the labor theory of value made its way into aesthetics as “the rejection of the values of the producer or creator in favor of the consumers of the artwork” (48).

In the nineteenth century, individuated taste, though contested, was in the process of becoming hegemonic in aesthetics just as it was in economics. Gagnier takes the Oxford don Walter Pater’s (1839-94) avant-garde aesthetic theories to be the equivalent of Jevons’s economic ones. Pater’s impressionistic criticism famously verges on solipsism. His conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873) declares, “Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality. . . . Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (119).

We cannot communicate our aesthetic responses to others. Similarly, Jevons reflects that, “‘Every mind is thus inscrutable to every other mind, and no common denominator of feeling seems to be possible’” (qtd. in Gagnier 43). Economic value is individuated and incommunicable by anything other than the reductive measure of price. Of course, aesthetic individuation was not totally new in the 1870s. We have already seen weak versions of individuation in Burke and Wordsworth.

How does individuation interact with the increasing autonomy of discourses about aesthetics, ethics, and consumption? At the same time that Pater’s criticism was disarticulating aesthetics from ethics, a similar phenomenon was occurring in the way
that middle-class English people related to quotidian material consumption. According to Cohen, early Victorians imagined their object relations in a strongly moral idiom, an attitude largely due to evangelicalism. Over the course of the century, object relations shifted to a more individuated, aesthetic, and expressive idiom. Cohen connects individuation in household furnishing to the emerging discipline of psychology and its understanding of the human subject in terms of personality, rather than in terms of the older, morally-inflected framework of character (xii, 124-5). Entrepreneurs and professional decorating advisors both played a role in shifting the evaluation of furniture from the moral arena to the aesthetic. This new aesthetic idiom of object relations was less rule-bound and more accommodating of the idea that individual preference was not just a valid way to choose furniture, it was the best way. A representative decorating manual from the 1880s, M.E. James’s *How to Decorate Our Ceilings, Walls and Floors*, offered this advice:

> . . . most people prefer their own taste to that of other persons, and rightly in a matter of this sort, for the room should show the individuality of the person who inhabits it, and the more it is the outcome of his own mind and tastes, the more interesting it will be, not only to himself, but to anyone of ordinary sympathy and intelligence. A room, however beautifully decorated, that tells nothing of the man or woman who lives in it must always have a grand-hotel effect, chilling and depressing. (qtd. in Neiswander 19)

For Hutcheson and Hume, differences in taste had required explanation. For James and other domestic advice-givers like Mary Eliza Haweis, differences in taste warranted celebration, not analysis.

For Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, the automatic, seemingly disinterested operation of aesthetic response meant that taste could be the model of an analogous, disinterested
moral sense innate to human nature. As taste becomes more individuated, aesthetic preferences appear increasingly as a sign of individual moral status and personality, not as a sign of universal human nature. Yet taste was not totally individuated in the Victorian era, or even today. Victorian taste discourse sometimes includes an awareness that taste is a semiotic system that does sociological and ideological work. As Garson rightly points out, many Victorian novelists were aware that the “social performance” of taste can be consciously manipulated (18). One thinks, for instance, of Chapter 27 in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, when Rosamund Vincy, intent on improving her fortunes by marrying Dr. Lydgate, hides her admiration for L.E.L. because Lydgate has expressed his scorn for the verses published in literary annuals. The narrator depicts Rosamund as attempting to prove that her tastes make her worthy to share Lydgate’s superior social status. Sociological analyses like Thorstein Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu’s theory of taste as cultural capital codify such observations about taste’s social functions (Garson 17-18). Bourdieu’s sociological theory of taste is particularly subtle, formulating as it does the concept of *habitus* to explain that the use of cultural capital to naturalize class hierarchy is often internalized, not conscious as it was in Rosamund’s case.

As we will see, shifting the emphasis of taste from judgment to self-expression, from socially negotiating aesthetic response to affirming individual sensuous experience, allows new ethical and social functions for taste, but also raises new problems. Rather than fully embracing individuation, Victorian readings of taste shuttle ambiguously between self and environment. In Ruskin’s paternalistic socialism, for instance, taste
links individual aesthetic desire to desire for a social organization in which all citizens can develop their capacity for aesthetic pleasure through creative labor and ethical consumption.
CHAPTER THREE
EARLY JOHN RUSKIN

“Well, you ask me whether the cultivation of taste be the proper ‘ergon’ of a man’s life, and you desire me to consider the matter as a thesis, separate from my own case,” Ruskin wrote to Rev. Osborne Gordon in 1844, shortly after publishing *Modern Painters I* (3: 665).\(^1\) The letter to Ruskin’s former mentor at Oxford continued,

> This is impolitic of you, for you thereby deprive yourself of a most powerful ally—conscience. If you were to put it straight to me to say whether I am right in thinking of nothing but pictures, I might possibly say No; but if you put it to me whether all men who are living happy lives in the cultivation of art and observance of nature, are also living sinful lives—I should be inclined to take a very different view of the question, and still say No—and a much louder No than the preceding . . . (3: 665, emphasis in original)

The life of John Ruskin (1819-1900) is generally regarded as having two phases. He begins as a critic of art and architecture, and ends as a critic of society and political economy, with the dividing line somewhere in the 1850s or 60s. However, this division is not a strict one. Both aesthetic and social concerns are evident in this letter, where Ruskin simultaneously voices his attraction to art and his anxiety about art’s moral status.

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\(^1\) Unless otherwise noted, all Ruskin quotations are from the Library Edition of his complete *Works* (1903-12), edited by Ruskin’s followers E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. It was Cook and Wedderburn’s policy to use the final edition revised by Ruskin as their copy-text. Cook and Wedderburn collated what they considered the most substantive differences across Ruskin’s manuscripts and editions (1: lviii).
Understandably, it is routine for critics to speak of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory as one of “moral,” “disinterested,” or “non-utilitarian” beauty. For example, in his groundbreaking study *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (1971), George Landow writes, “the notion of disinterested pleasure is at the center of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory” (161). More recently, we find George Levine labeling Ruskin’s aesthetic theory “non-utilitarian” (“Matter” 238). In *Ruskin’s Educational Ideals* (2011), Sara Atwood prefers the term “moral” to “disinterested,” writing that “we know the importance that Ruskin placed on taste in relation to morality” (54). These critics are absolutely correct that Ruskin connects aesthetics to morality. He resists the idea that beauty has intrinsic value and that art is unconnected to social and ethical life. Yet the critical reception of Ruskin’s work, specifically the history of describing his theories as both “moral” and “disinterested” or “non-utilitarian,” exhibits a tendency to overlook immaterial registers of utility while ignoring the fact that Ruskin stresses art’s usefulness.

Ruskin does insist that commerce and industrial labor are art’s opposites. However, if we equate this stance with the familiar opposition between economic value and aesthetic value, we mischaracterize one of Victorian England’s most controversial and influential critics of art and society. Furthermore, when we assimilate Ruskin’s theories to post-Kantian disinterested aesthetics, we overlook aspects of his thought that are worth rehabilitating. Much like late-twentieth-century literary critics who rightly criticized aesthetic claims to transcendent self-justification, Ruskin suggested that beauty is not self-justified. Of course, their arguments are very different. Recent literary critics point to art’s social and political utility in order to delegitimate aesthetic ideology by
showing that art is not a privileged category existing apart from social life. Ruskin
pointed out art’s ethical utility in order to prove that art is a privileged cultural category
because it connects to, and enriches, social life. Despite his devotion to art and beauty,
Ruskin spent his career justifying them rather than assuming that they were self-justified,
autonomous, or possessed of intrinsic value.

Ruskin roundly rejected the puritanical view that “the cultivation of art”
(implicitly, an activity requiring leisure) is a potentially sinful distraction from Christian
salvation, but he considered it irresponsible to spend his own life “thinking of nothing but
pictures.” Casting his project as one of cultivating other people’s taste allowed him to
feel that he was doing something more than simply indulging in and analyzing his own
aesthetic pleasures—pleasures so intense that John Rosenberg labeled Ruskin
“photoerotic” for his powerful responses to visual stimuli (4). Intriguingly, Ruskin rarely
mentions “disinterestedness,” though he frequently discusses taste. While Arnold’s and
Wilde’s aesthetic theories can feel recognizable to twenty-first-century readers, Ruskin’s
idiosyncratic idealism, not to mention his reliance on unfamiliar eighteenth-century
thinkers, make some of his declarations appear quaint or downright odd. However, it is
precisely Ruskin’s strangeness that makes his writings fruitful for my overarching
argument that the aesthetic is ideologically more multi-faceted than recent criticism
acknowledges. Perhaps the most compelling reason for Ruskin’s relevance today is that
he combines a capacity for intense aesthetic pleasure with a willingness to ask what that
pleasure means in an unjust world.
Rather than claiming that Ruskin opposes disinterested aesthetic value to interested economic value, I argue that Ruskin struggles with and strategically redefines the concept of utility in order to connect art to ethics and society. In the process, he both asserts and undermines a host of oppositions—use vs. contemplation, body vs. soul, utility vs. inutility, interestedness vs. disinterestedness—that differentiate artworks from quotidian objects. As we will see, deploying such oppositions to justify art within a theocentric, specifically Evangelical Anglican, worldview leads the young Ruskin into conceptual contortions. As his religious beliefs shift toward agnosticism in the late 1850s, he relies less frequently on such oppositions to guarantee art’s ethical function. Crucially, whether early or late in his career, one opposition that Ruskin does not deploy is that of disinterested, intrinsic aesthetic value contrasted with interested economic value. For Ruskin, instead of having a special kind of value, art has a special, moral utility. Even when they descend into incoherence (as they occasionally do), his arguments for art’s utility problematize the idea that art can have intrinsic value. Proving art’s utility means addressing questions of whether and how objects meet human needs and desires. Ruskin’s place in the history of aesthetic autonomy is thus an ambiguous one. He strives to connect art to life, yet in order to do so, he sometimes relies on binary oppositions that separate them.

In addition to showing how Ruskin both resists and contributes to the hegemony of aesthetic autonomy, I track how Ruskin uses taste to connect art’s moral status to subjective experience as well as to objective properties. We do not yet fully appreciate how Ruskin uses taste to wrestle with the place of individual desire within his
aestheticized and moralized vision of society. He goes back and forth between attributing art’s moral function to the object itself, and attributing it to the viewer’s ability to assume a disinterested attitude. I argue that, although he resists the idea that individuated taste is an adequate guide for aesthetic preferences or economic choices, he nonetheless uses taste to carve a space for individual desire and subjective perception within his vision of a society where beauty has a special moral utility because it attests to the human capacity for emotional engagement with the world beyond the self.

My focus on taste and utility contributes to a new development in Ruskin studies: attention to his theories of consumption. Many scholars have studied how Ruskin’s productivist approach to architecture in The Stones of Venice (1851-53) links aesthetics to ethics by embedding art within socioeconomic relations: good art is produced by a good community, not by individual genius. More recently, scholars like David M. Craig have become interested in Ruskin’s “ethics of consumption,” which presages today’s fair trade movement.

Ruskin’s discussions of taste are rife with contradictions. It is the contradictions of taste, its ability to signify idiosyncratic pleasure and impartial judgment, that makes taste discourse so amenable to a thinker who, like Ruskin, has conflicting loyalties to order and to particularity, to external reality and to internal emotional experience. Throughout his career, Ruskin repeatedly expresses his yearning for a paternalistic society where citizens’ willing obedience to authority would produce political and aesthetic order. However, one of the complexities of writing about Ruskin is that his work does not have a single ideological or political meaning. His urgent critiques of
public taste and of laissez-faire capitalism are both liberating and authoritarian. Ruskin’s
taste theory wavers between expressing and subverting his attraction to authoritarianism
in matters of taste. He grapples with the ways that aesthetic judgment is entangled with
individual desire and subjective experience, as well as with social environment and
conditions of production.

In order to contextualize Ruskin’s project of cultivating taste, I first establish that
taste was a matter of public concern during the early and middle Victorian period. I
compare Ruskin’s taste discourse with that of other public taste crusaders like Henry
Cole (1808-82) in order to demonstrate that Ruskin’s theories engage more deeply with
ethical and social issues. I then turn to the contradictions embodied in early works like
*The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-38) and the more mature *Modern Painters II* (1846).
My readings explore how Ruskin’s taste discourse enacts the tension between taste as
judgment and taste as pleasure, between abstract rules and individual subjective
experiences of beauty. Although Ruskin does try to claim some kind of disinterestedness
for aesthetic perception, his work as a whole both asserts and interrogates the crucial
opposition between utility and beauty’s intrinsic value, between an interested encounter
with art and the disinterested contemplation of it.

Chapter 4 turns to later works like *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) and *Unto This
Last* (1860/62), elucidating how Ruskin’s thinking about the relation between utility and
beauty develops as he becomes more concerned with social criticism. With its emphasis
on both subjective experience and on external reality, the rubric of taste has a privileged
role in Ruskin’s aesthetic and ethical thought. He uses taste (as aesthetic desire and as
capacity for pleasure) to challenge the liberal idea—which his contemporaries increasingly took as common sense, and which remains with us today—that the basic unit of society is the individual who should be free to pursue her own self-interest as long as she does not harm others, and that an unregulated market is the best guarantor of this “free” relationship between the individual and the group. For Ruskin, taste as moralized desire is not a sign of individual moral status. It always registers the moral environment that society provides for the individual, including the degree to which it fosters her capabilities. Thus Ruskin introduces concrete questions of social structures and human capabilities into the problem of how taste can be a universal judgment grounded in individual sense perceptions.

Ruskin vs. Design Reform: Two Victorian Critiques of (Individuated) English Taste

[Ruskin] is so entirely out of harmony with all of modern life that surrounds him that he is by many regarded as an anachronism rather than as a man, and that his views are looked upon rather as vain protests than as serious opinions. It is, however, his greatest merit that he is utterly careless of the current habits of thought, and that he has thus been enabled fearlessly to supply to them precisely those elements in which they are most wanting. The English people have become meanly practical, and he is grandly unpractical; they have become essentially commonplace, and he is gloriously poetical; they believe in nothing more than cash, he believes in nothing less; they are thoroughly positive, he is thoroughly ideal. It has been reserved for him, in spite of all such disadvantages, to produce works which from the mere power of their language have captivated even the most indifferent, and which have set many thinking in quite a new direction.

—“Jehu Junior” (qtd. in Robinson Chronicles 374-76)²

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² “Jehu Junior” was the pseudonym of Thomas Gibson Bowles (1842-1922), who founded Vanity Fair in 1868, fostered its witty house style, and wrote biographical sketches to accompany the chromolithograph caricatures that were one of the magazine’s distinguishing features. Jehu Junior’s description of Ruskin, along with a caricature by Adriano Cecioni, appeared on February 17, 1872 (Matthews and Mellini 92).
Raised in a wealthy home by strict but affectionate and culturally-inclined Evangelical Anglican parents who exposed him to books, paintings, and even theater, Ruskin began his career with the conviction that English taste was dreadful. One of his earliest prose works, *The Poetry of Architecture*, offers a conservative critique of individuated taste. The teenaged Ruskin prefers aristocratic order to the chaos produced by individuals freely following their own architectural preferences. He expresses relief that the standards for painting are set by “the chosen few . . . our nobility and men of taste and talent,” thus providing painters with some insulation from the marketplace where vulgar public taste rules (1: 7). Unfortunately, the rabble-like English public do have the ability to influence architecture. “There, the power is generally diffused. Every citizen may box himself up in as barbarous a tenement as suits his taste or inclination [or pocketbook, one might add]; the architect is his vassal, and must permit him not only to criticise, but to perpetrate,” Ruskin fumes (1: 7). Ruskin makes it clear that such expression of individual taste results in buildings egregious not just for their ugliness, but for their diversity. As he puts it, “The streets of our cities are examples of the effects of this clashing of different tastes; and they are either remarkable for the utter absence of all attempt at embellishment, or disgraced by every variety of abomination” (1: 7). The political implications are easy to hear: the democratic diffusion of power results in chaos and ugliness. Rule by the superior few produces unified order and beauty. Time did not mitigate Ruskin’s indignation at English taste, and scorn would remain a weapon he wielded against all he deemed ugly. Taken as a whole, however, his critique of individuation is not clearly or simply conservative nostalgia for aristocratic order.
As his religious beliefs changed, Ruskin’s justification for beauty and art shifted from a theocentric focus on how beauty reminds us of God to an anthropocentric focus on human capabilities and earthly justice. Ruskin identified 1858 as the year that he lost his religious certainty, but the process was probably more gradual. As his religious convictions turned to agnosticism or even atheism and then to a personal, non-doctrinal Christianity, Ruskin retained his capacity for taking pleasure in beauty. His own aesthetic pleasure must have provided an impetus for his work. In his later writings, Ruskin suggests that we all have taste and that when society is justly organized we will all have the opportunity to develop this capacity. His wide-ranging pedagogical endeavors—teaching drawing via correspondence, lecturing at a working men’s college and a middle-class girls’ school, acting as Slade Professor of Art at Oxford, authoring a drawing manual, founding a museum, and donating materials to educational institutions—were attempts to foster this capacity for taste. For Ruskin, taste is a moral resource even as he worries that isolated aesthetic contemplation, though attractive, is impossible or irresponsible in an unjust world.

In a turn to social criticism in works like *Unto This Last*, Ruskin loudly objected to the materialism and competition that he saw in laissez-faire capitalism. One of Ruskin’s most original contributions to political economy, which is only now being recognized, is that he was one of the first thinkers to identify consumption’s economic and ethical importance (Craig 5). Holding consumers responsible for the conditions under which their purchases were produced, Ruskin sees aesthetic and economic choices as inseparable (Ruskin 17: 113-14). He does not see legislative change as the solution.
Instead, he wants to reform individuals’ desires. His social goal is the moral transformation of individuals who will then work to reorganize English society according to his organic vision of individual parts contributing to a harmonious whole. In this vision, the desire for beauty and the cultivation of taste are not mere social palliatives, but signs and promises of moral regeneration. Expressing his conviction that cultivating national taste required a transformation in desire rather than an abundance of art objects, he wrote “It is no use to begin at the Completion—get the stomach of this country into order, then—your arts will all teach themselves” (unpublished letter qtd. in Eagles 32).

Ruskin’s project of improving English taste was connected not just to art, but also to less rarified arenas of material culture. A great many Victorians wanted to reform taste, but they did not always share the social goals that Ruskin adopted in his later years. In the late 1830s, when The Poetry of Architecture appeared, taste was already a topic of public concern. From 1835 to 1836, Parliament’s Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures investigated design in British goods. Charged with maintaining Britain’s industrial supremacy, the parliamentary committee concluded that although British manufacturers led the world in technology, their products were poorly designed (Cohen 14). They recommended the founding of government-sponsored Schools of Design, which began in 1837 (Atwood 160). Jules Lubbock argues that commercial motives alone

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3 In “Traffic” (an 1864 lecture, published 1866) Ruskin differentiates such taste reforms from his own project by dismissing J. Gardner Wilkinson’s recent On Colour: And on the Necessity for a General Diffusion of Taste Among All Classes (1858). It is unclear whether Ruskin had actually read Wilkinson’s book, or was simply reacting to its title. Like Ruskin, Wilkinson treats taste not as a matter of aesthetic laws, but as an innate capacity that can be developed. However, he also trumpets the typical design reform claim that improving public taste will make England better equipped to compete commercially with more tasteful European nations. This claim was repugnant to Ruskin’s view of taste as a moral capacity, not an asset with cash value. Wilkinson’s text includes respectful references to Ruskin’s art criticism.
cannot explain this state intervention in the design of household goods. Rather, as a continuation of the political and moral currents that had precipitated the 1832 Reform Act, design reform was an effort “to reshape personal morality” through “control over individual consumption” (Lubbock 248).

Changing demographics also explain why Ruskin was not alone in wanting to reform English taste. Average income doubled in real terms between 1851 and 1901. The middle class that constituted 12.5% of the population in 1851 made up 25% in 1901. Most of these middle-class households rented their homes, spending only about 10% of their income on housing (Cohen 13). Increased prosperity meant that the middle class had more disposable income than ever before to spend on possessions like household furnishings and art. Faced with an overwhelming material world of new manufactured goods, art objects, and reproductions, middle-class shoppers were eager for advice on how to spend their money tastefully. *The Poetry of Architecture* originally appeared in a publication that served just this advisory function: J.C. Loudon’s *Architecture Magazine.*

Loudon felt that Ruskin’s writings could improve public taste in architecture (1: xliii). Comparing Ruskin’s taste discourse to that of Victorian design reformers reveals how much more ambiguous Ruskin’s conception of taste was, and how much more traction it provided for social critique.

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4 John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), a friend of Ruskin’s father, was a practicing landscape gardener whose work had roots in the eighteenth-century theories of Sir Uvedale Price. He also worked as a writer and editor purveying advice on garden and household design. Today Loudon’s *An Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture* (1832) is a standard primary source in academic studies of Victorian material culture. Loudon’s periodical and volume publications were numerous, ranging from advice on suburban gardens to the best layout for cemeteries.
The preeminent voice in design reform discourse belonged to Henry Cole, a man once described as “a hyperactive Benthamite civil servant” (Lubbock 249). Other important voices were Richard Redgrave (1804-88), William Dyce (1806-64), Owen Jones (1809-74), and Ralph Nicholson Wornum (1812-77). For these men, the question of taste and design was one of both aesthetics and function. Cole, a member of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce since 1845, worked in the government-sponsored Schools of Design, had a line of “Art Manufactures,” and helped organize the 1851 Great Exhibition that was meant to realize Prince Albert’s goal of fusing industry with art (Cohen 15).

The Great Exhibition, held in the purpose-built Crystal Palace, made discourse about public taste even more prominent. When the *Art-Journal* offered the substantial sum of 100 guineas for the best essay on the practical lessons British manufacturers could derive from the Crystal Palace, the winner was Wornum’s essay on “The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste” (1851). Besides educating the taste of the manufacturers who produced tacky goods and the public who purchased them, design reformers tried to transform industrial design into a recognizable profession. They advanced copyright protections, insisted that manufacturers hire only trained designers, and promoted regularized design training like that offered at Cole’s government schools (Bizup 162-63, *JDM* 1: 3-4).5

When it came to judging manufactured objects aesthetically, “fitness” was a central and somewhat flexible concept that allowed design reformers to connect utility to

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5 Cole helmed the *Journal of Design and Manufactures* (1849-52), which can be viewed online through the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. Contributors like William Dyce and Richard Redgrave supported professionalization for designers and treated design as a matter of aesthetic, commercial, social, and moral importance (Bizup 131-36).
beauty. By fitness, design reformers meant something different from Adam Smith’s “appearance of utility” and from Smith’s delight in the intricate, efficient harmony with which a machine’s interlocking parts work together. For design reformers, fitness sometimes came close to the modernist dictum that “form follows function.” Thus, in his “Supplementary Report on Design” (1852), Redgrave contrasts the design situation in France and England. French ornamentation shows “fitness and fancy” because it is “specially adapted to the thing ornamented” (711). In contrast, he laments, “In England the ornament designed for one work is made to do duty for twenty others: one figure truly plays many parts, and is often used with an inconceivable want of fitness” (711). At other times, “fitness” means that form should represent function (Bizup 119-21). Wornum, in his evaluation of the Great Exhibition, praises an ornate French sideboard’s “happy and intellectual” decoration (XIII***). The sideboard depicted food and food sources, symbolizing its function in the dining room. Similarly, the statement of purpose for Cole’s line of “Art Manufactures” includes the declaration that “Art Manufacturers will aim to produce in each article superior utility, which is not to be sacrificed to ornament; to select pure forms; to decorate each article with appropriate details relating to its use” (qtd. in Lubbock 255).

Cole’s strictures against public taste led Charles Dickens to parody him in *Hard Times* (1854). In the chapter “Murdering the Innocents,” a dismal gentleman berates Sissy Jupe for liking flowered carpets, declaring “‘What is called Taste, is only another name for Fact. . . . You don’t walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk

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6 These curious page numbers are due to the fact that Wornum’s essay was printed as an appendix to the *Art-Journal’s* illustrated catalogue of the Great Exhibition.
upon flowers in carpets’” (9). According to this caricatured design reformer, flowered carpets fail the “fitness” test because representations of delicate, three-dimensional plants do not belong on a flat surface meant for walking. Though Dickens exaggerates design reform’s laws of fitness, he is not exaggerating as much as we might think. Wornum’s discussion of textiles includes the stricture that “In another important fabric, carpets, English manufacturers make a very distinguished display, though the most essential feature, æsthetically, is uniformly disregarded, namely, that a carpet is made to be trodden upon” (XX***). Observing that English manufacturers produce carpets with illusionistic designs like “lilies floating in pretty pools” and “hillocks of flowers,” Wornum concludes, “As well might a man counterfeit the bottomless pit, and expect people to walk into it, as think to attain the approval of men of taste by such designs as these” (XX***).

Dickens’s harsh parody hones in on design reform’s assumption that taste follows immutable natural laws. Design reformers proposed to solve Britain’s design problem by providing quasi-scientific expertise on laws of taste that could be discovered and applied to manufactures. Cole and the London School of Design reconciled aesthetic and capitalist “laws” by arguing that improved design is crucial to commercial success (Bizup 162-3). The same argument appears in Wornum’s “The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste.” Given the subject matter of the Art-Journal contest, it is not surprising that Wornum’s essay treats taste as an asset to, not a critique of, English manufacturing. Wornum points to the economic success of Wedgwood pottery to bolster his argument that cultivating good taste (in Wedgwood’s case, classical taste) is an “indispensable foundation of
success” (XVI***). He goes so far as to declare taste “the producer’s most valuable
capital” (VII***). This economically valuable taste is a “species of judgment” that
involves the use of reason and reference to “fixed natural laws” (I***). Like Cole,
Wornum stresses that good taste requires not imagination, but professional training and
expertise (Bizup 164-65).

Where design reform equates taste with certified expertise on visual laws, Ruskin
sees taste as requiring imagination and feeling. For Ruskin, imagination and feeling are
moral qualities that cannot be produced by specialized training. Instead, good taste can
only be fostered by a holistic education that develops all of the student’s intellectual,
emotional, and moral faculties. His lecture “Education in Art” (1858, published 1880)
suggests that students from all class backgrounds should learn drawing not primarily
because it is a valuable technical skill, but because it will increase the accuracy with
which they perceive and communicate about the world (16: 143-46). *Fors Clavigera*
(1871-84) openly criticizes Cole, the Great Exhibition, and the government art schools’
vocationalism (Ruskin 27: 603-05, 29: 154; Atwood 46).

Ruskin also criticized Cole’s foray into using museums to educate public taste
(Atwood 161). In 1852, with help from Richard Redgrave, Owen Jones, and A.W. Pugin,
Cole used artifacts from the Great Exhibition to open what eventually became one of the
world’s foremost museums of art and design: the Victoria and Albert. From its initial
home in Marlborough House, the museum moved in 1857 and was renamed the South
Kensington Museum. There were practical concerns that had to be considered if the
public, especially the working class, were to visit and improve their taste. According to
Atwood, South Kensington “became the nexus for debates about such issues as admission fees, opening hours, and accessibility” (161). Ruskin plunged into the fray, testifying to the National Gallery Site Commission in 1857 and to the Committee on Public Institutions in 1860, not to mention founding his own St. George’s Museum in 1875. For Ruskin, logistical questions about opening hours necessarily led to larger questions about regulating labor conditions so that, rather than being exhausted and dehumanized, workers could not only visit galleries, but enjoy them (16: 473-74).7

When we compare Ruskin’s taste discourse with Cole’s and Wornum’s, it is easy to see how Ruskin’s theories gained a reputation for aesthetic disinterestedness—a reputation that, I argue, is somewhat misplaced. While design reformers happily promoted the idea that good taste made manufacturing more profitable, Ruskin could not accept such a symbiotic relationship between art and industry. Both before and after he shifted his attention from art to social reform, Ruskin was deeply antipathetic to the possibility that taste could have commercial utility or be produced by vocational training. However, the fact that Ruskin violently rejected the notion that beauty and taste could be exchanged for cash does not mean that he saw them as disinterested, much less useless. Although Ruskin treated art as the opposite of industry, he was much less consistent about whether art was the opposite of utility. Commercial utility, after all, is only one kind of utility.

Ruskin was not alone in moralizing taste. Cole and other design reformers framed public taste as a matter not just of national commercial success, but of virtue (Cohen 17-18). However, design reform’s aesthetic morality fails to provide the kind of social critique that Ruskin’s later taste theory incorporates. In March 1849, Cole helmed the first issue of The Journal of Design and Manufactures, which asserted “Whilst the commercial value of ornamental design now comes home practically to the perception of tens of thousands,—to manufacturers, artists, and designers; to artisans and dealers in decorative manufactures; the moral influence of ornamental art extends to millions” (1, emphasis in original). The Journal’s assertion is as vague as it is confident. There is evidence that some Victorians had a more specific sense that beautiful or ugly material surroundings would influence character development for better or worse. Household goods could be morally degrading not just because they were ugly, but because they were made from a host of deceptive materials like veneer, gilding, or fake marble (Cohen 18-19). Redgrave’s “Supplementary Report on Design” begins and ends with the opposition between the beautiful and the meretricious. His first page expresses concern that “without some critical guidance, some judicial canons, or some careful separation of the

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8 In Leaves from a Journalist’s Note-book (1874), Percy Russell wrote,

The most silent, persistent, and gradual are also the most powerful influences, morally considered; and I cannot doubt that the colour and form with which we domestically surround ourselves in our homes have very special effects upon our character and even temperament. At any rate, without going so far as to assert that the more practical among our Lares—id est, the household furniture—can be primary moral influences, it is by no means so difficult to understand how they act as secondary causes in developing the disposition. (56)

meretricious from the beautiful, it is to be feared that the public taste will rather be vitiated than improved by an examination of the Exhibition” (Redgrave 708). The language in his final sentence is even more moralistic as Redgrave hopes that his report will “lead to the rejection of what is meretricious and false, and to a more simple, grave, and earnest style in modern ornament” (749). Redgrave frames bad public taste as a symptom, not a cause, of a design crisis brought on by a crisis of representation. Due to deceptive new materials and manufacturing methods, “the visual attributes of a given article could no longer testify to its authenticity or merit” (Bizup 169). Bizup and Lubbock both map this crisis of representation onto class mobility: if maids could parade about in imitation cashmere shawls, then neither people nor objects were what they seemed (Bizup 169, Lubbock 256).9

Compared to Ruskin, Wornum and other design reformers were more capable of recognizing that art is a commodity in a capitalist society. (Not that design reformers employed such Marxist terminology.) Despite this recognition, their moralistic framework is weak, limited to analyzing objects as vulgar, unfitting, or false. Accusing electroplated candlesticks of deception is a fairly impoverished notion of taste’s morality, one that is ultimately based on an insistence that people’s possessions accurately represent their social class. Although it expresses unease about social mobility, design reformers’ taste discourse provides little traction for analyzing social relations. Their

9 Despite Dickens’s irritation with design reformers, Our Mutual Friend’s (1864-65) negative depiction of the nouveaux- riches Veneerings indicates that he, too, associated “deceptive” materials with problematic class mobility and even immorality.
solution to the perceived crisis in public taste and morals was to train experts who would instruct the public in taste’s universal laws.

In contrast, though Ruskin insists on an untenable opposition between art and commerce, his taste theory has a much richer ethical vocabulary. As we will see in more detail below, Ruskin’s taste theory evaluates not just objects, but their conditions of production and consumption. Of paramount importance is whether those conditions foster imagination and feeling. Consequently, his taste theory is concerned with subjects as well as objects. Ruskin’s solution to Britain’s moral and aesthetic degradation requires much more than expertise. As he would eventually articulate it in *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin’s solution demands that the division of labor, the treatment of workers, and the distribution of profit be overhauled.

**Taste: A Capacity for Pleasure or for Judgment?**

For every one of us has peculiar sources of enjoyment necessarily opened to him in certain scenes and things, sources which are sealed to others; and we must be wary, on the one hand, of confounding these in ourselves with ultimate conclusions of taste, and so forcing them upon all as authoritative, and on the other, of supposing that the enjoyments of others which we cannot share are shallow or unwarrantable, because incommunicable. I fear, for instance, that in the former portion of this work I may have attributed too much community and authority to certain affections of my own for scenery inducing emotions of wild, impetuous, and enthusiastic characters, and too little to those which I perceive in others for things peaceful, humble, meditative, and solemn.

—Ruskin (4: 74-75)

Rather than relying on expert knowledge of universal rules, Ruskin’s theory of taste enacts the tension between taste as a judgment grounded in shared, even universal, principles, and taste as a subjective pleasure grounded in particularity. Since Ruskin treats aesthetics and ethics as inseparable, his ethical thinking shows the same tension
between favoring absolutes and remaining committed to the importance of individual perception, pleasure, and desire. Taste provides Ruskin with a flexible rubric for articulating his evolving sense that both art and society should promote individual pleasure and desire, but that individual pleasure and desire alone are not adequate goals for either art or society. Although Ruskin rejects individuated taste as a norm, he maintains (sometimes unwittingly, sometimes consciously) an investment in subjectivity and particularity by repeatedly proposing that individual perceptions, pleasures, and desires, not universal rules or abstract concepts, are the crucial components of taste.  

Ruskin does not define “taste” systematically, but improving taste remains a vital concern throughout his career. Although The Poetry of Architecture was meant to be a taxonomy of European buildings from the cottage to the palace, the declared purpose of this survey “is not the attainment of architectural data, but the formation of taste” (1: 29). As I mentioned above, The Poetry of Architecture is a conservative critique of the English tendency to express personal taste. Interestingly, despite his evident desire that the English public defer to authority rather than consulting their own preferences, Ruskin’s solution is not simply to hire experts. Since any building’s beauty depends on its relationship to a specific physical setting that is replete with emotional and cultural

10 George Landow identifies a similar contradiction or complexity in Ruskin’s work. According to Landow, Ruskin’s aesthetic theories are riven by simultaneous commitment to and anxiety about romanticism, specifically about the belief that emotion is central to the production and consumption of art. In Landow’s words, “Ruskin continually concerned himself throughout his career to find ways to protect a theory of the arts centered on emotion from the potentially limiting and distorting effects of that emotion” (386-87).

11 In his letter to Osborne Gordon, Ruskin regrets that the meaning of taste is so vague. Some people use it to denote a connoisseur’s technical knowledge, “the faculty of knowing a Claude from a copy” (3: 665). For others, taste means “a passionate love of all the works of God” or “love and knowledge . . . not of technicalities and fancies of men, but of the universal system of nature—as interpreted and rendered stable by art” (3: 665).
meanings or associations, a list of architectural rules and proportions cannot provide adequate aesthetic guidelines (1: 5, 9). Ruskin was no fan of German philosophy, but when he states that taste requires “knowledge and feeling” he is registering the conundrum that made taste so compelling for Kant: taste is a judgment based on non-rational knowledge (1: 8). In the teenaged Ruskin’s terms, taste in architecture involves rational understanding of proportion and utility along with non-rational awareness of the feelings aroused by a particular landscape and a sense of what kind of building matches those feelings. For instance, a ramshackle French cottage can be “in perfectly good taste” because its signs of age suit its setting (1: 17). Good taste will produce very different cottages in other landscapes.

In *The Poetry of Architecture*, Ruskin’s method for evaluating buildings demonstrates his ultimately unachievable desire to find some kind of abstract mental procedure that will subsume the sensuous particularity of the aesthetic encounter, not to mention affect generally, thus allowing him to arrive at an airtight estimation of each building’s aesthetic merits. In this two-step method, Ruskin will first “determine what is theoretically beautiful” (1: 74). The second step is to “observe how far our expectations are fulfilled in individual buildings” (1: 74). One challenge he faces in his survey of European architecture is that “There never was, and never can be, a universal beau idéal in architecture, and the arrival at all local models of beauty would be the task of ages” (1: 116). However, he is willing to give it a try. For each geographical area, he produces an ideal by asking what kind of building best suits the landscape’s physical characteristics
and common mental associations. Once this ideal is formulated, he is equipped with a
standard by which to judge the actual buildings. Confessing the monumentality of his
task (to wit, producing an ideal for every kind of building in every part of Europe), the
young critic expresses a hope that he can provide a procedure that will allow his readers
to practice evaluating individual buildings, gradually building up the skill necessary to
tackle “the village and the city” (1: 74). As it happened, Loudon’s *Architectural
Magazine* went out of print before Ruskin got beyond the cottage and the gentleman’s
country villa.

Even when applied to isolated cottages and villas, his methodology breaks down. His
frequent deviations from his declared method demonstrate how poorly such an
abstract proceeding was suited to his own intense, non-rational visual pleasures and
pains. For instance, in the abstract, stucco is “a paltry and unsubstantial material” (1: 95).
When compared to stone, stucco looks too cheap, too new, and too bright. What happens
when Ruskin applies his abstract methodology to the use of stucco in Italian lake villas?
“The first objection, which strikes us instantly when we *imagine* such a building, is the
want of repose, the startling glare of effect, induced by its unsubdued tint,” he writes (1: 92, emphasis in original). Yet, confronted with the stucco and stone villas surrounding
the Lago di Como, Ruskin admits: “this objection [to bright stucco] does not strike us
when we *see* the building” (1: 92, emphasis in original). Unwilling to give up his general

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12 Here we see Ruskin borrowing from associationist aesthetics, though he is interested not in
idiosyncratic mental associations, but rather in what associations viewers of landscapes will share due to
their cultural background. For discussions of how Ruskin opposes associationist taste relativism, but
nonetheless uses and revises associationist aesthetics at various points in his career, see Landow (101-10)
beauty in subjective associations, Ruskin locates beauty (or aesthetic pleasure) in both subjective
associations and objective visual properties (Helsinger 325n52).
rule against stucco, he ingeniously rationalizes his attraction to Lago di Como’s stuccoed villas.

Ruskin’s rationalization takes the form of verbal descriptions that, through careful attention to local particularities, reproduce some of the immediacy of his own visual perceptions. Stucco looks offensively new. Buildings in Italy should look old, in keeping with the country’s classical associations. In formulating this norm, Ruskin assumes both that the tourist has a certain degree of cultural capital, and that the tourist’s classical knowledge will mediate her aesthetic judgments of Italian landscapes. However, villas may safely deviate from the norm of antique dignity because they are mere summer pleasure-houses, “built more as a plaything than as a monument” (1: 93). No longer basing his aesthetic judgment on a norm mediated by cultural and historical knowledge, Ruskin’s defense of stucco villas focuses on the immediate sensations that they provide the viewer. Bright white villas make lovely reflections in the lake, relieving the dark reflections of cypress trees (1: 91-92). Ruskin’s assertion that stucco visibly recognizable as such must remain “decidedly disagreeable” registers an unwillingness to abandon his abstract methodology and pre-formulated norms (1: 95). However, his attraction to Italian lake villas conquers, and his apology for them culminates in what is probably the most sensuous and carefully-observed description of stucco in English prose, as he muses, “There is also a great deal of ease and softness in the angular lines of the stucco, which are never sharp or harsh, like those of stone; and it receives shadows with great beauty, a point of infinite importance in this climate; giving them lightness and transparency, without any diminution of depth” (1: 95-96). Local context and particularity trump the
imagined aesthetic ideal. In a text that attempts to counter individuated taste with aesthetic authority, Ruskin nonetheless proceeds to ground his judgment of stucco on particular experiences of affective engagement and visual pleasure.

In some instances, Ruskin explicitly recognizes that he is deviating from his declared method of starting with an ideal and using it to measure reality. For instance, he notes that his chapter on Swiss mountain cottages fails to follow his intended method of describing national scenery, then formulating the ideal cottage for such a landscape, and finally using that imagined ideal as a standard for judging the reality (1: 42). A few chapters later, Ruskin humorously recognizes that chimneys also defy his abstract methodology. “Speculation . . . on the beau idéal of a chimney can never be unshackled,” he writes, “because, though we may imagine what it ought to be, we can never tell, until the house is built, what it must be; we may require it to be short, and find that it will smoke, unless it is long; or, we may desire it to be covered, and find it will not go unless it is open” (1: 56, emphasis in original). Abstraction and idealization again prove inadequate for judgment, at least in the case of such a practical architectural feature. In Ruskin’s evaluation of the Lago di Como villas, it seemed as if Italian stucco seduced him into basing his aesthetic judgment on the pleasure he felt at the sight of a particular material object. In the case of chimneys, it is even harder to discount material particularity. Because chimneys must be useful, artistic judgment cannot proceed according to any general rule of beauty. Judgment is “shackled” to material particularity, to considering any given chimney’s specific situation and functioning. Aesthetics and
utility are on a collision course. There will be repercussions for Ruskin’s aesthetic theories.

Despite this difficulty, Ruskin remains committed to evaluating chimneys aesthetically. Since there can be no single ideal by which to evaluate all chimneys, he reverses his method and, like Burke in his *Enquiry*, proceeds empirically. In an attempt to generate an ideal based on whatever characteristics are shared by Europe’s most beautiful specimens, he takes his readers on an illustrated tour of chimneys from England to Spain (1: 58).

The question of how utility relates to aesthetics complicates his evaluation and leads him into contradictions. On one hand, chimneys, like any other overtly practical architectural feature, have “disagreeable associations” and thus should be unobtrusive (1: 56). Adding decoration will only call attention to everything that is “intrinsically ugly” about them (1: 56). On the other hand, even though their utility renders them ugly, it is simultaneously the chimneys’ only chance of aesthetic salvation. A chimney’s practical character can endow it with beauty, for “what is most adapted to its purpose is most beautiful” (1: 64).

Of all the chimneys in his survey, only two English examples are “fit for imitation” (1: 64). Ruskin realizes that this assertion seems incompatible with his declaration that the English have “no taste,” while the Italians, Spaniards, and Germans, despite their inferior chimneys, have “good taste” (1: 64-65). His solution is to separate judgments of taste from judgments of utility. The practical-minded but tasteless English produce attractive chimneys only when they ignore aesthetic concerns and design
chimneys for function. The result of this process is a beauty based on functionality, or what design reformers would call “fitness.” As soon as the English consciously attempt to decorate their chimneys, the result is tacky (1: 64-65). With their good taste, continental Europeans excel at conscious aesthetic decisions, but lack a sense of fitness. They are successful at grouping or concealing chimneys, but fail to design them for function (1: 65).

Ruskin’s “Chapter on Chimneys” simultaneously states that beautiful form follows function (“what is most adapted to its purpose is most beautiful”) and strongly implies that utility and beauty, fitness and good taste, are mutually exclusive. “A Chapter on Chimneys” also demonstrates how difficult it was for Ruskin to reconcile his commitment to general rules of good taste with his attention to particular aesthetic experiences. The manuscript for “The Cottage—Concluding Remarks” registers this strain in a passage that was omitted from serial publication. Ruskin apologizes for the incoherence of his remarks about chimneys, then defends himself by stating that it is difficult to judge the components of architecture when removed from the “‘local feelings’” by which they should be judged (1: 66n3). He feels confident that “‘having once got at the general principles of chimney-building, it will be easy to apply them to, and test them by, the individual examples which we shall constantly meet with’” (1: 66n3). The text’s process of arriving at such general principles shows great strain,

13 In praising practical, unornamented English chimneys, Ruskin may be approving less of their functionality than of the presumed “naturalness” exhibited by their designers. Compare Ch. IV on Westmoreland cottages. Fascinatingly, the beauty of these cottages results from the lack of reflection (i.e. the assumed naturalness) that peasants exert in constructing them. “The uncultivated mountaineer of Cumberland has no taste” and succeeds in suiting the cottage to its purpose and landscape simply by using local materials and suiting his own needs (1: 52). The peasant who “begins to think of effect . . . commits a barbarism by whitewashing the whole” (1: 52).
however, as Ruskin attempts to reconcile general rules with individual experiences, not to mention utility with beauty. As we will see below, the question of beauty and utility—of whether and how beautiful objects meet human needs—continues to Complicate Ruskin’s more mature theories of beauty and taste.

**Ruskin’s Moral Theory of Beauty, and the Problem with “Aesthesis”**

In 1837, when Loudon began publishing the articles that comprise *The Poetry of Architecture*, Ruskin was only eighteen. In 1843, Ruskin’s preference for J.M.W. Turner’s paintings led him to write *Modern Painters I*, which defended Turner’s realism against conventional, academic standards for painting. *Modern Painters* (1843-60) would eventually take up five volumes. Between publishing the first and second volumes, Ruskin took his first tour of Europe without his parents and developed a new appreciation for old Italian art (4: xxii, xxiv). In *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin tries to produce a theory of beauty that is systematic, even if it lacks a single governing standard.

I have suggested that rather than taking Ruskin’s “moral” or “disinterested” aesthetic for granted—whether by accepting it at face value or by rejecting it automatically—we need a more analytic account of how Ruskin connects the beautiful to the good. As we saw earlier, design reformers who evaluated objects in both moral and aesthetic terms tended to focus on the materials used and the subject matter depicted. Likewise, it is common today to focus on content when morally evaluating narratives and images: too much violence, too much sex, too much racism or sexism. Ruskin does evaluate subject matter in moral terms, but here I am concerned with elucidating his less familiar strategies for linking beauty to morals. Drawing on eighteenth-century theories
discussed in Chapter 2, Ruskin refuses to treat aesthetics as a separate field of knowledge distinct from ethics or psychology. Essentially, by arguing throughout his career that the designation “aesthetic” is too narrow to describe the simultaneously sensuous, mental, emotional, and moral experience of beauty, and by preferring to discuss beauty using a vocabulary drawn from moral philosophy, Ruskin resists not just the idea that beauty is purely a matter of individual sense perceptions, but also the idea that aesthetic experiences have their own meaning unconnected to other spheres of human experience.

Ruskin’s early strategies for linking art to life backfire. Because Ruskin’s concept of morality in 1846 relies on a particularly anti-materialist Christianity, connecting beauty to morality forces him to disconnect beauty from any human desires and needs not directly related to Christian salvation. Ruskin’s Evangelical belief in the incompatibility of the soul with the body forces him into an inadvertent endorsement of the notion that art has an intrinsic value—a notion that, for Wilde, will seem to require that art has no moral utility.

In order to counter the associationist position that taste is purely subjective, *Modern Painters II* tries to classify the mental faculties involved in aesthetic experience. These mental faculties are universal features of the human mind and have the potential to operate the same way in anyone who has an aesthetic experience. Or rather, since Ruskin does not use the term “aesthetic experience,” we might say that *Modern Painters II* classifies the mental faculties that perceive and derive pleasure from natural and man-made beauty. Always a stickler for accurate word use and knowledge of etymology, Ruskin objects to describing experiences of beauty with the term “aesthetic,” because its
Greek root denotes “mere sensual perception” (4: 42). In fact, his decision to republish *Modern Painters II* in 1883 was a protest against what he saw as the increasingly dominant errors of Aestheticism. He objected to the way that Aesthetes separated art from morality and reduced the pleasures of beauty to the pleasures of sense.

*Modern Painters II* opposes “Æsthesia,” the merely sensual perception of pleasure, to “Theoria,” a term Ruskin invents for the moral perception of pleasure in beauty (4: 47). Theoria is “the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as a gift of God; a gift not necessary to our being, but added to, and elevating it” (4: 47).

Ruskin revisits his definition of beauty from *Modern Painters I* (3: 109-11), reminding the reader that “ideas of beauty” are definitely a matter of moral perception and partly a matter of sensual perception, but emphatically not a matter of intellectual perception (4: 48). “Moral perception” for Ruskin involves affective and mental but non-rational processes.

Importantly, the classification of a pleasure as Theoria or Aesthesis depends not just on the characteristics of the object, but on the feelings of the subject (4: 47). Here, Christian belief is key for Ruskin. When accompanied by reverence, “even the lower and more sensual pleasures may be rendered Theoretic” (4: 47). The “general law” at work here is that sensory pleasures “when sought in the abstract and ardently . . . are foul things; but when received with thankfulness and with reference to God’s glory, they become Theoretic” (4: 48). The variance in “heart-feeling” also allows Ruskin to explain how we can all have a capacity for taste (i.e., pleasure in beauty) but not be pleased by the same things. Later we will see how Ruskin’s dual theory of “Typical” and “Vital”
beauty proposes that in order to receive pleasure from beauty we need a sympathetic heart in addition to an active theoretic faculty. We will also see how his theory of taste shuttles between accounting for the particular features of objects that create beauty and accounting for the subjective capacities that allow us to experience beauty.

As a capacity for receiving pleasure from divinely-bestowed beauty, Theoria is a distinctly contemplative faculty. One may passively receive sensory pleasures with thankfulness, but active seeking turns them “foul.” By postulating that we receive pleasure through an innate but cultivatable mental faculty, Ruskin counters theories that beauty (as a pleasurable feeling or as a property of objects) depends on truth, utility, custom, or the association of ideas (4: 66). He spends the most energy countering this last associationist “error” because it would mean that beauty depends on individual subjectivity. He prefers the term “Theoretic faculty” because “impressions of beauty” are a matter of moral perception, not sensual or intellectual perception (4: 42). Ruskin invents the mental faculty of Theoria much as Hutcheson invents the “inner sense.” Both are modeled on the immediacy and universality of the external senses. Like the external senses, they are presumed to be present in everyone and to act automatically, without the interference of reason or individual subjectivity, and thus without interestedness.

There is another way in which Modern Painters II looks back to eighteenth-century moral philosophers who treated social, moral, and aesthetic concerns together. Landow points out that in order to understand Ruskin’s use of the term “moral” (as in the moral perception of beauty), we need to understand that Ruskin uses a vocabulary inherited from eighteenth-century moral philosophy. This vocabulary uses the same
terminology to discuss psychology and morality. As we saw earlier, moral philosophers like Shaftesbury treated feeling—specifically, a feeling of affection for the good—as the basis for virtue. In this context, “sympathy” is one of the most important terms connecting feeling to both virtue and art (particularly Romantic poetry). Sympathy means not simply a feeling of pity or charity, but an imaginative ability to change places with another in order to evaluate her behavior, or in order to evaluate one’s own behavior from an external viewpoint (Smith *TMS* 11-22, 128-31).14

Ruskin had read Smith’s *Theory* by the time that he published *Modern Painters I* in 1843 (Landow 95). The importance of feeling in moral philosophy dovetails with the importance of feeling in Romantic art, which was also influential on Ruskin. Ruskin accepts the proposition that moral knowledge is non-rational and based on feeling. The idea was so common that he probably derived it from multiple sources, perhaps including Wordsworth in addition to Smith (Landow 155-56). Since aesthetic reactions, pleasure, imagination, and taste also involve feeling, Ruskin regards them as related to morals.

However, Ruskin is not simply the passive inheritor of an unquestioned tradition that uses the same terms to discuss feeling, morality, and beauty. After all, Baumgarten had called for a separate science of sensuous knowledge a full century earlier, and in the early 1800s Coleridge was responding enthusiastically to the idea that aesthetic perception is separate from moral perception. Ruskin chooses to reject the identification

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14 Landow thinks that Ruskin assumes that the readers of *Modern Painters* will know the definition of “sympathy” as it was used in moral philosophy (151). Much later, in *Fors Clavigera* Letter 34 (1873), Ruskin explicitly defines “sympathy,” which he equates with “compassion” and “fellow-feeling” as “the imaginative understanding of the natures of others, and the power of putting ourselves in their place, [which] is the faculty on which the virtue depends” (27: 627).
of art and beauty with sensuous knowledge. The “feeling of the beautiful” is the closest that Ruskin comes to referring to “aesthetic experience” (4: 79).

What are the merely aesthetic pleasures, if beauty is not one of them? Ruskin produces a hierarchical classification of sensual (in his terms, properly aesthetic) pleasures. He draws on Aristotle’s taxonomy of pleasure, which identifies the lowest sensory pleasures as those that are “contrary to reason” (4: 45). Indulgent “pleasures of touch and taste” belong to this low category because they distract us from reason and from higher pleasures, and because they are even “destructive . . . of the very sensibilities by which they themselves are received” (4: 44).

Importantly, these lowly pleasures of taste and touch are also inferior because they are related to physical need and can too easily overrun their “natural” function. Inferior pleasures are “instruments of our preservation, compelling us to seek the things necessary to our being . . . when this their function is fully performed, they ought to have an end; and can be only artificially, and under high penalty, prolonged” (4: 45). In other words, the necessary pleasure of eating to sustain life can turn into gluttony. Ruskin is setting up an opposition between human needs and beauty’s intrinsic value. Pleasures derived from sight and hearing are higher because “They answer not any purposes of mere existence” (4: 45). Ruskin contrasts these endlessly delightful higher pleasures with the lower pleasures of the hungry stomach, which can be satiated. “And as these pleasures have no function to perform, so there is no limit to their continuance in the accomplishment of their end, for they are an end in themselves, and so may be perpetual with all of us; being in no way destructive, but rather increasing in exquisiteness by
repetition,” he writes (4: 46). The appearance of flowers is one such non-functional pleasure, since their beauty gives us no useful information about whether they are good to eat like fruits or grains. Similarly, we can take non-functional pleasure in the sound of someone’s voice, which is unrelated to any information that the speaker conveys to us (4: 46).

Thus, even when considering only the truly aesthetic (sensory) pleasures, Ruskin creates an opposition between lower pleasures related to physical human needs and higher (some might say “disinterested”) pleasures. By ranking the pleasure of beauty above pleasures that are related to human needs and sensory experience, Ruskin inadvertently provides a germinative version of the claim that art is a realm of intrinsic value, a higher plane where judgment and value float free from social processes or prejudices.

In 1846, when he was drafting Modern Painters II, Ruskin’s Evangelical devaluation of the body and of the temporal world in general was at the root of his assumption that the possibility of sustaining “mere existence” is incompatible with higher sources of pleasure.¹⁵ Again we can see that his commitments to disinterested pleasure, utility, and the aesthetic are ready to collide. Rather than saying that Ruskin’s Evangelical faith leads him to conceive soul and body as opposites, it is almost more

¹⁵ Ruskin’s devaluation of the body and the temporal world may also owe something to his reading of Plato. Atwood states, “As Ruskin’s classical studies intensified he combined his daily Bible reading with readings in Plato, paying close attention to the ways in which their teaching intersected” (29). It would be interesting to study the interaction of Ruskin’s Christianity and his Platonic idealism in Modern Painters II, even though, according to Atwood, it was not until the 1880s that “these sacred and profane studies became inextricably linked in Ruskin’s mind” (29).
accurate to say that he conceives them as implacable enemies.\textsuperscript{16} Later in \textit{Modern Painters II}, we see this same distrust of the earthly and physical when Ruskin comments doubtfully on the possibility of painting spiritual nudes (4: 327). A more striking example of the attitude toward the body that Ruskin’s religious upbringing inculcated appears in one of his revisions to \textit{The Poetry of Architecture}. In the serialized version, Ruskin promises that he will soon move on from domestic buildings to fortifications and religious architecture. He apologizes for spending so much time on

the most degraded branch of the whole art of architecture, one hardly worthy of being included under the name—that, namely, with which we have lately been occupied whose ostensible object is the mere provision of shelter and comfort for the despicable shell within whose darkness and corruption that purity of perception to which all high art is addressed is, during its immaturity, confined. (1: 171)

In extreme terms, this passage posits an intractable incompatibility between the body and the mental or spiritual power that receives pleasure from beauty.\textsuperscript{17} Compared to this published version, Ruskin’s original manuscript uses much tamer diction that does not emphasize the hostile, hierarchical relation between body and soul. Omitting the passage

\textsuperscript{16} Rosenberg’s classic biography, \textit{The Darkening Glass}, foregrounds the intensity and physicality of Ruskin’s aesthetic responses (4). Rosenberg points out that Ruskin’s letters show this intensity: he uses verbs like see, draw, describe, touch, devour (79). Rosenberg does not explore how Ruskin’s aesthetic responses complemented or were at odds with his Evangelical upbringing.

More recently, Linda Dowling has stated that Ruskin “experienced recurrent spasms of uneasiness about the place and worth of sensation in aesthetic judgment for he knew his own experience of art and nature to be enchantingly and imperiously sensuous” (30). Contrary to most modern critical opinion, which tends to value Ruskin’s later social criticism, Dowling sees Ruskin’s earlier, more religious texts as closer to what she calls “aesthetic democracy,” meaning a conviction that all people have the potential to experience art in the same way. Dowling admits that early texts like the first volumes of \textit{Modern Painters} do sometimes assert “an Aristotelian hierarchy of mind over body,” but she argues that, overall, they persuasively cast pleasure in beauty as a form of Christian worship, thus helping “to dissolve away the inveterate Calvinist prejudice against the physical senses among many of his readers” (29-30).

\textsuperscript{17} Though I am not pursuing a psychoanalytic reading of Victorian aesthetics, Ruskin’s writings and life invite one. The pathological horror that he here expresses towards the body inevitably reminds one of his unconsummated marriage to Effie Gray.
“despicable shell . . . confined,” the manuscript simply reads, “‘body with which we have
lately been occupied’” (1: 171n2). Over his career, Ruskin’s evolving attitudes toward
architecture serve as an index of his increasing willingness to see less of an opposition
between body and soul, and to reconsider the definition of utility.

**Disinterestedness/Contemplation vs. Utility**

In the 1846 text of *Modern Painters II*, the oppositions between body and soul,
utility and beauty, ramify into a series of mutually reinforcing binaries: use vs.
contemplation, interestedness vs. disinterestedness, practical knowledge vs. theoretic
knowledge. The point of these oppositions is to guarantee that pleasure in beauty is
disinterested. As shown in Chapter 2, claims to disinterestedness functioned to
differentiate aesthetic discourse from moral philosophy, and art objects from other
commodities. However, even though *Modern Painters II* sets up an opposition between
beauty and utility, Ruskin’s desire to keep beauty connected to moral philosophy’s civic
and ethical concerns leads him to assert paradoxically that beauty has both utility and
intrinsic worth.

In a moment we will see how *Modern Painters II* sets up an opposition between
utility and beauty, but also treats that opposition—and the attendant oppositions of use
vs. contemplation, interestedness vs. disinterestedness—equivocally. I analyze how and
why Ruskin defends beauty’s “utility” rather than its “value.” Defending art’s utility—
while at the same time insisting that spiritual and material utility are antithetical—forces
Ruskin into untenable contradictions. He must face vexing questions of whether beauty’s
moral utility resides in the beautiful object itself or in the attitude the viewer takes toward
the object. Chapter 4 will show how these contradictions play out in Ruskin’s later writing, after his ethical focus shifted from salvation in heaven to justice on earth.

For years after 1858, distaste for his former Evangelicalism and for his youthful writing style kept Ruskin from reprinting *Modern Painters II*. In 1883, irritated by what he saw as the errors of a merely sensuous Aestheticism, he changed his mind and reprinted *Modern Painters II* in a revised, rearranged edition. My discussion of *Modern Painters II* will include attention to the dialogue between the text Ruskin published in 1846 and the changes he made in 1883. Ruskin allows his original claims to stand, but uses footnotes to question and contradict assertions made in the main text. The problems that utility posed for Ruskin’s theory of beauty appear most clearly in the resulting textual dialogue, but they were already present in 1846.

While the first volume of *Modern Painters* vindicates Turner, the second volume pursues the broader task of vindicating beauty and the pleasure we take in it. Strikingly, Ruskin casts his defense of beauty not in terms of beauty’s intrinsic value, but in terms of its special, moral utility. Early in the 1846 text, Ruskin writes that his task of justifying art is both novel and necessary:

> But that this labour [by artists], the necessity of which, in all ages, has been most frankly admitted by the greatest men, is justifiable from a moral point of view, that it is not a vain devotion of the lives of men, that it has functions of usefulness addressed to the weightiest of human interests, and that the objects of it have calls upon us which it is inconsistent alike with

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18 Ruskin revised *Modern Painters II* on multiple occasions (4: liii-lv). The last edition he altered was published in 1883, when he reissued it in a stand-alone edition without the rest of *Modern Painters* (4: xviii). Among other changes, he rearranged the section order (4: lii-lv). In keeping with Cook and Wedderburn’s policy of following Ruskin’s final revisions, the Library Edition takes the 1883 edition as its copy text. However, Cook and Wedderburn retain the original section order and note substantial differences across editions (4: xlix).
our human dignity and our heavenward duty to disobey, has never been boldly asserted nor fairly admitted . . . (4: 27)

He devotes the book to proving this statement. In 1883, Ruskin reasserts that the main point of the book is to vindicate art’s non-economic utility. “Its first great assertion,” he writes, “is, that beautiful things are useful to men because they are beautiful, and for the sake of their beauty only; and not to sell, or pawn—or, in any other way, turn into money” (4: 4).

Perhaps Ruskin’s choice to vindicate beauty by proclaiming its usefulness, rather than celebrating its intrinsic value as Wilde would do, stems from the fact that Ruskin’s opponents include both Utilitarians who see art as useless and fellow Evangelicals who see it as a worldly temptation. As a young man, Ruskin had encountered such strict religious attitudes. His mother Margaret’s religious reservations led her to abstain from the theatrical entertainment that her husband and son enjoyed (Hilton Early Years 23). The possible negative influence of fiction was a matter of public debate at the Oxford Union where, as an undergraduate, Ruskin spoke for the motion “‘That the reading of good and well-written Novels is neither prejudicial to the moral nor to the intellectual character’” and introduced the motion, “‘That Theatrical Representations are upon the whole highly beneficial to the character of a nation’” (1: xxxv n1). In Modern Painters II, he strives to prove, in the face of such Evangelical reservations, that beauty and the pleasure we take in it are morally unimpeachable. His strategy is to provide an elaborate analysis of how physical beauty can remind viewers of God (4: 210). Skeptics might ask, if beauty is divine, why are so many Christians unmoved by it, or even suspicious of it (4:
Ruskin responds that this Christian “bluntness in the feelings” has less to do with religious zeal than with a tendency toward

-turning the eye at intervals of rest too selfishly within; the want of power to shake off the anxieties of actual and near interest, and to leave results in God’s hands; the scorn of all that does not seem immediately apt for our purposes, or open to our understanding, and perhaps something of pride, which desires rather to investigate than to feel. (4: 216-17)

As we will see in Chapter 4, the possibility that beauty can take us beyond our “near interests,” lead us to recognize our interdependence, and expand our ability to perceive and to feel is central to Ruskin’s notion of its moral function.

Realizing that “utility” and “useful” are powerful words for his contemporaries, Ruskin proceeds to explain how he defines utility and why he can call art useful. In the process, he challenges Utilitarian readers to question their own understanding of utility. This passage, which is laced with biblical allusions, reads very much like a sermon (4: 28-32). It expresses intense concern that peace and material prosperity, not to mention technological advances, urbanization, and the destruction of historical buildings and of the natural environment, have led England to moral laxity. In this situation, anyone who thinks that art is not useful has a very limited concept of utility. Ruskin writes,

And yet people speak in this working age, when they speak from their hearts, as if houses and lands, and food and raiment were alone useful, and as if Sight, Thought, and Admiration were all profitless, so that men insolently call themselves Utilitarians, who would turn, if they had their way, themselves and their race into vegetables; men who think, as far as such can be said to think, that the meat is more than the life, and the raiment than the body . . . hewers of wood and drawers of water, who think that it is to give them wood to hew and water to draw, that the pine-forests cover the mountains like the shadow of God, and the great rivers move like His eternity. (4: 29)
As he does so often, Ruskin here pours scorn on the diminished intellectual and spiritual stature of his opponents, who cannot see the goodness of creation in non-instrumental terms. In another favorite strategy, he challenges his audience to examine their assumptions by redefining a key word—here, the word “useful.” He breaks down the opposition between beauty and utility by insisting that the useful includes not just the practical or material, but also the spiritual.

Indeed, in Ruskin’s terms, natural or man-made beauty that meets human spiritual needs has a specially privileged kind of utility. Echoing the catechism he learned as a child, Ruskin declares, “Man’s use and function . . . are, to be the witness of the glory of God, and to advance that glory by his reasonable obedience and resultant happiness” (4: 28-29). By extension, anything that helps us to witness God’s glory and obtain happiness by being obedient to God is useful (4: 29). “But,” continues the text, “things that only help us to exist are, (only) in a secondary and mean sense, useful” (4: 29 emphasis in original). Although he challenges his audience to question the opposition between beauty and utility, he does so in terms that maintain a dichotomy between body and soul. Later in his career, Ruskin is more sympathetic to material necessity and does not cast it as the degrading opposite of spiritual needs. His 1883 footnote apologizes for the “offensively aggressive” piety in the passage we have just considered (4: 28n).

But in 1846, Ruskin’s theocentric definition of utility means that, in order to prove that art is useful, he must prove that it leads us to God, and that we regard beauty with an attitude of disinterested contemplation. Because he pits material and spiritual

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19 The second “only” was inserted in 1883 (4: 29n2).
against each other, he must prove that art’s utility and the pleasure we take in it do not
derive from its sensuous satisfactions or its material utility. This task entangles Ruskin in
a number of contradictions.

One of the contradictions in Ruskin’s work is that, even though he sees art as
morally useful (in either theocentric or anthropocentric terms at different points in his
career), he sometimes relies on the strategy of guaranteeing beauty’s disinterestedness by
equating beauty with inutility, specifically with inutility for material ends. The post-
Kantian claim that aesthetic pleasure and judgment are disinterested requires that the
subject who encounters a beautiful object have no interest in or use for that object outside
of the moment of aesthetic experience.

As Kant puts it, “In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in
the least biased in favor of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it”
(46). From this claim grows the belief that the disposition proper to aesthetic pleasure is
one of distanced appreciation unmindful of the self’s needs or desires. As we saw in
Coleridge, the post-Kantian aesthetic experience is one of disinterested contemplation.
While it is possible to imagine that disinterestedness can be guaranteed by the viewer’s
mode of attention, another common strategy is to guarantee disinterestedness by insisting
on the inutility of the aesthetic object. If the object is non-utilitarian, then it is impossible
to regard it as an object of interest, i.e. of action or use. This strategy culminates in
Wilde’s aphorism, “All art is quite useless” (3: 168, emphasis in original).

Using beauty’s inutility as a guarantee of its disinterested contemplation is a
tricky strategy for Ruskin, who sees nature as a prime source of beauty. (Anyone reading
Modern Painters for the first time will be surprised to find that it discusses beauty in nature almost as much as it discusses painting.) For Ruskin, beauty is present in trees, mountains, lakes, even predatory animals. Is the strategy of taking inutility as a guarantee of disinterestedness convincing when applied to beautiful objects that happen to be natural resources rather than commodities circulating in a specialized art market? In brief, no.

Whenever Modern Painters II attempts to insist that our pleasure in beautiful natural objects depends on their inutility, the result is far-fetched enough to cast doubt on whether “Theoria,” or disinterested contemplation, is really an accurate description of how we take pleasure in beauty. Ruskin’s description of disinterested pleasure in the beauty of plants starts plausibly enough:

Now I wish particularly to impress upon the reader that all these higher sensations of beauty in the plant arise from our unselfish sympathy with its happiness, and not from any view of the qualities in it which may bring good to us . . . the moment we begin to look upon any creature as subordinate to some purpose out of itself, some of the sense of organic beauty is lost. (4: 152-53)

But this pronouncement begins to break down as soon as he attempts to illustrate it with a specific example of beautiful inutility in nature. A living tree has beauty, he declares, because “it is perfectly useless to us” (4: 153). Though no devotee of Kant, Ruskin uses the tree’s inutility as a guarantee of our pure pleasure in its beauty in exemplary post-Kantian fashion. Or, to use terms that Ruskin himself eschewed, he uses the tree’s inutility as a guarantee of the viewer’s disinterested aesthetic pleasure.

The problem here, as Ruskin realizes, is that trees are useful. By producing oxygen, by providing fuel and building material, they contribute to human physical life.
All of a sudden, inutility and disinterestedness must reside in the viewer’s disposition toward the tree, since they cannot reside in the tree itself. In other words, the viewer must take up a special kind of attention or disposition that defines the encounter with beauty. Ruskin makes the startling claim that, as soon as we recall that the living tree is producing oxygen for us to breathe, “we begin to look upon it with some such indifference as upon a gasometer” (4: 153).20 Ruskin’s antipathy to the idea that beauty can have utility even leads him to assert that knowledge of animal anatomy erases an animal’s beauty. Intellectual knowledge and intellectual delight in the ingenuity of animal organs will replace the disinterested, non-rational appreciation of beauty. When we understand how an ostrich’s leg or a shark’s dorsal fin moves, we cease to find it beautiful (4: 154-55). In Ruskin’s terms, thinking about a plant’s or an animal’s function reduces it from a living thing to a mere “mechanical contrivance” (4: 154). Adam Smith, or, for that matter, Ruskin’s older contemporary Charles Babbage (1791-1871), would have had no such reservations about the possibility of mechanical beauty. But for Ruskin, even though the organism’s visual properties have not changed, the viewer has lost the disposition necessary for the “feeling of beauty.”

20 A parallel example: in Modern Painters II, whenever Ruskin tries to shoehorn the self-sufficient autonomy of the post-Kantian art object into his theocentric theory of natural beauty, the result is awkward because he recognizes that relationships in nature are structured by interdependence. His discussion of a rose-tree resembles his far-fetched discussion of the tree/gasometer:

Every leaf and stalk is seen to have a function, to be constantly exercising that function, and as it seems, solely for the good and enjoyment of the plant. It is true that reflection will show us that the plant is not living for itself alone, that its life is one of benefaction, that it gives as well as receives; but no sense of this whatsoever mingles with our perception of physical beauty in its forms. (4: 151, emphasis in original)
To a twenty-first-century reader, Ruskin’s attempt to take inutility as the guarantee of aesthetic disinterestedness breaks down because it is predicated on a false assumption that judgments of taste can attain universality by excluding any “merely” subjective and individual needs and desires from the process of judgment. Such claims to universality are unpersuasive, and Ruskin’s comparison of trees to gasometers seems as bizarre as any of the unlikely theories put forth by his eighteenth-century predecessors who pursued the standard of taste.

There is a second reason that Ruskin’s attempt to take inutility as the guarantee of aesthetic disinterestedness breaks down. Claims of aesthetic inutility bolster the post-Kantian model of aesthetic experience in which one approaches beauty with an attitude of distanced contemplation—and Ruskin’s theory of aesthetic pleasure does not map neatly onto this post-Kantian model. Although contemplation is a key term in Ruskin’s theory of beauty, his Romantic conviction that receiving pleasure from beauty requires affective engagement prevents him from theorizing that distanced contemplation constitutes the proper disposition for enjoying beauty. Rather, affective engagement, an emotional openness to or closeness with the object is crucial to “the feeling of the beautiful.” This demand for emotional engagement can require physical interaction. Writing to his friend Edward Clayton in 1840, Ruskin advises living closely with Turner engravings, using them as bookmarks in order to see them throughout the day and then taking them to bed in order to dream of them at night (1: 428). This advice hardly fits a model of distanced aesthetic contemplation, and it is a far cry from the respectable bourgeois behavior expected in art museums.
We have seen contradictions within Ruskin’s attempts to judge specific instances of beauty. In *The Poetry of Architecture*, his susceptibility to particularity and affective experience disrupted his youthful attempt to judge Italian villas and Swiss cottages according to abstract ideals of beauty. (Against all reason, stucco can be beautiful.) In *Modern Painters II*, the tension between utility and intrinsic value, interestedness and disinterestedness, caused him to perform mental contortions in order to explain how a tree can be beautiful even as it usefully provides us with oxygen. Tensions between individual pleasure and abstract aesthetic principle, between utility and intrinsic value, between interestedness and disinterestedness, extend beyond these two specific examples. They organize Ruskin’s entire theory of beauty in *Modern Painters II*. To negotiate these dualistic tensions, Ruskin produces a bifurcated theory of “Typical” and “Vital” beauty.

Typical Beauty is more orderly and closer to formalism, though far from identical to it. It is amenable to contemplation, to the disinterested aesthetic disposition. In contrast, Vital Beauty requires that the viewer exercise moralized sympathy—in other words, affective engagement, even imaginary identification, that does not fit the model of disinterested contemplation. In Ruskin’s discussion of Vital Beauty, the oppositions between the viewer’s interestedness or disinterestedness, and between the object’s utility or inutility, break down. Although Ruskin explicitly insists that beauty is an objective property, his discussion of Vital Beauty suggests that sometimes beauty exists in the heart, if not the eye, of the beholder.

The starting point for the following analysis is Landow’s astute observation that Ruskin’s conflicting convictions about the role of affect in art are an organizing
conundrum throughout his aesthetic theories. He inherits the Romantic precept that subjectivity and emotional involvement are crucial to art, but he cannot allow subjectivity free rein because he fears that unrestrained subjectivity ends in selfishness, inability to perceive reality accurately, even solipsism. Landow highlights how many of Ruskin’s theories are strategies for including but also limiting subjectivity’s role in beauty. Ruskin struggles to reconcile the emotional experience of pleasure in beauty with his belief in objective beauty. How can beauty be both a feeling and a visual property? Normally emotions are hard to describe, verify, and compare. Ruskin’s solution is to assume that all humans can or should feel the same emotion in the presence of an objectively beautiful object (Landow 113-14). Landow identifies Ruskin’s theory of Typical and Vital Beauty as yet another strategy for balancing objective and subjective definitions of beauty.

Ruskin positions Typical and Vital Beauty against associationism’s relativist standard of beauty. In full Evangelical mode, Ruskin defines Typical Beauty as a material attribute that reminds us of God’s attributes (4: 64). In this theocentric scheme, a rock’s visual qualities make us think of God’s stability. In his 1883 revisions, Ruskin tempers Typical Beauty’s explicit Christianity. Perhaps reflecting his affinity for Platonic idealism, he clarifies that Typical Beauty is simply “any character in material things by which they convey an idea of immaterial ones” (4: 76n*). In this scheme, a rock’s visual qualities remind us of stability. Ruskin’s overwhelming tendency to read natural phenomena as bearers of immaterial meanings, regardless of whether those meanings are explicitly Christian, reflects his early training in scriptural typology. Typological exegesis was an interpretive approach that treated the details of biblical narratives as existing on
multiple levels of meaning. Thus Old Testament occurrences not only signify in their own right, but also prefigure New Testament occurrences (Landow 346-47). Signifier and signified are of almost equal importance (369).

The pleasure we take in Typical Beauty is characterized by reverent joy. It is a contemplative pleasure received by the “Theoretic faculty.” In Ruskin’s terms, Typical Beauty does not provide aesthetic (sensual) pleasure. Ruskin’s chapters enumerate some of the main “characteristics of mere matter by which I conceive it becomes agreeable to the Theoretic faculty” (4: 142, emphasis in original). These chapters include, for instance, “Of Repose, or the Type of Divine Permanence” and “Of Symmetry, or the Type of Divine Justice.” Still attempting to counteract associationism’s relativist taste theories, Ruskin does admit that association is an extremely powerful source of pleasure, and even that an individual’s subjective associations can create links between particular objects and thoughts of the divine (4: 73-74, 76). However, these associations have nothing to do with beauty and the universal, “Theoretic” pleasure that we take in it. Typical Beauty is a property of objects. It is not based on subjective reactions. Visual characteristics like symmetry do not remind us of immaterial or divine realities through our own subjective associations. Rather, they operate by “typical resemblance” (4: 76).

While Typical Beauty resides in an object’s properties and reminds us of immaterial realities, Vital Beauty at least partly (perhaps even wholly) depends upon the viewer’s subjective engagement with a living organism. Specifically, Vital Beauty requires that the viewer have sympathy for “the appearance of felicitous fulfilment of

21 For an in-depth discussion of Ruskin’s use of typology, see Chapter 7 “Symbolic Language” in Helsinger and Chapter 5 “Ruskin and Allegory” in Landow.
function in living things” (4: 64). Or, as Ruskin puts it in an 1883 footnote, “the first state of vital beauty is defined to be Happiness, perceived with sympathy; the second, Moral intention, perceived with praise” (4: 152-53n*).

Ruskin makes it clear that the Theoretic faculty receives pleasure from Typical Beauty. It is less clear which faculty receives pleasure from Vital Beauty. Landow interprets Ruskin as attributing our pleasure in Vital Beauty not to Theoria, but to sympathy: we take pleasure in Vital Beauty through the “process, act, or faculty—one cannot be sure which” of sympathy (Landow 150). My own reading is that the Theoretic faculty receives pleasure from both kinds of beauty, but that the Theoretic faculty’s “full receiving” of Vital Beauty requires two internal, subjective (in Ruskin’s terms, “moral”) conditions (4: 161). The first requirement is a sympathetic heart, or what Ruskin calls variously “cultivation of the affections” and “sensibility” (4: 147-48, 156, 161). In other words, our emotional disposition—our ability to have affection for other beings and to take pleasure in their joy—determines our ability to perceive Vital Beauty. Our capacity for affection can change. Specifically, it will grow greater as we come closer to God (4: 148). The second subjective requirement is a “moral sense” that can perceive how each organic being “is in its nature, its desires, its modes of nourishment, habitation, and death, illustrative or expressive of certain moral dispositions or principles” (4: 147). Ruskin also calls this condition “the accuracy and faithfulness of the heart in its moral judgments” (4: 161).

This moral sense sounds much like Ruskin’s typological reading of Typical Beauty, as when he treats symmetry as a sign of divine justice. However, Typical Beauty
involves typological readings of visual forms. The moral sense involved in Vital Beauty performs typological readings of an organism’s activities and functions. Intriguingly, Vital Beauty’s “moral lesson[s]” can conflict with Typical Beauty (4: 156, 160). For instance, the sight of predatory animals offers little Vital Beauty because the moral lesson they offer is merely a negative one: not to be “rapacious, restless, and cruel” (4: 156). Nonetheless, in their colors and forms, predators can possess great Typical Beauty (4: 157).

In Ruskin’s original definition, Typical Beauty denoted not just any material forms, but those that put us in mind of the divine. It is only when juxtaposed with Vital Beauty that Typical Beauty resembles formalism or distanced aesthetic contemplation. If we put aside the anthropomorphized, moralized meanings that we attach to animals, if we “check the repugnance or sympathy with which the ideas of their destructiveness or innocence accustom us to regard the animal tribes,” and regard them formally, we will be able to “pursue the pleasures of typical beauty down to the scales of the alligator, the coils of the serpent, and the joints of the beetle” (4: 157). Beauty can come from line and color, as well as from moral meanings. Typical Beauty here seems close to formalism because it is working against symbolic moral concerns. However much Ruskin responds to formal beauty, he can only bring himself to authorize such formal pleasures temporarily. He concludes his sentence by declaring that “sometimes” we should accept the “more important” moral lessons offered by less gorgeous animals, “regardless of the impressions of typical beauty” (4: 157).
Ruskin’s example of the tree/gasometer also demonstrates how Typical Beauty can temporarily slide into formalism unconnected to moral meanings. As long as the tree lives, its usefulness is a product of its existence in an interdependent ecological system. We are not purposely taking advantage of the oxygen it releases as it performs the photosynthesis and respiration necessary to its own life. Our ability to forget that the tree sustains our breath allows us to take pleasure in both its Typical and Vital Beauty.

Attempting to prove that the tree’s beauty is a function of its (perceived) inutility, Ruskin explains that the more action we take to render the tree useful, the less beautiful it becomes. If we cut the tree down to use the trunk as a rough bridge, we destroy its Vital Beauty. However, the trunk can retain its Typical Beauty, which is “dependent on its lines and colours, not on its functions” (4: 153). If we saw the trunk into planks, we make it even more useful, and destroy all its beauty. It can only regain beauty “when decay and ruin shall have withdrawn it again from use, and left it to receive from the hand of nature the velvet moss and varied lichen, which may again suggest ideas of inherent happiness, and tint its mouldering sides with hues of life” (4: 153).

Ruskin’s frequent recourse to personification betrays how much Vital Beauty (i.e., sympathetically taking pleasure in other organisms’ happiness, moral intention, and “felicitous fulfilment of function”) depends upon the viewer’s subjective engagement with the organism, not with the organism’s inherent beauty or utility. To introduce the concept of Vital Beauty, Ruskin asks us to imagine our attention shifting from the Typical Beauty of an imposing Alpine landscape to the Vital Beauty of a fragile *soldanella alpina* pushing its way up through the snow. In order to evoke the sympathetic
emotional response that is part of Vital Beauty, Ruskin must attribute human characteristics to the Alpine flower. He vividly personifies it, describing how its bell hangs down “as if partly wondering at its own recent grave, and partly dying of very fatigue after its hard-won victory” (4: 146-47). When we see this struggling Alpine blossom,

we shall be, or we ought to be, moved by a totally different impression of loveliness from that which we receive among the dead ice and the idle clouds. There is now uttered to us a call for sympathy, now offered to us an image of moral purpose and achievement, which, however unconscious or senseless the creature may indeed be that so seems to call, cannot be heard without affection, nor contemplated without worship, by any of us whose heart is rightly turned, or whose mind is clearly and surely sighted.

(4: 147)

Ruskin’s prose vividly attributes wonderment and moral purpose to the flower, but he admits that it may actually be incapable of either. Even if it is “senseless,” however, it can offer us an “image” of happiness and moral achievement (4: 147). The next paragraph continues to express the idea that Vital Beauty rests on the “real or apparent” appearance of happiness in an organic being (4: 147). Ruskin stresses our “joy” in the happiness of other organic beings: we “look upon those as most lovely which are most happy,” regardless of whether that happiness is a result of our own projection (4: 147, emphasis added in 1883). In other words, Vital Beauty may be based on an organism’s properties, or it may be based entirely on subjective projection, but either way it is pleasurable.

Later, discussing Vital Beauty in plants, Ruskin again admits that we cannot know if they actually feel joy or pain. But, he insists, they can have the appearance of doing so (4: 150-51). In 1846, Ruskin likes to think that flowers can experience joy (4: 150). He
supports this belief not with reference to actual flowers, but with allusions to Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Milton (4: 150, 150n†). As with his own evocative personification of the soldanella, these literary allusions are more persuasive as examples of literary imagination than of botanic emotion. As Landow points out, Ruskin allows the viewer to use imagination by projecting human qualities onto the Alpine flower that it may not really possess (Landow 147-48). It is this projection or personification that allows the viewer to feel sympathy for the flower. Indeed, an ability to feel for the personified flower (an ability that requires imagination, projection, subjectivity) is a measure of a heart “rightly turned” and a mind “surely sighted”? What matters is our subjective experience of the soldanella’s Vital Beauty, not beauty’s existence as an objective property.22

The Ruskin of 1883 is less sentimental toward flowers, adding this footnote:

This third paragraph, again, is mostly nonsense. . . . And although it is very pretty and amusing to think of flowers as friends, or pets, yet it is to be remembered that an immense quantity of the pleasure we take in the beauty of the botanic world is given us by vegetables, which we are prepared mercilessly to thresh, mince, boil, and dine on. (4: 150n*)

This footnote undercuts his earlier assertion that flowers epitomize non-functional, intrinsic beauty because they provide us with pleasurable colors and forms that tell us nothing about whether they are good to eat like fruits or grains (4: 46). Ruskin in 1883 is much more willing to admit that something that sustains life can be beautiful, and that a

22 In Modern Painters III (1856), Ruskin’s chapter on “the pathetic fallacy” revisits the question of why we enjoy poetic language that attributes emotion and agency to natural objects, specifically through personification and metaphor. Such attribution, he now considers, is the erroneous result of fancy or emotion. This fancy or emotion is not necessarily bad, and it produces much good poetry. However, the best poet, and the best man, is he who engages emotionally with nature, but does not let his feelings overwhelm his rational apprehension that “the primrose is forever nothing else than itself,” however much he may love it (5: 209).
vegetable’s beauty is perfectly compatible with its being used “mercilessly” rather than contemplated sympathetically or disinterestedly. His professed willingness to consume rather than contemplate beautiful vegetables problematizes the critical tradition that characterizes Ruskin’s aesthetic theories as disinterested. The next chapter explores how the oppositions between beauty and utility play out in Ruskin’s writing as his ethical focus shifts from humanity’s relationship with God to relationships within the human community on earth.
CHAPTER FOUR
LATE RUSKIN

Beauty’s relationship to utility has remained a defining question in recent critical work that contrasts Ruskinian with Darwinian aesthetics. Jonathan Smith and George Levine both cast Ruskin’s aesthetic theories as “non-utilitarian” when compared to Charles Darwin’s. As a result, they inadvertently reiterate Landow’s influential observation that disinterestedness defines Ruskin’s aesthetic theory. Levine cites a passage where Ruskin describes flowers as beautiful in themselves without reference to the useful fruits they will become (“Matter” 239). Where Darwin would highlight a flower’s reproductive function, Ruskin marginalizes it. Levine takes this as evidence of Ruskin’s “non-utilitarian” aesthetics. However, Ruskin’s descriptions of natural phenomena and their aesthetic qualities are more multivalent than Levine’s example would suggest.

Rather than casting Ruskin as the author of a non-utilitarian aesthetics, I attempt to unravel his changing understanding of the nature of utility and its relation to beauty. This changing understanding was part of an anthropocentric turn in Ruskin’s thinking. As he abandoned Christian orthodoxy, he became less concerned with spiritual salvation and more concerned with the temporal issues that Victorians designated “political economy.” His willingness to reconsider the relationship between temporal and spiritual, body and mind, manifests itself in works like The Stones of Venice, Modern Painters V, and the
1883 revisions to *Modern Painters II*, where the binary opposition between physical need/instrumental value and non-physical need/intrinsic value breaks down. However, there are important continuities linking Ruskin’s early and late work. He is always concerned with art’s morality, even if his definition of morality shifts. Throughout his career, Ruskin’s conflicting loyalties to order and to particularity, to external reality and to internal emotional experience, to disinterestedness and to utility, make it inaccurate to label his theories an aesthetics of disinterested value. His late work continues to exhibit these conflicting loyalties, though he comes close to favoring emotional experience and earthly utility as the defining factors in art’s moral function.

After tracing Ruskin’s anthropocentric turn, I argue that Ruskin’s aesthetic and political-economic theories resist individuated readings of taste by relying on a methodology I term “aggregate analysis.” Ruskin’s aggregate analysis—reading taste as an index of the individual’s environment as well as of his or her capacity for aesthetic pleasure—allows him to introduce concrete questions of social structures and human capabilities into his model of aesthetic desire.

Chapter 3 demonstrated that Ruskin deploys taste in order to make space for individual desire and subjectivity in his ethically-inflected aesthetic theory. Importantly, however, he never grants individual preference a paramount place. He uses taste to maintain an uneasy balance between the intensity of subjective experience (“This pleases me”) and the claims of objective standards and external reality (“This is beautiful”). In the final section of this chapter, I argue that Ruskin’s dualistic use of taste is one manifestation of a broader strategy that I call “capability analysis.” He deploys this
strategy to connect aesthetics to ethics while challenging the idea that either aesthetic or
economic value is objective or intrinsic.

Analyzing Ruskin’s taste theory reorients the recent criticism on his place in
Victorian aesthetics. Jonathan Smith’s intelligent study, *Charles Darwin and Victorian
Visual Culture* (2006), situates Darwin’s rhetorical use of illustrations within debates
between Ruskinian aesthetics and the variously named physiological, evolutionary, or
empiricist aesthetics stemming from Darwin (Smith 2-3).¹ In Darwin's view, as
articulated in *The Descent of Man* (1871), beauty and the aesthetic sense are utilitarian in
that they can be explained by sexual selection, which is “the success of certain
individuals over others of the same sex, in relation to the propagation of the species”
(638). Taste, therefore, is not limited to humans. As evidence, Darwin points out that
many species of animals prefer the most colorful or ornamented mates (639-40).²

Darwin’s paradigmatic example is the female Argus pheasant, which has “the æsthetic
capacity” to appreciate “the exquisite shading of the ball-and-socket ornaments and the
elegant patterns on the wing-feathers of the male” (640). Smith argues that we should
attribute Ruskin’s resistance to Darwin’s physiological aesthetics not just to his “well-

¹ Smith painstakingly demonstrates that Darwin’s illustrations both deploy and destroy pre-
existing visual conventions for representing scientific knowledge—conventions that supported the
traditional idea that species are fixed and stable. In treating Darwin’s texts and his illustrations together,
Smith assumes that the relationship between image and text is just as likely to be unstable as stabilizing
(38). By studying “not just scientific contexts and cultural appropriations but the interface between them,”
he integrates interpretive approaches drawn from sociology and cultural studies (38). He positions his
analysis as a contribution to the study of “‘the materiality of communication’ as a way of moving beyond
the sterile debates about the relationship between art and science” (39).

² Although his explanation is more strictly physiological, Darwin is hardly the first to take the
selection of a mate as the paradigmatic aesthetic choice. As we saw in Chapter 2, Edmund Burke claims
that while male animals choose *any* available member of “the sex” without distinction, beauty helps men
differentiate and choose among possible mates (39). Darwin is unusual in identifying females as exercising
aesthetic preference.
documented personal queasiness about sexuality” but to his realization that Darwin’s work offered a rival aesthetics (28). According to Smith, Ruskin fully understood that his own moral aesthetic was threatened when Darwin and his followers explained human attributes, including the aesthetic sense, in terms of physical causes (27). In Darwin’s account, the capacity for aesthetic pleasure is not grounded in any moral capacity like a sympathetic heart or a Theoretic faculty. It is grounded in exigencies of reproduction that humans share with animals.

Building on Smith’s argument, George Levine’s article “Ruskin, Darwin, and the Matter of Matter” (2008) discusses how Ruskin's anti-materialism (specifically his desire for matter to mean something beyond itself, and his tendency to read the world mythically or allegorically) is at the root of his objections to Darwin and to Victorian scientific methods like “objective” observation, which seemed to reduce matter to matter only, and to treat it as disconnected from a meaningful, and specifically anthropocentric, view of the world.3 We have already seen how anti-materialism underpins Ruskin's objections to describing the beautiful as merely “aesthetic” (sensuous). Darwin’s theory suggests that the pleasure that humans and other animals take in beauty is specifically and only a sensuous pleasure. Summarizing Ruskin’s objections to Darwin’s physiological explanations, Levine writes, “What is missing from matter is just non-utilitarian value.

3 One of Levine’s most persuasive points regards Ruskin’s anthropocentric and affective view of knowledge. Darwin’s goal of distanced, objective observation is at odds with Ruskin's desire to attend to “the felt experience of the natural world” and to place knowledge of nature in “a human context” (“Matter” 230, see also 235). In no uncertain terms, Ruskin's view of nature is anthropocentric, while Darwin's is not (“Matter” 234, 240).
As Smith points out, the non-utilitarian is the province of the art that Ruskin defended as some might defend a church” (“Matter” 238, my emphasis).

Although Smith and Levine provide intelligent analyses of Ruskin’s objections to Darwinism, their tendency to associate Ruskin’s aesthetic theory with “non-utilitarian value” misses the mark in much the same way as Landow’s influential statement that “the notion of disinterested pleasure is at the center of Ruskin’s aesthetic theory” (161). All three men are identifying something real and characteristic about Ruskin’s thinking, yet their terminology (“disinterestedness” and “non-utilitarian value”) obscures more than it clarifies. For one thing, “value” is a particularly vexing signifier, and one that Ruskin himself does not favor when discussing beauty. Furthermore, as Levine clearly knows when he states that for Ruskin “everything is valuable insofar as it relates to the human,” the opposition between “utilitarian” and “non-utilitarian” value breaks down in Ruskin, just as many a binary opposition breaks down (“Matter” 239). As we have seen, even though he sometimes relies on the strategy of guaranteeing the viewer’s disinterestedness by insisting on beauty’s inutility, Ruskin is also eager to justify art’s importance precisely in terms of its (special, moral) utility. Even in terms of Smith’s and Levine’s own arguments, it would be more accurate to label Ruskin’s aesthetic theories “anti-materialist” rather than “non-utilitarian,” with the caveat that “anti-materialist” here means simply a belief that there is an immaterial reality, not the belief that the immaterial is always morally superior to the material. ⁴ As for Landow, his important study on The

⁴ Writing of Darwin’s arguments against the anti-evolutionary author George Douglas Campbell, Duke of Argyll, Smith observes that “In casting his dispute with Argyll as a contrast between the utility and
Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin appeared in 1971, when a literature professor could write about a Victorian theory of “disinterested pleasure” without feeling compelled to demystify its claims. Since Ruskin himself rarely if ever uses the term “disinterested” to talk about beauty, Landow’s use of the term tends to assimilate Ruskin’s distinction between the practical and the contemplative to mid-twentieth-century assumptions about that distinction and about the possibility of intrinsic, disinterested aesthetic value. Remarkably, there is no entry for “disinterestedness” in Cook and Wedderburn’s exhaustive index to Ruskin’s works. They list forty-one unique passages for “taste.” When critics emphasize value and disinterestedness in Ruskin’s theories, they obscure the degree to which the cultivation of taste, with its dual emphasis on subjective experience and on the object experienced, has a privileged role in Ruskin’s aesthetic and ethical thought.

Taking “taste” rather than “non-utilitarian value” or “disinterestedness” as the key term in Ruskin’s aesthetics allows us to recognize how Ruskin eventually situates art within a range of human needs. Crucially, the opposition between utility and inutility, instrumental and intrinsic value, interestedness and disinterestedness, breaks down when we realize two things. First, the binary opposition of physical needs/instrumental value vs. non-physical needs/intrinsic value is a false one. Second, no object or being exists in such isolation that its functions, interests, desires, or needs can avoid impinging on or overlapping with the functions, interests, desires, or needs of other objects and beings. As non-utility of beauty, Darwin partly misrepresents what was actually an argument about the definition of utility” (134). We might accurately apply this insight to the dispute between Ruskin and Darwin.
we will see, Ruskin’s work registers these insights, at least at intervals, and uses them to reformulate beauty’s utility to individual development and to society as a whole.

Ruskin’s spiritual and religious crises help explain his growing willingness in the 1850s to treat spiritual and physical needs, contemplative and practical knowledge, as inextricable rather than opposed. However, this willingness to rethink the mind-body relationship actually predates Ruskin’s 1858 loss of faith. *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) expresses regret at the tendency among theologians to separate and rank the spirit, intellect, and senses. This text puts forth the theory that the spirit, intellect, and senses are all simultaneously divine and mortal. All three can be sanctified or degraded (9: 67-68).

Ruskin scholars, including Landow, have noted that unlike the early theocentric volumes of *Modern Painters*, the fifth volume (1860) concentrates “upon man and his relation, not to God, but to the needs of life in this world” (Landow 304). *Modern Painters V* revises II’s version of disinterestedness, specifically the rejection of material needs as degrading. The fifth volume further affirms the necessity and nobility of humanity’s dual nature as spirit and animal. Human nature, Ruskin writes, “is nobly animal, nobly spiritual—coherently and irrevocably so; neither part of it may, but at its peril, expel, despise, or defy the other. All great art confesses and worships both” (7: 264). This new position leads him to criticize religious art that overlooks humanity’s physical and animal nature, along with temporal needs (7: 264).

As the 1860s began, Ruskin was transforming himself from an art critic to a social critic. Given the progressive politics that characterize most members of American English departments, it is no surprise that recent literary critics have tended to favor this
more political phase in Ruskin’s career. Although we would hardly want to endorse all his views, the acerbic insights of Ruskin’s social critique, particularly his insistence on holding people accountable for the common good, seem all the more persuasive as the twenty-first-century U.S. continues its march toward economic stratification. Since Ruskin’s social thought cannot be easily labeled, a brief overview of his positions will here be useful.

With biting rhetoric, Ruskin refuses to let his prosperous contemporaries forget that for many Victorians, industrialization and urbanization had devastating effects: industrial drudgery, sewer-like slums, a depopulated and polluted countryside. He denounces Victorian materialism and laissez-faire capitalism in terms that today seem alternately progressive and paternalistically autocratic. In his autobiography Praeterita (1885-89), he declares himself “a violent Tory of the old school;—Walter Scott’s school, that is to say, and Homer’s” (35:13). In Fors Clavigera, he professes to be “a Communist of the old school—reddest also of the red” (27: 116). Like Carlyle, whom he admired, he largely rejected or ignored Britain’s actual political system, demonstrating little interest in achieving reform through Parliament, party politics, or voting and democracy (Eagles 29).

The preface to Unto This Last provides a bald list of Ruskin’s concrete social goals. In order “to prevent the reader casting about in alarm for my ultimate meaning,” Ruskin enumerates “the worst of the political creed at which I wish him to arrive”: universal state-sponsored education, state-funded pensions for “the old and destitute,” and private industry supplemented by state-run factories guaranteeing a supply of well-
made necessities at affordable prices (17: 21-23). One of his more extreme proposals stipulates that anyone who refuses to work be compelled “to the more painful and degrading forms of necessary toil, especially to that in mines” until they agree to “the laws of employment” (17: 22). As Sara Atwood trenchantly observes, Ruskin was not only inspired by Plato’s ideal state, he shared the Greek philosopher’s “willingness to impose the order he sought” (143). Yet, despite his support for government intervention in the name of public good, Ruskin always supported free trade. He opposed the protectionist Corn Laws, for instance (Eagles 39). In Ruskin’s eyes, protectionism did not limit economic competition. Rather, it was an extreme form of competition that gave one country an unfair advantage (17: 72n*). As evidenced by his prescription of forced labor in the mines, Ruskin’s politics combine radical critique with paternalistic authoritarianism. Unfortunately but unsurprisingly, his thinking is also marred by acceptance of racial and gender inequality. As one example, Ruskin actively supported the infamous Governor Edward John Eyre of Jamaica. Eyre’s bloody response to an 1865 rebellion by black Jamaicans, which included suspending Jamaica’s constitution, dissolving its legislature, and summarily executing over 400 people, created one of the defining political controversies of the 1860s, in which English intellectuals took sides over whether Eyre should be tried for murder. We can justifiably generalize that Ruskin supported a strong, paternalistic state providing all citizens with opportunities for work and education, but we are wise to remember that his politics were complex, contradictory, and not always admirable.5

5 In 1885, under the title A Knight’s Faith, Ruskin published an admiring biography of the colonial
Ruskin’s increasing concern with earthly social problems led to changes in his theory of art’s morality. In 1883, writing a new introduction for *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin reasserts that the main point of the book is to vindicate art’s moral utility. But his definition of moral utility has shifted from the theocentric to the anthropocentric. The book’s “first great assertion,” he writes, “is, that beautiful things are useful to men because they are beautiful, and for the sake of their beauty only; and not to sell, or pawn—or, in any other way, turn into money” (4: 4). In setting up an opposition between beauty and money, Ruskin superficially sounds like a proponent of art for art’s sake declaring beauty’s intrinsic value, its freedom from and superiority to non-aesthetic schemes of value. However, Ruskin never says that beauty in art or nature is valuable for its own sake. He states that beauty is “useful,” and thereby situates it in relation to human needs and desires. He does not suggest that beautiful things have a specialized “aesthetic value” that is incommensurable with “exchange value,” “use value,” or even “moral value.”

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administrator Sir Herbert Edwardes, a man best known for his military successes against the Sikh Empire in 1848-49. See Patrick Brantlinger’s “A Postindustrial Prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris, and Gandhism” (1996) for a discussion of how Ruskin supported “chivalric imperialism” (469). See also Marcus Wood’s *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (2002) for an argument highlighting the racism that underpins Ruskin’s suggestion, in “The Nature of Gothic,” that the plight of a slave is preferable to that of a European industrial worker (379-97). Wood situates his reading in the context of Ruskin’s other writings on slavery and his active support for Governor Eyre.

The classic feminist critique of Ruskin’s sexism is Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), which unfavorably contrasts Ruskin’s gender prescriptivism with John Stuart Mill’s more liberal views. Since then, many critics have attempted to give a more nuanced account of Ruskin and gender, often arguing that his gender ideology, like Victorian domestic ideology generally, idealizes women in a way that can either restrict them to the home or authorize them to bring their domestic virtues into the public sphere. Ruskin’s defenders can also point to his involvement in women’s education, such as his support for Winnington Hall, a progressive girls’ school. See Jan Marsh’s “Of *Sesame and Lilies*: Education in a Humane Society” (2002) for a balanced view of the gender ideology expressed in one of Ruskin’s most popular books. Seth Koven’s “How the Victorians Read *Sesame and Lilies*” (2002) provides interesting information about the text’s reception by Victorian women. In a different vein, Sharon Aronofsky Weltman’s *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (1998) contextualizes Ruskin as one of several Victorian writers who use myth to question rigid gender norms.
Interdependence and Ruskin’s Aggregate Analysis

Thus far, we have seen how Ruskin’s theory of beauty is not really “disinterested” because his work periodically questions and undermines the host of oppositions—between body and spirit, utility and uselessness, instrumental value and intrinsic value—that underwrite the notion of aesthetic experience as disinterested and contemplative, existing in serene isolation from the social and economic. Instead, Ruskin locates beauty in a network of human needs, needs that he eventually comes to see as equally valid whether they are spiritual or material. As Ruskin’s notion of art’s utility changes, his aesthetic theories increasingly demonstrate an awareness of interdependence—of how humans rely on each other and on their environment to get their needs met—that leads him to read taste as an expression of the individual’s social environment. His career-long concern with aesthetics and ethics stages a dramatic engagement with a question that literary critics still face: to what extent are concepts like disinterestedness, free play, and the aesthetic compatible with social analysis and social justice?

Throughout his life, Ruskin’s aggregate readings of everything from architecture to wealth register his realization that the details of paintings, the trees of forests, the money in banks, even liberal bourgeois individuals themselves do not exist in self-sufficient isolation. I use the term aggregate analysis to designate Ruskin’s tendency to interpret material artifacts as if they were the index of entire spiritual, cultural, or social systems, and to invent symbols that operate in the same way. Thus in *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin reads Venice’s medieval architecture as an index of the city’s moral and cultural health. Likewise, in the 1864 lecture “Traffic” (published 1866), he accuses the
English middle class of worshipping the “Goddess of Getting-on” who must always simultaneously be for some people “the Goddess of not Getting-on” (18: 453, emphasis in original). If his moralistic interpretation of architecture sometimes seems far-fetched, his image of laissez-faire capitalism’s two-faced goddess reminds us of the inadequacy of a liberalism that imagines that an individual’s pursuit of property can be carried on without affecting other people and organisms.

By producing a theory of taste that acknowledges interdependence, Ruskin resists both individuated taste and aesthetic autonomy. Individual tastes cannot be an adequate norm in any field, because our aesthetic choices are also economic and ethical; they impinge on other people. Ruskin’s aggregate readings acknowledge interdependence and resist individuation by refusing to take the individual as an adequate unit of analysis. Yet even as Ruskin wholeheartedly rejects the possibility that individual desire can be an adequate norm, the rubric of taste expresses how central individual aesthetic pleasure remains to his ethical vision.

Ruskin’s “Law of Help,” described in Modern Painters V, is one of the most obvious examples of interdependence and aggregate analysis in his work (7: 203-16). Because it has received significant critical attention, I will discuss it only briefly.⁶ According to the “Law of Help,” every element of an artistic composition must exist in such a vital, mutual relationship to every other element, that the removal of one detail would destroy the beauty of the whole. Ruskin’s vocabulary makes it clear that the “Law

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of Help” is also a principle of social organization, and Ruskin scholars generally read the “Law” as an organic model for the combination of differing parts into a harmonious whole, whether in art or society (Ruskin 7: 207, Frost 90). Atwood takes the “Law of Help” to be a central principle in Ruskin’s social criticism and his pedagogy. Mark Frost points out how “Of Leaf Beauty” a long section in Modern Painters V, describes the growth of leaves in terms that exemplify the “Law of Help” as an organizing principle in nature (Frost 86, 95; Ruskin 7: 48). Thus, for instance, leaves grow in patterns that allow them all to maximize their exposure to sunlight. Frost’s reading of “Of Leaf Beauty” clarifies something that makes Ruskin’s political thought complex and hard to categorize.

To wit, “Ruskin’s environmental vision prior to 1860 was characterized by a dual impulse, as he reached, on the one hand, towards a hierarchical organicism, and, on the other, toward a proto-ecological concept of interdependent mutualism” (Frost 87). In Ruskin’s thinking on nature, the hierarchical impulse appears in “a model of nature, drawn from scriptural anthropocentrism, offering a hierarchy descending from Homo sapiens” (Frost 88-89). The interdependent or mutual model of nature appears in his application of the “Law of Help” to nature (Frost 89). The hierarchical/interdependent tension registers as an unresolved movement between anthropocentric and biocentric readings of the natural world (Frost 97-98).

The same dual impulse toward hierarchy and interdependence characterizes Ruskin’s social thought. On the hierarchical end, Ruskin often interprets social difference as innate inequality, and thus as authorization for quasi-feudal paternalism and Carlylean authoritarianism. The “Law of Help” requires that all parts be different and work together
for a harmonious whole, but that difference can imply inequality. We should be troubled by Ruskin’s disputatious assertions, which appear even in a text as radical as *Unto This Last*, that inequality is innate and essential. Stuart Eagles has noted the paradox that between approximately 1870 and 1920, Ruskin’s eloquent social criticism inspired a generation of progressive public servants and political activists, ranging from middle- and upper-class young people associated with university settlements like Toynbee Hall to members of organized labor.⁷ These people, most of whom were exposed to Ruskin’s ideas in their youth, tended to take his anti-capitalism and pro-welfare-state stances but leave his anti-democratic belief in the need for hierarchy (Eagles 2, 20-21).

Ruskin’s progressive followers were picking up on the mutualistic strand of Ruskin’s political thought that is in tension with his authoritarianism. The same tension characterizes his aesthetics. By rejecting individuated taste as a valid norm for consumption, and by tending throughout his career to insist on aggregate analysis, Ruskin resists the central assumptions of Victorian liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism: the assumption that the socioeconomic order is composed of bounded individuals who should be free to pursue their own interests as long as they do not harm others, and the illusion that being able to buy the goods and services we need means that we are independent and capable of satisfying our own needs. For Ruskin, pre-existing, interdependent relationships, not discrete individuals who voluntarily enter into social relationships, are the building blocks of society. In *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 3 (1871), Ruskin expresses this

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⁷ For recent work on Ruskin’s political and social legacies, see Eagles’s *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920* (2011) and Gill Cockram’s *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (2007).
view of society as structured by interdependent relationships: “‘Independence you had better cease to talk of, for you are dependent not only on every act of people whom you never heard of, who are living round you, but on every past act of what has been dust for a thousand years’” (27: 50).

At bottom, both “Of Leaf Beauty” and Ruskin’s political economy are attempts to imagine a non-competitive world, one where individual desire aligns with the common good. Ruskin’s willingness to take up polemical stances, and his inimitable tone—alternately denunciatory, visionary, and humorous—have little in common with Shaftesbury’s serene Enlightenment prose. Yet both men envision a social order where pursuing the common good constitutes one’s own best interest. The Victorian critic writes, “Without the fellowship, no beauty; without the steady purpose, no beauty; without trouble, and death, no beauty; without individual pleasure, freedom, and caprice, so far as may be consistent with the universal good, no beauty” (7: 98, my emphasis). For all his resistance to the idea that individual taste is a valid consumer norm, Ruskin remains deeply committed to the significance of individual aesthetic experiences. His theories of beauty and taste negotiate this tension between hierarchy and interdependence, between individual desire and common good, between honoring individual aesthetic experiences and imposing aesthetic standards.

Turning our attention to Ruskin’s aggregate analysis of architecture, The Stones of Venice is the obvious choice. However, Ruskin’s inclination for aggregate analysis seems to have been instinctive, and to have preceded his increased social awareness of the 1850s and 60s. As we have seen in The Poetry of Architecture, the precocious teenager
was already insisting that a nation’s architecture expresses national character. Though hardly a mature work, _The Poetry of Architecture_ almost perfectly encapsulates how taste is an arena in which Ruskin struggles to reconcile individual desire with authority and the common good while registering his instinctive recognition of socioeconomic interdependence. As we saw earlier, the young Ruskin inveighs against the free exercise of individual taste, arguing that most consumers need an architect’s expert guidance. In a concession to liberal individualism, Ruskin concedes that people have a right to decorate their homes’ interiors as absurdly as they please. But since other people have to see the exteriors, homeowners have no right to consult only their own “edificatorial fancies” regarding external decoration (1: 131). Just because one owns a thing does not mean that it does not affect others and that one can do whatever one wants with it (1: 131-32). Buried in a conservative critique of the English public’s taste is an insight that will eventually ramify into a full-blown attack on Victorian assumptions about the sacredness of property and independence. We get a hint of Ruskin’s future communitarianism when he further informs landowners that they should preserve the beauty of their grounds because “The nobler scenery of that earth is the inheritance of all her inhabitants” (1: 132). The young Ruskin is content to berate the English public for their bad taste, and to advise them to hire experts to do their architectural planning for them.

However, taken as a whole, Ruskin’s writing on taste does not take submission to an external aesthetic authority as an adequate way of bringing individual aesthetic desire in line with the common good. _The Poetry of Architecture_ acknowledges that feeling, not just rules or expertise, are crucial to good taste. In “Traffic,” Ruskin refuses to give
expert architectural advice, instead regarding the cultivation of each individual’s capacity for taste as the necessary solution to ugly architecture. Authoritarian though Ruskin is, he is also determined to force his readers and students to look around them more actively, to become more capable of finding pleasure in beauty and of recognizing injustice in society.

_The Poetry of Architecture_ was subtitled _The Architecture of the Nations of Europe Considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character_. “Nation” would remain an important word in Ruskin’s future aggregate analysis.

Famously, _The Stones of Venice_ elaborates on the idea that architecture registers not just national characteristics, but national morals. Explaining the relationship of architecture to the social group, Ruskin writes,

> A picture or poem is often little more than a feeble utterance of man’s admiration of something out of himself; but architecture approaches more to a creation of his own, born of his necessities, and expressive of his nature. It is also, in some sort, the work of the whole race, while the picture or statue is the work of one only, in most cases more highly gifted than his fellows. (10: 213-14)

Architecture, which he previously described as the lowest of the arts because it meets the human need for shelter, proves particularly amenable to the communitarian thrust of Ruskin’s ethical-aesthetic thinking. By reading architecture as both a sign and a cause of national morals, his discussion of beauty and taste gains traction on social issues. In his much-anthologized chapter on “The Nature of Gothic” Ruskin evaluates a nation’s morals specifically by assessing the working conditions of its laborers. As a young man, he had worried that the cultivation of taste might be reduced to “thinking of nothing but pictures” (3: 665). By the time he wrote _The Seven Lamps of Architecture_ (1848), he was
raising the question of whether architectural decoration was produced by happy workers, though he was not clearly linking happiness to labor conditions (8: 218). In “The Nature of Gothic,” his aggregate analysis of architecture—reading it as a sign of communal, not individual, morals—means that enjoying a beautiful building is not an act of isolated aesthetic contemplation. It is an act that registers the socioeconomic conditions under which the building was produced.

In *The Poetry of Architecture*, Ruskin imagined the link between architecture and nation in rather facile terms as simply the expression of a stereotyped national character. The materially-minded English, for instance, eschew picturesque older buildings and prefer the comfort provided by neatness and newness (1: 14-17). Similarly, *The Stones of Venice* attributes Venice’s decline in architecture to its political, social, and moral decline during the Renaissance. However, the later text also provides a more carefully-conceptualized link between architecture and nation. Although Ruskin never loses his appetite for national stereotypes, *The Stones of Venice* reads architecture not just as a sign of national morals, but as an index of economic interdependence.

In “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin’s aggregate analysis of Venetian architecture leads him to praise a medieval society that, he believes, fostered the mental faculties and creative freedom of its workers. In his eyes, the modern industrial division of labor destroys this growth and freedom by limiting workers to repetitive, mind-numbing tasks: “It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided, but the men . . . broken into small
fragments and crumbs of life,” he writes (10: 196). Earlier in *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin predicted that, if England failed to ameliorate the lives of its working class, the British Empire would go the way of Venice and Tyre, reduced first to a ruin and then to a memory (9: 17). Although Ruskin’s tone verges on the mythic, the continental revolutions of 1848 would have been on his readers’ minds. Ruskin attributes class hatred and revolutionary unrest not to inequality, which has always existed, but to the “degradation of the operative into a machine” caused by the division of labor (10: 194). If laborers could only enjoy freedom and creativity in their work—that is, if labor could be an aesthetic experience exercising the mind and the emotions as well as the body—then the working classes would not resent the upper classes (10: 194-95). Characteristically,

8 Ruskin’s ideal society minimizes the division of labor. In “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin criticizes the division of labor that creates class division: the “gentleman” does all the thinking and the “operative” does all the work (10: 201). Instead, everyone should have access to both labor and thought—a state of affairs that would make everyone a true gentleman (10: 201). Pedagogical projects like his drawing lessons at the London Working Men’s College, where he taught regularly 1854-58 and periodically thereafter, were his attempt to provide laborers with access to a holistic education. At Oxford, where he taught young gentlemen, his much-maligned road-digging project was a parallel attempt to ensure that the ruling class experienced physical labor.

However, Ruskin is far from proposing that we completely eradicate the division of labor or the class system. Testifying to a parliamentary committee about his tenure at the Working Men’s College, he emphasized that he did not wish his students to pursue self-improvement as a means to social mobility. He proposed to ameliorate rather than change their status as artisans: “I want all efforts for bettering the workmen to be especially directed in this way: supposing that they are to remain in this position for ever . . . how then you may make them happier and wiser” (16: 474). As always, one notes the political doubling of Ruskin’s thought and work. On the one hand, though not entirely opposed to social mobility, he thinks it best that the working class stay in their place. There will always be unpleasant physical labor to be done; in Ruskin’s view, the accident of birth is a perfectly reasonable way to decide who does it. On the other hand, he sees no reason why being born to the working class should prevent people from having rich lives and developing their talents and capacities. He realizes—and even demands that others realize—that greater economic justice is required before people can develop mentally and spiritually.

*News from Nowhere* (1890), by Ruskin’s socialist admirer William Morris, comes much closer to imagining a world where the division of labor has almost vanished. In this utopian romance, the citizens of Nowhere enjoy a holistic education that cultivates body and mind. Everyone possesses the skills to make a wide array of useful products (31-32). However, some specialization is necessary. At harvest time, for instance, the skilled agricultural laborers do the more demanding work, while permitting the “‘scientific men and historians, and students generally’” to exercise their bodies while enjoying the simpler outdoor jobs (215).
Ruskin’s social vision combines radical demands for a more just society with a reactionary acceptance of inequality. The working classes should be able to enjoy their labor, but they should also accept their social place once it has been made more comfortable.

Ruskin’s awareness of economic interdependence belongs to the radically challenging side of his thought. Addressing his readers directly, he informs them that economic interdependence makes them responsible for the conditions of labor under which their homes and possessions are produced. “[L]ook round this English room of yours,” he challenges them.

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. . . . 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. (10: 193)

You, the reader, must ensure that workers regain the creative freedom that the factory system denies them (10: 193-94, 196-99). In such a situation, individuated taste cannot be an adequate norm. Instead, Ruskin proposes guidelines for identifying and purchasing items that show signs of creativity and humane labor conditions (10: 196-99).

*The Stones of Venice* interprets architecture as both cause and expression of the health of the polis. Eleven years later, Ruskin’s lecture “Traffic” takes the inadequacy of contemporary English architecture as an expression of England’s moral inadequacy. Ruskin reiterates that “every great national architecture has been the result and exponent of a great national religion. You can’t have bits of it here, bits there—you must have it everywhere or nowhere” (18: 444). To most people, there is nothing very remarkable in
the fact that religious and academic buildings are likely to be Gothic while commercial, industrial, and private buildings are not. After all, they serve different functions. Ruskin, however, reads these architectural differences symbolically. The stylistic separation of churches from factories and homes “signifies neither more nor less than that you have separated your religion from your life,” he tells his audience (18: 440). Characteristically, he insists on aggregate analysis. One must examine the aesthetic and moral health of the nation as a whole, or not at all.

Ruskin makes the same aggregating move in Unto This Last, where his methodology foregrounds socioeconomic interdependence. Unto This Last, Ruskin’s best known work of political economy, met with hostile reception when it first appeared as a series of essays in Cornhill Magazine (1860). Reviewers found it ill-informed, socialist, or the product of a hysterical (implicitly feminine) brain. What could Ruskin, an art critic, know about political economy?

In Ruskin’s mind, the jump from aggregate aesthetic analysis to aggregate economic analysis is not a large one. In Modern Painters II, immediately after asserting “that beautiful things are useful to men because they are beautiful,” Ruskin continues, “This, the beginning of all my political economy, is very sufficiently established in the opening chapter” (4: 4). Although beauty might seem to have little to do with wages or trade, Ruskin can identify it as the beginning of his political economy because he treats

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9 As Cornhill’s editor, William Makepeace Thackeray had to deliver the news that the publishers wanted to cut the series short because the first three essays had not gone over well with readers. Allowed to publish one final installment, Ruskin shaped his last essay into a conclusion (17: xxvii-xxix). Issued as a book in 1862, Unto This Last sold slowly. By about 1887, extracts were being reprinted and sold in cheap format under the title “The Rights of Labour according to John Ruskin” (17: 5).
political economy as the study of the full range of human needs and desires. Beauty may not be necessary for physical survival, but in Ruskin’s mind it is a human need. Ruskin’s preface to the 1862 book edition of *Unto This Last* defends the text as his “truest, rightest-worded, and most serviceable writing” (17: 17). In addition to its utility, he defends its style, dubbing the last chapter “probably the best I shall ever write” (17: 17). Thus Ruskin argues for both the text’s utility and its aesthetic worth.

Mainstream political economists like John Stuart Mill envisioned the socioeconomic order as composed of individuals pursuing their own interests. Ruskin argues that, by ignoring interdependence and “social affection,” this methodological individualism renders the “soi-disant science of political economy” unable to explain the phenomena it undertakes to explicate (17: 25). Ruskin’s proof of this argument is that political economists are unable to offer solutions to strikes (17: 26-27). Rejecting the typical terminology of political economy, Ruskin instead describes society using metaphors that insist that individuals exist within pre-existing, interdependent relationships. Social and economic interdependence—sometimes inflected with quasi-feudal paternalism, sometimes with a more democratic mutuality—characterize Ruskin’s political economy. Individualism and competition are anathema to him.

For instance, Ruskin compares the relationship between employers and workers to the relationships between parents and children, officers and soldiers, quasi-feudal masters and the servants who share their household (17: 27-32, 41-42). Characteristically, given

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10 Ruskin admits that the servant and soldier examples are not perfectly correlated to the situation of industrial labor (17: 32-33). Specifically, “a servant or a soldier is engaged at a definite rate of wages, for a definite period; but a workman at a rate of wages variable according to the demand for labour, and
Ruskin’s paternalism, the balance of power in these relationships is asymmetrical. He accepts power imbalance but wants to configure it as benign, not exploitative. Metaphors drawn from domestic life and the military are Ruskin’s attempt to envision how the equally asymmetrical economic relationship between employers and laborers could be ameliorated if it were imagined in terms of interdependence rather than in terms of competitive individualism. Taking mothers and children as an example, Ruskin acknowledges that people’s interests may be in conflict, but argues that such conflict does not necessarily translate into antagonism and competition. In a poverty-stricken household, a starving mother may choose to go hungry rather than deprive her children (17: 27). Melodramatic as this example sounds, Ruskin in 1860 would have remembered the decade of the “hungry forties,” when economic depression in England led to working-class starvation and malnutrition—colloquially, the “clemming” depicted in Elizabeth Gaskell’s industrial novel *Mary Barton* (1848). The Irish experienced even more disastrous food shortages during the 1845-49 Potato Famine.

In addition to proposing alternative organizing metaphors for socioeconomic relations, Ruskin asserts that political economists’ narrow reading of self-interest renders them incapable of actually explaining economic phenomena because they wrongly assume that people are predictably rational and self-maximizing, as if humans were “‘covetous machine[s]’” (17: 25). Ruskin counters that in order to predict human desires, with the risk of being at any time thrown out of his situation by chances of trade”—a situation that does not make for affection between master and man (17: 33). He inquires to what extent this situation can be remedied by regulations that stabilize wages and guarantee employment to some degree—a situation that, he argues, would give employees greater interest in their employer’s success, and would foster affection between the two classes (17: 33).
we must realize that they are based on emotion as much as upon rational self-interest. Conventional political economy fails because it overlooks the affective pleasures and motivations studied by aesthetics and ethics. As an example, Ruskin derides the idea that a domestic servant’s work can be maximized not by treating him equitably, but by exploiting him just to the point beyond which he would quit. The servant’s behavior cannot be predicted as if it were that of “an engine of which the motive power was steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any other calculable force” (17: 29). Notably, rather than analyzing the relationship between a factory-owner and his workers, Ruskin locates his example within the home, a site that, according to Victorian domestic ideology, should provide an escape from individualism and competition. This setting is more amenable to Ruskin’s argument that the “motive power” of the servant’s labor is “the will or spirit of the creature . . . brought to its greatest strength by its own proper fuel: namely, by the affections” (17: 29-30). Rather than completely rejecting the comparison of the worker to a predictable machine, Ruskin reconfigures the mechanistic metaphor and describes the human as an engine running on emotional fuel. The “‘social affections’” play a motivating role in desire and decision-making (17: 25). He proposes a new political economy that takes into account desire’s interpersonal, emotional dynamic.

Even as he denounces the suffering caused by laissez-faire policies, Ruskin proves that he is no democrat. Using the metaphor of the body politic, Ruskin declares

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11 Since the late twentieth century, many academic economists have recognized that economic behavior does not reliably follow patterns of rational self-interest or the maximization of utility. Behavioral economics, a field that has gained public attention with books aimed at popular audiences, attempts to provide a more accurate description of consumer decisions by acknowledging various cognitive, emotional, and social factors that affect people’s economic decisions. Popularizations of behavioral economics include Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner’s *Freakonomics* (2006), Dan Ariely’s *Predictably Irrational* (2008), and Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s *Nudge* (2008).
that just as a flushed body may signify health or illness, so inequality may signify good or ill for the nation (17: 48). Expressing a sentiment that his more progressive followers would ignore, he asserts that inequality is not intrinsically good or bad for a nation (17: 46). The outcome depends on whether inequality is based on justice. Inequality may be either “the melodious inequalities of concurrent power” or “the iniquitous dominances and depressions of guilt and misfortune” (17: 48).

Turning to wealth, Ruskin expands on the possibility that any given sign can have either of two opposite meanings. “It is impossible to conclude, of any given mass of acquired wealth, merely by the fact of its existence, whether it signifies good or evil to the nation,” he writes. “Its real value depends on the moral sign attached to it, just as sternly as that of a mathematical quantity depends on the algebraical sign attached to it” (17: 52). In this complicated passage, Ruskin reverses the problematic of representation. Four years later, “Traffic” would point to the gap between a financial signifier like paper money and the material objects or labour that it can command (18: 452). Here, in Unto This Last, Ruskin argues that a mass of material objects—what we would normally consider to be a referent rather than a signifier—can neither be nor represent its own value. Instead, the value of material wealth depends upon a “moral sign” representing the social and economic structures under which the wealth was produced.

Calculating the “moral sign” means taking the nation as your unit of analysis: inquiring whether the material wealth benefits the polis rather than asking whether it benefits its owner (17: 52). Despite Ruskin’s reliance on the language of morals, aggregate analysis is not merely a symptom of the sometimes objectionably prescriptive
nature of his rhetoric. Aggregate analysis makes sense if, as Ruskin did, you see money as debt. In a footnote on “the disputes which exist respecting the real nature of money,” Ruskin is certain that

All money, properly so called, is an acknowledgment of debt; but as such, it may either be considered to represent the labour and property of the creditor, or the idleness and penury of the debtor. The intricacy of the question has been much increased by the (hitherto necessary) use of marketable commodities, such as gold, silver, salt, shells, etc., to give intrinsic value or security to currency; but the final and best definition of money is that it is a documentary promise ratified and guaranteed by the nation to give or find a certain quantity of labour on demand. (17: 50)

Indebtedness implies that interdependence, not individual independence, structures monetary exchange. Personal preference cannot be the only norm governing such relational transactions (Craig 13-14). Ruskin urges his readers to ask how their acts of consumption and production affect others—for, as he conceives it, affecting others is an inescapable consequence of the relational nature of economic acts (17: 113-14).12

Ruskin’s aggregate analysis of money—his insistence that it represents both one person’s abundance and another person’s need—foreshadows “Traffic’s” arresting denunciation of the bourgeois “Goddess of Getting-on” because, simultaneously, there are people for whom she must be “the Goddess of not Getting-on” (18: 453). Ruskin throws his considerable rhetorical strength into reminding his audience of those people. He challenges his readers and listeners to recognize the hypocrisy underlying the comfortable assumption that we are only responsible for ourselves, and that the market

12 In his classic treatise The Gift (1950), anthropologist Marcel Mauss theorizes that capitalist exchange leads to a social imaginary based on individual interest. In contrast, gift economies foreground social relationships (76). While Mauss’s account of “archaic” gift economies is far from idyllic, he argues that the obligations they impose, “to give, to receive, to reciprocate,” offer a model of solidarity that should be incorporated into modern political theory and practice (39, 78-83).
will ensure that deserving individuals are materially rewarded. Today, though we rightly
balk at many of Ruskin’s positions, the power of his language—in its familiar biblical
cadences and in its increasingly idiosyncratic symbolism, in its bitterness and in its
generosity—continues to make his aggregate analysis compelling.

Ruskin and Capability Analysis

The moment we can use our possessions to any good purpose ourselves,
the instinct of communicating that use to others rises side by side with our
power. If you can read a book rightly, you will want others to hear it; if
you can enjoy a picture rightly, you will want others to see it . . .
—Ruskin 18: 218

But, without any reference to the opinion of others, and without any
chance of partiality in your own, there is one test by which you can all
determine the rate of your real progress.

Examine, after every period of renewed industry, how far you have
enlarged your faculty of admiration.

Consider how much more you can see, to reverence, in the work of
masters; and how much more to love, in the work of nature.
—Ruskin (16: 154, emphasis in original)

In an all-out attack on political economists, Ruskin redefines mainstream political
economy’s central terms—“riches,” “wealth,” “value,” and “production”—according to
his own aggregate analysis. In 1864, invited to speak to the citizens of Bradford on the
topic of architecture, he instead challenges his audience to re-examine their definitions of
value and wealth. “Well, what in the name of Plutus is it you want?” he inquires. “Not
gold, not greenbacks, not ciphers . . . ? You will have to answer, after all, ‘No; we want,
somehow or other, money’s worth.’ Well, what is that?” (18: 452). This confrontational
lecture, published as “Traffic,” revisits themes from Unto This Last, where Ruskin
challenges conventional definitions of value.
Just as taste provides Ruskin with a rubric for an aesthetics that attends to human capacities and needs, so he redefines economic terms like “value” and “use” in order to reinsert human capabilities and moral concerns into the discussion of money. I use the term “capability analysis” to designate his insistence that our economic and aesthetic relations to objects can and should foster the growth of capabilities like the “powers of love, of joy, and of admiration” (17: 105). Ruskin’s capability analysis is a critique of economic understandings of value. Crucially, it is not a critique that relies on casting aesthetic value as a special, intrinsic kind of value superior to “empty” economic value. Capability analysis challenges the idea that either ethical or aesthetic value is intrinsic, independent of an individual’s desires and abilities, or independent of the environment that shaped that individual.

Where mainstream political economy and its most famous critic, Marx, emphasize production, Ruskin’s capability analysis leads him to focus not just on production, but also on consumption. He identifies another oversight by political economists: by defining wealth in terms of production, they overlook the good that exists in consumption (17: 98, 102). All “essential production is for the Mouth, and is finally measured by the mouth; hence . . . the wealth of a nation is only to be estimated by what it consumes,” Ruskin declares (17: 101). For Ruskin, consumption means not just accumulation, but use; not just art, but taste.

Redefinition is a favorite rhetorical tactic for Ruskin. In *Unto This Last*, he quotes John Stuart Mill in order to contradict and revise the political economist’s terms. (Rather unfairly, Ruskin takes Mill to epitomize laissez-faire policy and all of industrial
capitalism’s worst excesses.) For Mill, value means “[‘value in exchange’] and wealth
‘consists of all useful and agreeable objects which possess exchangeable value’” (qtd. in Ruskin 17: 80). If in Modern Painters II, Ruskin wavered between defining beauty as an objective property or a subjective feeling, in Unto This Last he has no qualms about defining “usefulness” and “value” as depending not just upon objective properties, but also upon subjective capacities. Ruskin argues that the “usefulness” and “agreeableness” of an object depend “not merely on its own nature, but on the number of people who can and will use it” (17: 80-81). In other words, the study of wealth requires knowledge about people as well as about things. Ruskin proposes a model of evaluation that links the economic, the ethical, and the aesthetic in a vision of human growth.

Just as he did with “value,” Ruskin brings his capability analysis to bear on Mill’s definition of “wealth.” For Mill, to be wealthy means “[‘to have a large stock of useful articles’]” (qtd. in 17: 86). With his characteristic mania for accurate definitions, Ruskin points out that Mill’s formula raises questions about the precise nature of “Utility” and “Possession” (17: 86). For most Victorians—and for most Americans today—possession, or private property, is presumably a transparent concept that everyone accepts and understands. Ruskin issues an abrupt challenge to this central tenet of individualist and capitalist thinking. “And first of possession,” he writes, then continues with the startling declaration, “At the crossing of the transepts of Milan Cathedral has lain, for three hundred years, the embalmed body of St. Carlo Borromeo” (17: 86). The corpse wears, but obviously cannot use, an array of valuable ecclesiastical goods. Ruskin’s point is that “possession . . . is not an absolute, but a graduated, power; and consists not only in the
quantity or nature of the thing possessed, but also (and in a greater degree) in its suitableness to the person possessing it and in his vital power to use it” (17: 87). The continental Catholic practice of embalming and displaying dead saints would have jarred nineteenth-century English Protestant sensibilities. Ruskin’s purposefully disturbing example renders the concept of “possession” strange. Here, possession is not an unquestioned, absolute relationship between subject and object, but a relationship that requires the subject to have the capability to use and enjoy. Similarly, utility depends not only on the qualities of a thing, but on who uses or abuses it and how (17: 87-88).

Thus wealth, which “we reasoned of only as accumulation of material” turns out “to demand also accumulation of capacity” (17: 87). Wealth depends not only on objects, but also on their owner’s ability to use them. The relevance of human capacities and desires to economic values means that political economy cannot disavow “moral considerations” (17: 81). The issue of the individual’s capacities and desires introduces the question of what role environment plays in forming those capacities and desires. It also points to the problem of whether and how society should provide the conditions necessary for people to develop their capabilities. Concluding his investigation, Ruskin redefines wealth as “‘THE POSSESSION OF THE VALUABLE BY THE VALIANT’” (17: 88). Anyone who wishes to measure the wealth of a nation must evaluate both material objects and their possessors’ capabilities (17: 88-89).

Twenty-first century readers are likely to find Ruskin’s political economy daunting or problematic, at least occasionally. For example, his practical advice for evaluating consumer choices demands an impossible degree of knowledge:
In all buying, consider, first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer . . . thirdly, to how much clear use, for food, knowledge, or joy, this that you have bought can be put; and fourthly, to whom and in what way it can be most speedily and serviceably distributed; in all dealings whatsoever insisting on entire openness and stern fulfilment; and in all doings, on perfection and loveliness of accomplishment; especially on fineness and purity of all marketable commodity: watching at the same time for all ways of gaining, or teaching, powers of simple pleasure . . . the sum of enjoyment depending not on the quantity of things tasted, but on the vivacity and patience of taste” (17: 113-14)

This advice is inspiring but difficult to follow in practice, which is why ethically-inclined consumers today rely on credentialing agencies to determine what goods are fair-trade or organic. More troublesome is Ruskin’s authoritarianism, his belief in the necessity of hierarchy and subordination if social harmony is to be achieved. We have inherited Mill’s suspicion toward authority and appeals to a singular version of the good. We are unlikely to believe that patterns of subordination may be, in Ruskin’s words, “the melodious inequalities of concurrent power” (17: 48). Mill argues from a principle of individuality that draws boundaries around people, creating zones of personal choice in which other individuals and the state should not interfere (Craig 18, 298-99). Mill was right to be suspicious. Dominant groups can enforce a single definition of the good or beautiful, and Mill’s argument for individual rights and liberties is a valuable tool against such domination. Perhaps, however, he overestimates the degree to which we can make choices that avoid infringing on the lives of others. Perhaps, as Craig points out, Ruskin is more accurate when he interprets consumer choices as “votes for certain societal arrangements and economic conditions” (298-99). Today, in an economy that is even
more globalized than in Ruskin’s time, our purchases are “votes” that affect the lives of people about whom we will never know anything.

We have seen how Ruskin’s capability approach registers interdependence and challenges Victorian conceptions of exchange value. Importantly, *Unto This Last* and “Traffic” do not suggest that aesthetics studies a more authentic or intrinsic kind of value. How can aesthetic value be intrinsic if people do not have the ability or access necessary to enjoy it? In the passage quoted above, Ruskin speaks of aesthetic pleasure as requiring the development of taste: “the sum of enjoyment depending not on the quantity of things tasted, but on the vivacity and patience of taste.” Here we see Ruskin privileging subjective capabilities, not objective properties, as the locus of aesthetic pleasure. However, Ruskin’s emphasis on cultivating taste means that he does not want the term to designate unreflecting individual preference.  

Taste is a subjective capacity that can grow and change. The cultivation of taste raises the question of what role environment

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13 Ruskin’s objection to defining taste as individual preference is intertwined with his objection to another common definition of taste: conformity to upper-class aesthetic norms. “For, consider the exact sense in which a work of art is said to be ‘in good or bad taste’” he writes in *Modern Painters III* (1856). “It does not mean that it is true or false; that it is beautiful or ugly: but that it does or does not comply either with the laws of choice, which are enforced by certain modes of life, or the habits of mind produced by a particular sort of education” (5: 94). By “the habits of mind produced by a particular sort of education,” Ruskin denotes what Bourdieu would call the *habitus* produced by an elite education.

Ruskin seems to be objecting that the common understanding of taste is too subjective a rubric for evaluating art because it relies on preference rather than on absolute criteria like truth or beauty. Yet he is not objecting that taste partakes too much of *individual* subjectivity. He objects on the more sociological grounds that one’s preferences are based on one’s class background. In particular, he complains that the popular understanding of good taste is based on conspicuous consumption (preferring marble for its cost, not its colors) and formalism (valuing appearance over substance, feeling, and sincerity) (5: 94-96).

Ruskin’s diatribe against the colloquial definition of “good taste” expresses his desire that object relations be infused with feeling, not with the aesthetic distance implied by connoisseurship or formalism. The “good taste” conferred by “the most refined education” has the drawback of tending “to narrow the sympathies and harden the heart, diminishing the interest of all beautiful things by familiarity” (5: 94-95). Ruskin’s guidelines for cultivating true taste focus on content and emotion more than on form. Ruskin’s *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) advises aspiring artists to choose subject matter that addresses the viewer’s emotions. For instance, Ruskin suggests that an abandoned plow will appeal to viewers’ feelings about labor and loss (15: 206).
plays in forming taste. Ruskin’s taste theory shades into social critique when he raises the question of whether industrial society allows all its members to develop taste along with other human capabilities like imagination.

In *Modern Painters II*, Ruskin complains that “what the world commonly understands by the cultivation of ‘taste’” is often merely a sensuous perception, and not a true cultivation of the “heart-feeling” that produces joy and reverence at the sight of beauty (4: 49). Almost 40 years later, lecturing on *The Art of England* (1883–84, published 1884), he reiterates his point that art education should include cultivating one’s ethical capabilities, not just attaining technical skill or connoisseurship. He laments the difficulty of finding good books for art instruction: “I do not mean merely as lessons in drawing, but in the formation of taste, which, when we analyse it, means of course merely the right direction of feeling” (33: 285). Feeling is, of course, a moral faculty in Ruskin’s thinking.

According to *Modern Painters II*, cultivating taste (or “the right direction of feeling”) requires that we find the correct balance between submission to authority and the “openness of heart which proves all things” (4: 58). Authorities can point us in the right direction, but they can also lead us, through custom, to prefer inferior things, or even to miss the opportunity to take pleasure in unfamiliar beauties. Cultivating taste requires a willingness to engage patiently in extended attention to objects, whether they are recommended by authority or not (4: 58). (Here we may recall that Ruskin’s art criticism began with a defense of Turner, whose paintings did not fit the canons of neoclassical taste.)
Despite the fact that Ruskin himself indulges in authoritative pronouncements on aesthetic matters, and despite the fact that he tries, unsuccessfully, to develop a theory of beauty as an objective property, his discussion of taste suggests—sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly—that aesthetic value, like economic value, requires the development of human capabilities. Far from being an autonomous realm of intrinsic value, the aesthetic, for Ruskin, is an index of national cultural health. A society can be judged according to whether it fosters the capacity for aesthetic pleasure in all its citizens. In 1860, invited to testify to Parliament’s Select Committee on Public Institutions about extending museum hours in order to attract the working class, Ruskin responded that there was “a much more important question, how you can prepare the workmen for taking advantage of these institutions” (16: 473). In his view, the English working class will derive no benefit from museums “unless we enable them to receive it; and all this is connected closely, in my mind, with . . . how far you can get the hours of labour regulated, and how far you can get the labour during those hours made not competitive, and not oppressive to the workmen” (16: 473-74). He proceeded to suggest that the upper classes of other nations took greater interest in the well-being of laborers, a statement that one committee member resented as “a slur upon the character of the upper classes in this country” (16: 482). Ruskin’s arguments about working-class museum-going show his attention to the material exigencies shaping particular aesthetic encounters.

Strikingly, Ruskin argues that a just, moral nation will produce imperfect art and architecture. Although one can train men to execute specific tasks like cutting a curved line perfectly, doing so limits their potential for invention. Like Dickens, Ruskin
associates industrial labor with the reduction of human workers to thoughtless, emotionless machines. For a thinker who believes that feeling is central to ethics, mechanization and repetitive labor are incredibly threatening, suggesting that industry renders workers incapable of feeling and thus of moral development. When, in “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin urges his readers to look around their English rooms and reevaluate their possessions in moral and aesthetic terms, he highlights precisely the reprehensible “perfectnesses,” the accurate and shiny manufactures, producible only by mechanization and the division of labor (10: 193). To produce such accurate and polished manufactures, he believes, the human worker becomes a mere “tool” (10: 192).

It may be inefficient, but Ruskin argues that the only way to preserve workers’ capacities for mental development is to allow them creative freedom, even if the result is rough. In practice, this means that, as much as possible, workers should plan as well as execute designs (10: 200-02). Ruskin’s preference for Gothic over Renaissance architecture can be explained by the fact that for him, architectural roughness and imperfection are signs of change, growth, and life—the opposite of mechanization. Every laborer possesses “some powers for better things; some tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought” (10: 191). It is the consumer’s responsibility to purchase manufactures that allow workers to develop these capacities. Workers have varying levels of ability, but they should all get to exercise and even improve those abilities.
Failure can be a sign of growth, of attempting something new (10: 192, 202-03).

For this reason, Ruskin prefers a vital roughness to smooth finish, both in architecture and in people:

And therefore, while in all things that we see or do, we are to desire perfection, and strive for it, we are nevertheless not to set the meaner thing, in its narrow accomplishment, above the nobler thing, in its mighty progress; not to esteem smooth minuteness above shattered majesty; not to prefer mean victory to honourable defeat; not to lower the level of our aim, that we may the more surely enjoy the complacency of success. (10: 191)

Thus, valorizing imperfection means valorizing process over product and form. Overly perfect art and manufactures indicate that workers have lost their creative freedom, a loss that Ruskin attributes to the division of labor (10: 197-204).

Ultimately Ruskin rejects aesthetic claims to intrinsic value and transcendent self-justification. Beauty is not self-justified. To be “a joy for ever,” he writes in the lecture series *Aratra Pentelici* (1870/72), a thing of beauty “must be a joy for all” (20: 212, emphasis in original). Taste cannot simply mean the process whereby an individual arrives at a “correct,” universal judgment about beauty. For Ruskin, society is responsible for creating the conditions that allow individuals to develop a taste for beauty, a capacity for aesthetic pleasure. The fact that Ruskin sees taste as susceptible to influence by one’s cultural environment means that, in his analysis, having good taste is not only a matter of balancing subjective pleasure with an objective recognition of physical properties or of universal laws. Having good taste also requires a conducive cultural and social environment. Thus bad taste can be a register not of individual ineptitude, but of societal failure.
As Helsinger points out in a slightly different context, Ruskin’s project is one of both “perceptual and cultural reform” (Beholder 5). In Modern Painters III, Ruskin suggests that contemporary aesthetic perception has been affected by religious doubt (and thus an inability to get spiritual and aesthetic pleasure from landscape) and by technology, especially trains and telegraphs (Helsinger Beholder 57-58). Art should address these perceptual and cultural problems. His work as a drawing teacher (conducted variously by correspondence and in manuals like The Elements of Drawing, and in person at the Working Men’s College, Winnington Hall, and Oxford) shows a similar concern.14 Ruskin’s drawing lessons were less concerned with technical proficiency than with art’s role in general education. Drawing could teach students to be better judges of art, but also to see the world more accurately and observantly (Atwood 33). The 1874 Hinksey-Ferry road digging project is probably the most vivid illustration of Ruskin’s desire to integrate art with general education, character formation, and social responsibility. As Slade Professor of Art, Ruskin convinced about eighty undergraduates to do manual labor improving the drainage and roads near Oxford.15 Alexander Wedderburn and, much more briefly, Oscar Wilde both participated in the road-digging (Atwood 64). Two years later, the road was already deteriorating and had to be rebuilt by professionals (Eagles 108). The road-digging garnered a fair share of mockery in its own

14 See Atwood’s Ruskin’s Educational Ideals for the most extensive recent discussion of Ruskin’s work as a teacher. Cathy Shuman’s Pedagogical Economies: The Examination and the Victorian Literary Man (2000) also includes a chapter on Ruskin’s opposition to competitive examinations and the strangeness of his pedagogical counter-proposals.

15 For a detailed discussion of Hinksey-Ferry, see Chapter 3 in Eagles. Eagles locates the project’s impact less in the actual road repair than in the challenge it provided to Oxford’s intelligent, affluent undergraduates to go do something practical for their country. At least partly because of Ruskin’s influence, a core group of the most dedicated participants pursued careers in public service (Eagles 108).
day. Even Rosenberg, who did so much to revive Ruskin’s reputation in the 1960s, seems slightly apologetic for his hero’s un-professorial exploit, lumping it with Ruskin’s “later vagaries” (178). Today, with the acceptance of service learning at universities, we are in a better position to regard Ruskin’s unconventional pedagogical undertaking as a valiant attempt to connect art and education to life.

Because aesthetic perception involves feeling, and because for Ruskin feeling is crucial to ethics, improving perception—or, in terms of my project, cultivating taste—requires a moral transformation that will, he believes, spill over into cultural and societal transformation. Beauty is not a panacea for the twenty-first century’s social ills and increasing economic inequality, but Ruskin’s prose exemplifies how the aesthetic can play a potent role in persuading an audience to pay closer attention to their world. If there are times when Ruskin’s ethical aesthetic theory seems little more than a simplistic assumption that beauty is a moral palliative, there are other times when his aggregate analysis and capability approach turn his aesthetic theory into something much deeper.

Ruskin’s aggregate analysis of taste challenges the liberal idea (still widely taken as common sense) that the individual is the basic unit of society, that aesthetic desires tell us more about the individual than they do about his or her social environment, and that the marketplace allows us to pursue our individual tastes without impinging on others. Even as Ruskin rejects individuated taste as a guideline for aesthetic and economic decisions, his inability to discount individual aesthetic experiences leads him to use the rubric of taste to make a place for individual desire and subjectivity in his vision of the good life. Taste, not beauty, is “the ONLY morality” because, like consumption in his
economic theory, taste implies the presence of human capacities for experience and growth. Taste is grounded in aesthetic experiences and choices, which for Ruskin in “Traffic” and Unto This Last are also economic and ethical choices, in which we encounter and react to the world. Taste is not a model of distanced contemplation, but of encountering the visual pleasures of the world around us and taking them as a spur for mental and affective growth. “[F]alse taste,” writes Ruskin in Modern Painters II, “. . . tests all things round it by the way they fit it. But true taste is for ever growing, learning, reading, worshipping, laying its hand upon its mouth because it is astonished, lamenting over itself, and testing itself by the way that it fits things” (4: 60).

Ruskin is right that an attitude of self-reflective openness can lead us to new aesthetic pleasures. Aesthetic pleasure does in fact exist on a continuum from ease to effort. I myself never liked Rubens until I took a class on Dutch and Flemish art, which taught me both to understand Rubens’s worldview and artistic goals, and to look more carefully at his lavish Baroque compositions. In an age when images of artworks were less accessible, Ruskin worked hard to expand and hone his ability to enjoy and judge art: traveling Europe, studying paintings and architecture, making copies. He advised one of his drawing students, “don’t let anybody insult your power by telling you to stay content with what you can do now” (Sublime and Instructive 10).

Ruskin treated his own acute aesthetic perception as a moral faculty. In Modern Painters II, declaring that he shares with the painters J.M.W. Turner and Samuel Prout an “accurate sense of comparative magnitudes,” he explains, “This is not a trigonometric, but a tragic power . . . and means, for me . . . that I cannot be consoled by a bit of
Venetian glass for the destruction of Venice, nor for the destitution of a London suburb by the softness of my own armchair” (4: 9). Here, as in his youthful letter to Osborne Gordon, Ruskin acknowledges and yet defies the possibility that aesthetic experience can dwindle to decontextualized, object-centered formalism (contemplating a bit of glass isolated from its city of origin, “thinking of nothing but pictures”) or to private, subjective pleasure (enjoying beauty from the comfort of one’s armchair).

Perhaps the most important reason for Ruskin’s continued relevance is that his aggregate analysis of taste raises the question of what aesthetic pleasure means in an unjust world. In grappling with this question, he produces a theory that attends to formal properties, to subjective experiences, and to social contexts. He refuses to let aesthetic experience become an escape from issues like poverty, environmental degradation, and urban development. For Ruskin, thinking about art means thinking about aesthetic objects, but also about the people who produce and consume them, and about the social settings in which those activities take place. Ruskin’s trifold balancing act proved too precarious, and too eccentric, for other Victorian critics to sustain. Arnold, who was likewise deeply concerned with art’s ethical function, proposes a model of aesthetic evaluation centered on “the object as in itself it really is” (1: 140). Wilde counters with a model that privileges individual subjectivity.
CHAPTER FIVE
MATTHEW ARNOLD

Nothing seemed to be ‘Greek’ among the great mass of Englishmen—if Greek be another name for the spiritual, the intellectual, the artistic; but everything material with that kind of materiality which provoked the urbane raillery of Mr. Matthew Arnold.

For in the sixties, which was the date of Mr. Arnold’s ‘floruit’ as a censor of Philistinism, we were in the full tide of our commercial and industrial prosperity, and it so happened that the disproportion between the change in our surroundings and the change in ourselves which the new era had brought about was becoming rather disquietingly noticeable.

—H.D. Traill (“The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee”)

. . . we gladly took refuge in our favourite doctrines of the mischief of State interference, of the blessedness of leaving every man free to do as he likes, of the impertinence of presuming to check any man’s natural taste for the bathos and pressing him to relish the sublime.

—Arnold (9: 84)

Like Ruskin, Matthew Arnold (1822–88) set himself the task of denouncing and improving his age. The son of Dr. Thomas Arnold, a famous educator and Broad Church partisan, Arnold was steeped in Oxford humanism. After graduating from Oxford’s Balliol College in 1844, he wrote poetry while supporting himself first with a fellowship at Oriel College, then with a post as a government secretary. He later abandoned poetry for prose, becoming his era’s preeminent literary critic and playing a

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1 Unless otherwise noted, Arnold quotations are from The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold (1960-77), edited by R.H. Super. One exception is that I use the Oxford World’s Classics edition of Culture and Anarchy (2009), edited by Jane Garnett. Culture and Anarchy’s first chapter began as a lecture “Culture and its Enemies,” delivered at the end of Arnold’s time as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Arnold published it in Cornhill Magazine in July 1867. After critiques appeared in other periodicals, Arnold responded with five more articles in Cornhill between January and August 1868. The first book edition (1869) reprinted these articles with minor changes, adding a preface, introduction, and conclusion (xxix). I use Garnett’s edition of Culture and Anarchy because it follows the 1869 text, thus retaining the topicality of the periodical essays.
pivotal role in the professionalization of literary studies. Although he is usually remembered as an author, Arnold spent thirty years working as a government school inspector. He tirelessly advocated for the inclusion of vernacular literature in elementary schools and teaching colleges.

Where Ruskin railed against his fellow Englishmen, Arnold needled them. His classicizing sensibility sometimes struck his contemporaries as overly precious. When the *Daily Telegraph* characterized Arnold’s criticisms as the fastidious naysaying of “an elegant Jeremiah,” Arnold replied with arch annoyance that Jeremiah was “just that very one of the Hebrew prophets whose style I admire the least” (C&A 32). A more substantive difference between Ruskin and Arnold appears in the ways they theorize the relationship between perceiving subject and aesthetic object. Though it sometimes requires mental and verbal gymnastics, Ruskin balances subjective processes and objective qualities in his account of aesthetic pleasure and judgment. Arnold’s cultural criticism upsets this delicate balance between perceiving subject and aesthetic object. Where Ruskin’s taste theory sustains and even explores the tension between claims about subjective experiences and claims about objects, Arnold’s cultural theory privileges claims about objects.

As we will see, Arnold’s writing on literature has surprisingly little to say about actual aesthetic experiences, about desire or pleasure. Where Ruskin found himself unable to ignore the power of individual, embodied aesthetic responses, Arnold turns to imposing abstractions: culture, disinterestedness, “right reason,” “standards of perfection that are real” (C&A 61, 39). Ruskin makes extreme statements about aesthetics and
ethics, but he also discusses specific aesthetic experiences that undermine his declarations. By rarely representing particular aesthetic experiences and their unpredictable results, Arnold’s criticism tends to avoid such pitfalls. He achieves a serene, reasoned tone that contrasts with Ruskin’s intensity and glaring self-contradictions. Yet, despite being a more democratic thinker than Ruskin was, Arnold promotes authoritative cultural standards much more consistently.

Ruskin suggests that cultivating our capacity for aesthetic pleasure, which entails close attention to the world outside us, can be a morally valuable practice. He also attends to the socioeconomic conditions that make this attention possible. In contrast, in order to make art morally valuable, Arnold relies on the idea that cultured reflection leads one, if not all the way to objective truth, at least closer to it. Rather than asking how judgments based on subjective reactions become communicated and shared, Arnold asks how we can arrive at correct judgment—at what, in “The Study of Poetry” (1880), he calls the “real estimate” of an artwork (9: 163). As theorized by Arnold, the goal of criticism and of culture consists of “trying to see things as they are . . . by all aids of observing, reading, and thinking” (C&A 61). Rather than issuing judgments influenced by historical or personal factors, the Arnoldian critic strives to recognize timeless literary value.

I argue that, by reconfiguring how aesthetic discourse positioned the perceiving subject’s relation to the aesthetic object, and by defining criticism as a practice of making claims about an object’s intrinsic properties, Arnold impoverishes his vocabulary for analyzing the subjective processes and social contexts that condition aesthetic preferences. Like Ruskin, he recognizes the dual subjective-objective character of the aesthetic. Unlike Ruskin, he attempts to minimize, rather than explore, this duality.
Ultimately, despite his belief in literature’s moral and social utility, many of his statements influentially promote the idea that literary texts have intrinsic value. With claims to intrinsic value come claims to autonomy. I attribute Arnold’s preference for an objective-sounding evaluative vocabulary to his distrust of individuated taste. Not unreasonably, he worries that individual desires, aesthetic or otherwise, can undermine social cohesion. His solution is to minimize the role that individual desire and subjectivity play in aesthetic experience and evaluation. This marginalization of subjectivity becomes problematic for him on the occasions when he does claim that emotional response to poetry is morally improving.

After providing an overview of how Arnold’s cultural criticism fits with contemporary trends in the academy (specifically, ideology critique, the aesthetic turn in literary studies, and recent sympathetic reevaluations of liberalism), I identify some of the rhetorical strategies that Arnold uses to reconfigure the roles of subject and object in aesthetic judgment. In particular, I focus on two strategies. First, I track how Arnold’s most famous critical formulations dispense with the inherited discourse of taste, instead taking vision as the metaphorical model for aesthetic judgment. In Chapter 2, we saw how elaborate eighteenth-century taste discourse became. Yet, at bottom, it was a discourse that took its central metaphor from a physical act inescapably tied to desire and need: the sensation one receives from an object about to be digested. In contrast, vision provides a model in which the relation between subject and object is defined by distance—and distance, as we will see, is a defining feature of disinterested Arnoldian evaluation.
Arnold’s second strategy for emphasizing objectivity is to focus on literary works for which there is some obvious standard by which to judge the text. For instance, *On Translating Homer* (1861) measures F.W. Newman’s translation of Homer against the original. In the case of modern poetry, where there is no “original” to serve as a standard, Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry” notoriously proposes that we judge poems against “touchstones,” a collection of great poetic lines by Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton that Arnold conveniently identifies for us (9: 167-70). In both cases, Arnold introduces the issue of subjectivity, only to circumscribe it.

After analyzing the strategies that Arnold uses to promote an objectivist theory that minimizes the complexity of aesthetic judgment and experience, I turn to Arnold’s claims for literature’s moral utility. Arnold’s abandonment of taste registers the grandiosity of his ethical-aesthetic project, which was nothing less than assuring that poetry would take on the moral, affective, and social functions once performed by Christianity. “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us,” Arnold wrote in “The Study of Poetry,” acknowledging that, for himself as for many of his contemporaries, orthodox Christianity was unconvincing. “Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry,” he continued (9: 161-62). No wonder taste, which was all too easily associated with individual desire, seemed inadequate to perform this task. Yet, I will argue, individual affective response is both central to, and missing from, Arnold’s theory of poetry’s moral utility. Poetry emotionally attaches us to moral ideas, he claims. However, having circumscribed emotion’s role in aesthetic judgment, he is unable to explore its ethical
function in any detail. He has recourse to the aesthetic object itself, and fails to theorize the interactive processes of aesthetic perception and judgment. Consequently, the ethical status of the aesthetic encounter becomes disconnected from any criteria related to the subject, including the subject’s social environment. As a result, Arnold inadvertently promotes the idea that the aesthetic is an autonomous realm of transcendent value unmoored from social realities.

The final section of this chapter situates Arnold’s theories against Victorian liberal individualism and the increasing tendency to read taste as an expression only of individual personality. Arnold finds taste an inadequate framework for connecting aesthetics to ethics because he distrusts the untrammeled expression of individual preferences. Redefining the aesthetic in terms of objectivity, detachment, distance, and the “free play” of the intellect provided Arnold with critical tools that taste did not.

**Arnold’s Object-Centered Aesthetics**

It is noticeable that the word *curiosity*, which in other languages is used in a good sense, to mean, as a high and fine quality of man’s nature, just this disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake,—it is noticeable, I say, that this word has in our language no sense of the kind, no sense but a rather bad and disparaging one. But criticism, real criticism, is essentially the exercise of this very quality. It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.

—Arnold (3: 268, emphasis in original)

Since the 1980s canon debates, Arnold’s work—specifically, his suggestion that one can identify “the best which has been thought and said in the world”—has come in for criticism, some of it well deserved (*C&A* 5). It is unfortunate that, in the academy, the task of countering conservative hierarchies of aesthetic value turned into a wholesale
debunking of the aesthetic. Given that literary study is now experiencing a prolonged return to the aesthetic, it seems worth revisiting both Arnold’s thought and the critiques leveled against it.²

Arnold treats distance and detachment as defining characteristics of aesthetic judgment. In one of the most persuasive and influential attacks on aesthetic ideology, Bourdieu’s *Distinction* critiques this kind of aesthetic detachment, showing how the concept functions to naturalize bourgeois superiority. Bourdieu’s critique of post-Kantian aesthetics focuses on the origins and social functions of the “aesthetic disposition”—the distanced, formalistic, disinterested mode of attention that has historically been produced as the legitimate way to appreciate art. It is thus a kind of cultural capital that signals class belonging. Interestingly, this disinterested mode of attention can be brought to bear upon any object, not just those classified as art (Bourdieu 3). Thus we signal class status not simply by owning artistic masterpieces (which only the wealthy can afford), but by demonstrating that we know how to appreciate art, and even how to approach everyday objects aesthetically. Kitsch exemplifies how the aesthetic disposition is a mode of attention and how it functions as cultural capital. Bourgeois or upper-class subjects appropriate items associated with lower-class lifestyles, while exhibiting that their attention to the object is distinctively distanced and formal. In this act of “aesthetic redefinition . . . it is the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption” (282).

² Amanda Anderson summarizes two main, and overlapping, critiques of detachment, including Arnoldian detachment. These attacks are generally leveled by pragmatists, by feminists, by postmodernists, and by anyone who adheres to Foucault’s theory that knowledge is “inseparable from power” (Anderson 24). The first critique is that detachment is, quite simply, “an illusory ideal” (24). The second is that detachment is “a form of power that disavows its own violence and exclusivity” (24).
Bourdieu, who focuses on post-Kantian aesthetics and French consumption patterns, never mentions Arnold directly. Nonetheless, Arnold’s emphasis on detachment strongly resembles the bourgeois aesthetic disposition that Bourdieu critiques. Bourdieu’s critique, however, should not be taken as a successful deconstruction of all forms of aesthetic pleasure and judgment. Rather, it specifically demystifies a historically conditioned aesthetic disposition that has been socially recognized as legitimate, and that is marked by detachment, distance, and formalism. It is only because Kant has been so influential in philosophical aesthetics and because Arnold has been so influential in professional literary criticism, that Bourdieu’s critique of the detached post-Kantian aesthetic disposition can appear as a successful attack on the aesthetic and literature per se.

Bourdieu gave *Distinction* the subtitle *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, signifying that he would use sociological methods to critique both Kant’s aesthetics and the particular practices of consumption that, in the wake of Kant’s philosophy, became socially marked as the only legitimate approaches to aesthetic pleasure (and thus these practices functioned as cultural capital). I would argue that Bourdieu is actually critiquing an aesthetic disposition modeled on the physical sense of vision, not the physical sense of taste. Vision does not require action, desire, or need, and thus is more suited to serve as a model for an affectively detached mode of attention. I mention *Distinction* because Bourdieu’s work is a particularly trenchant example of the kind of anti-aesthetic ideological critique that I am writing both with and against. The important insights of ideology critique—for instance, that aesthetic know-how and
refined taste function as cultural capital—do not discredit the aesthetic wholesale, but they should inform our current return to the aesthetic.

Despite the many valid critiques leveled against his thought, Arnold remains a useful figure to think with because, however uneasily, we can recognize ourselves in this poet turned school-inspector and literary critic. Uncomfortable as it is to acknowledge, whenever I publicly defend literary study and the humanities generally, I find myself uttering at least a few claims reminiscent of Arnold’s “Literature and Science” (1885), which argues that vocational preparation alone does not adequately prepare students for life after graduation. I call this situation “uncomfortable,” because although I share Arnold’s belief that a literary curriculum is important, and even his belief that it has transformative potential, I find his underlying rationale unpersuasive. Arnold locates literature’s transformative power in the literary text itself, and not in the much more contingent encounter between a particular subject and a particular text.

In his effort to counter a pluralist vision of competing individual goods, Arnold assures us that the great literary texts will challenge rather than confirm one’s preferences and ideas, ultimately leading one to truth. By insisting on objective literary standards, Arnold wields his authority not only against individuation, but against a more moderate pluralism that acknowledges competing standards of literary excellence and moral goodness. The problem with Arnold’s notion of disinterested literary value has been fully identified: the “great texts” do not provide a “view from nowhere.” They too involve

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3 “Literature and Science,” which incorporates material from some of Arnold’s annual inspector reports, was originally given as a lecture at Cambridge (1882). Then Arnold adapted it as a lecture for audiences in America (1883-84), where it was the most popular of his lectures (10: 464). After it appeared in several magazine versions, Arnold made some changes and published it in the 1885 Discourses in America (10: 465, 546).
stock notions, and they can function in what we would call a “hegemonic,” and Arnold would call an “interested,” fashion. Furthermore, the entire bloody spectacle of history tells us that familiarity with the monuments of Western culture is no guarantee of virtue. Yet if we feel tempted to blame Arnold for overstating poetry’s potential to edify readers, we should remember how frequently twenty-first-century English department chairs, instructors, and other champions of college-level literary study make similar assertions that literary study is a necessary component in an education that aims to improve critical thinking and mold responsible citizens.

At bottom, today’s defenses of the humanities probably contain a certain amount of individual, institutional, and disciplinary self-interest. (“Don’t cut our budget, cut some other department’s!” “I spent eight years training to teach literature, so give me a job!”) As long as we recognize these interests, they do not invalidate our arguments. However, our arguments are also motivated by our own affective investments in literature—our belief that texts should matter to others because they have mattered to us. Most of us would not have pursued literary studies if we did not find reading pleasurable and enriching.

While ideology critique held sway in literary study, this sort of talk about aesthetic pleasure and literature’s transformative potential seemed embarrassingly unprofessional. Fortunately, aesthetic pleasure, intellectual growth, and ethical development are increasingly acceptable topics for critical discussion. They are also strong rationales for a literary curriculum. It would be foolish to claim that reading literature is always transformative. It is fair to claim that it can be. Readers may find pleasure and dignity in seeing struggles like their own represented. They may grow
intellectually when reading about experiences and viewpoints different from theirs. These transformative possibilities depend upon all the subjective and social contingencies that structure any particular encounter between a given subject and a given aesthetic object. I do not ask that we endorse Arnold’s object-centered aesthetics, but we should sympathize with his advocacy for a literary curriculum. In a limited fashion, we can also share his hope that exposure to literature can change readers’ understandings of their social contexts. Importantly, advocacy for a literary curriculum needs to be coupled with critical reflection on what social conditions allowed us to find literature enjoyable and enriching, and how we can maintain or spread those conditions.

The heyday of programmatic ideology critique, with its hermeneutic of suspicion and its automatic distrust of the aesthetic and of any politics short of radicalism, does seem to have passed. We are witnessing growing enthusiasm not just for the return to the aesthetic, but also for reevaluations of liberalism and of the Enlightenment. Rather than mechanically attacking or defending aesthetics or liberalism, the best recent criticism reevaluates them in measured but sympathetic fashion. Given his status as a champion of both transcendent aesthetics and of liberalism “tempered by experience, reflection, and renouncement,” Arnold has received just such sympathetic reevaluation in the last decade.

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4 For a defense of Enlightenment specifically in relation to intellectuals and their social role, see John Michael’s Anxious Intellects: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values (2000). Because he sees postmodernist relativism as hindering effective critique, Michael urges intellectuals to justify their work by appealing to universals associated with the Enlightenment and the West: cosmopolitanism, tolerance, equality, rationality, inquiry, the pursuit of truth with a lower-case “t” (17, 105, 171). However, Michael does not claim that these intellectual values are the sole property of one time or place, and he is not appealing to universals in order to claim that academic work is above or beyond political conflict. Although he thinks we are right to suspect appeals to universals, he also thinks that they are unavoidable and useful. They are necessary to community, politics, and the intellectual’s task of recruiting and persuading. Without appeals to the universal or the transcendent, it is hard to advocate authoritatively for change or to imagine alternatives to the status quo (12, 62). In Michael’s opinion, universals cannot function as answers to political problems, but they are “the terms in which those [political] arguments must be conducted” (17).
(C&A 32). In Regenia Gagnier’s *The Insatiability of Human Wants* (2000), Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* (2001), and David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating Victorians* (2004), Arnold, despite his limitations, comes across as a more interesting and attractive liberal thinker than he appears when cast as either the hero or the villain of the canon wars. My contribution to this rethinking of Arnold’s work consists of situating a familiar observation—that Arnold’s theories are overwhelmingly, though not consistently, objectivist—within the history of taste discourse, individuation, and the ideology of aesthetic autonomy.6

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5 I discuss Anderson at length later in this chapter. Gagnier, attentive to the broad range of approaches that exist under the rubric “aesthetics,” identifies Arnold specifically as practicing an “aesthetics of evaluation” (123). Though Arnold’s emphasis on self-cultivation now seems a naïve approach to social problems, Gagnier does not dismiss Arnold’s fear that self-interest can be as destructive as class interest. Gagnier believes that Arnold’s “fears that the cultivation of the individual under mass market conditions could turn to competitive selfishness and social anomie remain some of the most prescient political and social criticism of modernity. At stake was the future of individualism itself: the bourgeois individual regulating herself for the social good or the self-interested, self-maximizing individual” (107).

Thomas’s *Cultivating Victorians* only discusses Arnold briefly, but Arnold (and Arnoldian humanism) certainly fit under Thomas’s interest in Victorian liberal practices of “cultivation.” Thomas positions himself in relation to the resurgent interest in pursuing aesthetic and formal readings that neither reduce aesthetics to ideology nor indulge in “neoconservative nostalgia for a dubiously conceived golden era of appreciation”(ix). However, he thinks that this project cannot work unless it includes a reassessment of modern liberal culture, especially liberal concepts of agency and the subject: “My linkage of aesthetic culture and liberal culture is premised on a point of methodological critique: to affirm the integrity and the importance of aesthetic experience, we must invoke, at least implicitly, the idea of self-reflecting individuality that informs liberalism’s conceptions of agency and autonomy” (ix). Rather than trying to defend a substantive account of liberal agency as something that can truly exist or be possessed, Thomas proposes that we consider liberal agency as a regulative ideal to be pursued. This regulative ideal includes reflective engagement with multiple viewpoints (40, 47).

For a more skeptical recent treatment of Arnold’s ideology and possible bad faith, see Antony Harrison: *The Cultural Production of Matthew Arnold* (2009). For instance, Harrison draws on Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field to argue that Arnold—an establishment man with significant cultural capital, not to mention institutional connections at Oxford and in government—disingenuously adopts the rhetorical stance of an outsider in order to produce the impression that he is autonomous of cultural and social forces.

6 David Bromwich’s “The Genealogy of Disinterestedness” (1982) is a useful example of criticism that traces how Arnold influentially claims objectivity and disinterestedness as defining characteristics of literary criticism. Bromwich begins by taking William Hazlitt (1778-1830) as an exemplary Romantic critic. Hazlitt wrote on everything from Shakespeare to contemporary politics to popular entertainments. Bromwich uses Hazlitt’s cultural criticism to show that for the Romantics, disinterested criticism did not mean detached criticism. Bromwich recovers the early-nineteenth-century meaning of “disinterestedness,” a meaning that he seems to think is still a valuable attribute for criticism: “Disinterestedness, for the person
In Chapters 1 to 4, my overarching purpose in analyzing eighteenth-century and Ruskinian aesthetics was to excavate some of the complexity of aesthetic discourses that did not subsume the subjective diversity and social complexity of aesthetic experience and evaluation under the rubric of a privileged, autonomous “aesthetic value.” The largely forgotten taste theories I have discussed so far should both defamiliarize and historicize our understanding of the aesthetic, and of ourselves as critics of aesthetic forms. With Arnold, however, we move into more familiar territory. Whether or not one is a Victorianist, most literary critics will recognize Arnold’s catchphrase, “the best which has been thought and said” (C&A 5). As a ubiquitous but not always well-understood figure in our professional imaginary, Arnold is relevant to any analysis of aesthetics and the profession.

When I describe Arnold’s theories as objectivist, I do not mean that Arnold actually attained a disinterested viewpoint. Arnold pursued objectivity on two levels. First, on the metaphysical level, Arnold believed in the existence of absolute truth and universal standards of literary value, even though he usually suggested that human limitation dooms us to pursuing rather than possessing them. He insisted on literary who keeps to it, ought to mean only that his final judgment will be affected by nothing but what he sees, hears, and feels to be the merits of the case. He has no vested interest in what he undertakes to judge, and his thoughts will not be swayed by prejudice, by tormenting fears or habitual associations. Yet he will have felt stirrings within him even as he made his judgment” (65, emphasis in original). Hazlitt expected readers and spectators to be moved by literature and art, and to pursue engagement with artworks that moved them. Though Bromwich does not discuss the sources for Hazlitt’s theory of disinterestedness and the human mind, Hazlitt was working in the tradition of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Adam Smith.

Bromwich argues that Arnold shifts the meaning of disinterestedness to something closer to detachment. One of Bromwich’s major points is that Arnold’s redefinition of disinterestedness requires an untenable metaphysical premise. Arnold and Hazlitt use similar language to discuss how the disinterested viewer looks at the object in itself, but only Arnold suggests that we need to see the object as “it really is.” Arnold’s formula assumes that reality exists and is accessible to those who can put aside their own personalities and desires. As Bromwich plausibly explains, Arnold’s emphasis on knowledge of the real “argues a commitment, for which he did not hold himself answerable, to a full-scale metaphysic of realism” (71). Bromwich seems to suggest that Arnold’s unrecognized “metaphysic of realism” is what drove him to assume the existence of “timeless standards” for poetry (71).
standards in an attempt to counter individuated taste, which bred, as he put it in “Copyright” (1880/82), a “cheap literature, hideous and ignoble of aspect, like the tawdry novels which flare in the book-shelves of our railway stations” (9: 126). Sometimes Arnold even suggested that we can know objective truth, not just approach it more nearly. In his famous dictum from “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864/64) that critics must “see the object as in itself it really is,” Arnold equates criticism with an act that clears away all subjective and social factors shaping perception and thought (3: 258). Such a feat of self-erasure (or, as Arnold saw it, self-improvement) is unlikely. Additionally, accurate perception is a strangely narrow remit for criticism. In the terms of my study, Arnold proposes a model of aesthetic judgment that marginalizes the data provided by affective reactions or social contexts. This model lacks much of the psychological, affective, and social complexity that taste discourse expressed.

Second, on the methodological level, Arnold’s criticism is objective in that it makes claims about the intrinsic characteristics of objects more frequently than it makes

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7 In contrast to my own position, Stefan Collini treats Arnold’s disinterestedness (which he equates with seeing the object as in itself it really is) as a more modest project: an attempt to promote a kind of attitude of openness. Collini does not see Arnold as making an epistemological claim about the possibility of objective knowledge (7).

In an age more pluralistic and relativistic than Arnold’s own, Arnold’s claims to disinterestedness have been the object of justifiable skepticism. One early example is Geoffrey Tillotson’s 1942 Tredgar Memorial Lecture. Though largely sympathetic to Arnold’s goals, Tillotson notes that “disinterestedness” is a misleading slogan for a critic as committed as Arnold was to reforming the English middle class (29-41). See also E.K. Brown’s *Matthew Arnold: A Study in Conflict* (1948). Brown treats disinterestedness as both a critical stance that Arnold sometimes achieves, and as a strategy that he uses to persuade readers to share his “moral or intellectual opinion” (22, see 18-23).

Rather than treating the inconsistency of Arnoldian disinterestedness as an individual shortcoming, David Lloyd and Paul Thomas’s *Culture and the State* (1998) takes it to be symptomatic. Lloyd and Thomas locate Arnold’s work within a larger history of how culture, aesthetics, and education came to play crucial roles in maintaining and reproducing the liberal state. In their analysis, the incoherence of Arnoldian disinterestedness is simply one example of the structural contradictions of bourgeois ideology, an ideology which claims that the state, like the aesthetic sphere, transcends interest and politics. See Lloyd and Thomas’s Chapter 4, especially pages 115-20 and 125-26, for their discussion of Arnold. For an ideological critique of Arnoldian disinterestedness and the role it played in early professional literary criticism, see Chris Baldick’s *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (1983), especially Chapter 2.
claims about the characteristics of subjects, or of subject-object interactions. It may clarify matters if we think of his methodology as “object-centered,” rather than “objective.” As we will see throughout this chapter, Arnold’s criticism can be methodologically object-centered even when it fails to achieve the goal of disinterested objectivity. For instance, Arnold famously evaluates texts based on whether they achieve moral and social effects that he considers desirable—hardly a disinterested evaluation of the textual object in itself. However, his explanation of literature’s moral utility is object-centered: he attributes the text’s moral and social effects primarily to the text’s intrinsic characteristics, not to subjective processes or social contexts. On the few occasions when he does discuss subjective processes, his prose is singularly vague.

In order to trace how Arnold breaks with the tradition that understood the aesthetic in terms of taste, and thus as a realm for desire or pleasure as well as for judgment or evaluation, it is useful to interrogate the metaphor underlying the Arnoldian formula of seeing the object as in itself it really is. The metaphor of vision allows Arnold to emphasize distance and detachment, not immediacy, as defining characteristics of the aesthetic. Taste requires action in a way that vision does not. Furthermore, the distance between the seeing subject and the object seen suggests that the aesthetic object is remote from the subject’s quotidian needs and concerns. Aesthetic distance will prove both enabling and troubling for Arnold, who wants art to connect to ethics and social life.

Ruskin, in his attempt to link aesthetics to ethics, had developed a theory of taste that embodied tensions between subjective experience and external reality, particularity and universality, use and contemplation, interestedness and disinterestedness. The concept of taste was amenable to his thinking precisely because it historically had
incorporated a parallel tension between pleasure and judgment. Furthermore, the rubric of
taste, which combines pleasure with necessary sustenance, was amenable to Ruskin's
sense that art connects to life. This sense of art’s connection to life was both a holdover
from Romanticism and a product of Ruskin’s own theory of art production as linked to,
not separate from, other productive human activities.

Whether consciously or not, Arnold recognized that the tensions and ambiguities
attending the discourse of taste rendered taste an inadequate tool for connecting aesthetics
to his particular brand of liberal ethics. Arnold shares neither Ruskin’s radical Toryism,
nor his idealist socialism. One inevitably feels that to label Ruskin’s political
commitments is to simplify them, but it is reasonably accurate to call Arnold a liberal, or,
as he described himself, “a liberal tempered by experience, reflection, and renouncement,
and . . . above all, a believer in culture” (C&A 32). Later we will examine the
endorsements and reservations that Arnold expresses in this formula. For now, we simply
need to recognize that Arnold accepted much of the Victorian liberal agenda: increased
equality, increased democracy, increased political power for the middle class, all
underpinned by a vision of society as a voluntary association of free individuals. Yet for
Arnold, increased democracy also brings the threat of “anarchy,” the undisciplined
pursuit of self-interest, of individual pleasures, desires, preferences. Consequently, in
order to connect aesthetics to social life and liberal ethics, Arnold relies on a more
imposing, ostensibly more objective vocabulary that tends to marginalize the roles that
subjectivity, particularity, and interestedness play in aesthetic experience.8 Taking vision,

8 From a very different political perspective, the writer and craftsman William Morris (1834-96)
also concluded that “taste” was an unsuitable framework for connecting art to his distinctively socialist
ethics. Morris is one of the most powerful Victorian voices linking art to ethics and social life. His lectures
not taste, as his primary metaphor for aesthetic evaluation provides him with an ostensibly more disinterested aesthetic vocabulary.

Adopting a new sensory metaphor entails developing a new theory of aesthetic experience and evaluation, including a new account of how the perceiving subject and the aesthetic object interact. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Coleridge discusses the relative merits of taste and vision as metaphors for aesthetic experience and evaluation. Despite Coleridge’s insistence in *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry* that the metaphorical connection between physical taste and artistic taste is merely an “accident,” he proposes that the physical sense of taste can clarify matters of poetic taste (5:I: 27). Why do we not treat one of the other senses metaphorically, especially given that beauty is perceived by the eye, not by the tongue (5:I: 28)? Coleridge’s answer is that, unlike the eye and the ear, the senses of taste and touch always combine a sense of our own life with the perception of the outward Object. Taste therefore as opposed to Sight and hearing teaches us to expect in its metaphorical use, not merely a distinct notion of an object in & for itself—for that would be better expressed by Sight—but a coinstantaneous reference of the Object to our own Being. (5:I: 29)

and articles rarely mention taste, which he calls “a somewhat ugly word” (23: 259). Instead, he deploys desire, pleasure, and use as categories of aesthetic reception. In order to connect art to society, Morris expands the definition of art until it encompasses all human production. More specifically, as Morris explains in “The Lesser Arts” (1877), human production becomes art when it is performed with pleasure and when it produces objects that are useful to the mind and/or the body (Morris 22: 23). Despite Morris’s focus on the pleasure of aesthetic response, he also claims, in “Making the Best of It” (c. 1879), that beauty can foster “a wholesome and fruitful discontent” with the status quo (22: 86). In other words, aesthetic response includes a desire that goes beyond the beautiful object itself.

Like his mentor Ruskin, Morris asserts that true desire for beauty must entail a desire for beauty to be accessible to all. In Morris’s view, this desire necessitates a radical reorganization of labor and property ownership, an end to pollution, and a return to simpler lifestyles. In lectures like “The Beauty of Life” (1880) and “The Aims of Art” (1886), Morris argues that artistic degradation (just like environmental degradation) affects everyone, even the privileged few who think that they understand and appreciate art (22: 62, 70; 23: 91). Unlike Ruskin, Morris finds socialism, not taste discourse, to be the most persuasive framework for connecting aesthetic desire to social and ethical desire.
Coleridge’s analysis explains almost perfectly why, despite taste’s long history in art criticism, an aesthetic theory that seeks to be objective will have to abandon this traditional sensory metaphor.

In *Aesthetics* (1835), Hegel provides a similar characterization of vision while articulating a different understanding of the relation between aesthetic object and perceiving subject. His conclusion is the opposite of Coleridge’s, in that Hegel regards vision and hearing as the only senses suitable for art precisely because they do *not* entail “coinstantaneous reference of the Object to our own Being.” According to Hegel, vision is “void of desire,” having “a purely theoretical relation to objects by means of light, this as it were non-material matter” (622). Although there is no evidence that Arnold read Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, Hegel’s characterization of vision can help us understand why sight provides a suitable paradigm for an aesthetic theory that attempts to make claims about objects without reference to the desires and needs of the perceiving subject. Sight is more amenable to a model of aesthetic evaluation that emphasizes intellectual apprehension and predicates such apprehension on the independent existence of subject and object. When taken literally, physical taste breaks down the separation of subject from object. As Hegel points out, taste “dissolves and consumes” the object (621). Furthermore, an object tasted impinges immediately on the subject in a way that an object seen may not.

If we contrast Arnold’s account of critical judgment with Kant’s theory of taste as a non-rational judgment, or even with Ruskin’s theory that a sympathetic heart is necessary for the perception of vital beauty, we can see that Arnold’s theory of aesthetic evaluation, organized by visual metaphors, assigns a remarkably central role to the
faculty of reason.\(^9\) Arnold often, though not exclusively, imagines the aesthetic encounter in terms of its *intellectual* impact.

Throughout his career, Arnold continues to use vision to represent aesthetic evaluation as a matter of disinterestedness, right reason, and critical intelligence. In his classic study *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* (1969), David DeLaura closes his argument that Cardinal John Newman influenced Arnold’s idea of “the capacities of the perfected intelligence” by listing all the similar terms that the two men use to discuss reason or the cultivated mind (DeLaura 79-80). Importantly, DeLaura points out that both men “commonly use metaphors of *light* and *sight* to convey the unfettered scope and penetration characteristic of the finest intelligence” (80). Arnold’s “On the Modern Element in Literature” (1857/69) defends literature’s utility by explaining that it can cater to the needs of a modern world that is uniquely in need of “intellectual deliverance” (1: 19). “Intellectual deliverance” means “comprehension” of “a copious and complex past” and of the present-day “spectacle of a vast multitude of facts” (1: 20). In other words, literature’s utility consists in metaphorically providing “the *true point of view*” from

\(^9\) For a discussion of the intellectual coherence of Arnold’s work, see Joseph Carroll’s *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold* (1982). Carroll argues that Arnold’s entire body of work is motivated by an intellectual quest “to render historical change concordant with rationalist universalism” (74). Carroll’s Arnold cannot accept an empirical, Lockean “mechanical sensationalism” that holds “that all we can or need to know are fragmentary perceptions given by the senses and mechanically arranged by ‘fictional’ abstract generalizations” (74). He seeks, not Romantic infinitude, but intelligible order (75).

Arnold’s solution is to posit a “universal order” that has “a progressive historical character” organized by the ideal of progress, or continual human development (Carroll 81). Development provides a single, objective norm against which all human progress should be measured, but allows for some flexibility in applying this norm to different historical conditions. For instance, Arnold’s theory of Hellenism and Hebraism, formulated in *Culture and Anarchy*, suggests that progress may mean either moral or intellectual cultivation, depending on which attributes the people of a particular historical epoch have neglected.

In Carroll’s framework, it is historical difference in what poets experience and represent, not individual taste or subjectivity, that makes universal aesthetic laws problematic. While Carroll focuses on how Arnold struggles to reconcile historical particularity with “rationalist universalism,” I focus on how Arnold ignores both social/historical contexts and the subjective particularity of aesthetic experiences in favor of universalized aesthetic standards.
which to discern the underlying order of what we see (1: 20, my emphasis). Years after “Modern Element,” Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry” still equates the ability to produce poetry that is an adequate criticism of life with the ability to achieve the correct viewpoint. For instance, he writes that Chaucer’s “superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life. . . . he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view” (9: 174, my emphasis).

Here, in one of his less authoritarian moments, Arnold speaks of the “central” rather than the “true” point of view. However, this central point of view remains uniquely privileged, if not objectively “true.” In formulas like the true “point of view,” the intellectual apprehension of objective truth coincides with the metaphor of vision.

Some of Arnold’s best-known phrases follow this formulation, emphasizing the importance of truth, objectivity, and reason as desiderata in his model of aesthetic evaluation. Famously, in “The Function of Criticism,” Arnold quotes his own definition of criticism, which had appeared in On Translating Homer. According to Arnold, with the unfortunate exception of English literature, modern European literature makes “‘a critical effort; the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is’” (3: 258, my emphasis). Culture and Anarchy (1867-68/69) continues the visual metaphor: culture’s pursuit of perfection involves “trying to see things as they are . . . by all aids of observing, reading, and thinking” (61, my emphasis). According to Arnold, the practical benefit of culture is that rather than taking “doing as one likes” as the highest good, culture makes one aware that “the really blessed thing is to like what right reason ordains, and to follow her authority” (C&A 61). (Arnold habitually attributes agency to a half-personified “culture.”)
Admittedly, another Arnoldian catchphrase—“disinterestedness”—is not specifically visual. However, it is easier to imagine a disinterested gaze than a disinterested taste.

In “The Function of Criticism,” Arnold reconfigures the vocabulary available for talking about the relationship between subject and object in the aesthetic encounter. If Arnold had not been so successful in turning literary aesthetics into a discourse about objective properties without regard for subjective and social processes, it might never have been necessary for critics like Eagleton or Bourdieu to demystify the aesthetic as functioning primarily to inscribe bourgeois ideology and social distinction.

“Function” suggests that great authors can only succeed fully if the historical moment is propitious. Arnold brackets the question of whether visual and performing arts use physical material (stone, paint, bodies) along with mental material (ideas, feelings). He purposely limits himself to literary material when he declares that “the elements with which the creative power works are ideas” (3: 260). Specifically, literature works on current ideas, and thus the quality of literary material depends on the historical moment. The successful or unsuccessful arrangement and interpretation of this material depends on the individual author (3: 260-61). Arnold writes,

creative literary genius does not principally show itself in discovering new ideas, that is rather the business of the philosopher. The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations;—making beautiful works with them, in short. (3: 260-61)

In this scheme, authors have no control over the medium in which they work. They are at the mercy of the historical moment. But if the creative faculty must work with “elements
that are not in its own control,” the critical faculty has greater agency. Those elements or ideas “are more within the control of the critical power” (3: 261). The critical faculty, attempting to see the object as in itself it really is, leads to a truer (if not absolutely true) “order of ideas” on which the creative faculty can work fruitfully (3: 261).

Where Ruskin treated affective engagement with art as an ethical resource, “Function” stresses intellectual and rational engagement with art as ethical resources. Here, Arnold’s method for connecting literature to life involves creating an overarching intellectual framework—disinterested criticism—that operates to uncover truth in all fields, from morals to politics. Elsewhere Arnold accedes that, valuable as “right reason” is, rational persuasion alone cannot persuade the vast majority of humans to recognize intellectual and moral truths. Texts like “The Study of Poetry,” *Literature and Dogma* (1873), and “Literature and Science,” which are concerned with literature’s moral utility, suggest that art can evoke emotion which then beneficially *attaches* people to pre-existing “ideas” and universal standards, whether in aesthetics or morals. Crucially, Arnold assigns emotional reactions no role in *generating* ideas, standards, or values. As we will see when I discuss Arnold’s Homer lectures, even when Arnold introduces the possibility that emotional reactions inform aesthetic evaluations, he quickly reaffirms that there is a single, objective standard of literary value. Proper literary judgment consists of accurately applying this standard, not of using subjective reactions as data for generating specific judgments or general standards.

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10 DeLaura argues that Arnold derives “the sharp discrimination of moral from intellectual truth” from Cardinal John Newman (28). Arnold’s theory of Hellenism and Hebraism then elaborates on the difference between intellectual truth/knowing and moral truth/action. Interestingly, both Newman and Arnold accept the idea that humans are not rational, and that the average person will not be convinced by logical arguments. Instead, appeals to emotion and imagination are also necessary (DeLaura 32-33). Arnold and Newman also thought of knowledge as needing to be synthesized through connection to an emotional and moral center (DeLaura 62-64).
In Arnold’s objective model, aesthetic judgment no longer appears, as it did for Kant, to be a special kind of judgment where individual subjective reactions are in tension with abstract universals or claims about reality. As we saw in Chapter 2, Kant described taste as a judgment where individual cases cannot be subsumed to universal standards. Arnold seems more comfortable equating aesthetic evaluation with the application of principles. According to Arnold, literary evaluation involves “an enunciation and detailed application of principles” in order to accomplish the goal “of establishing an author’s place in literature, and his relation to a central standard” (3: 283). However, Arnold suggests that the critic’s most important function is not judgment, but the discovery of new, true knowledge.11

In The Powers of Distance, Anderson helpfully points out that Arnold’s model of disinterested criticism—a model that, I have been arguing, replaces the metaphor of taste with the metaphor of vision—actually conflates a number of forms of detachment and distancing that other thinkers, notably Kant, differentiate among (Anderson 92). When Arnold, in Culture and Anarchy, suggests that “the best which has been thought and said” will release “a stream of fresh and free thought,” he combines “an appeal to the objective value of knowledge” (i.e. “the best”) with “an appeal to reason’s interrogation of custom”

11 In “Function,” Arnold writes,

Again, judging is often spoken of as the critic’s one business, and so in some sense it is; but the judgment which almost insensibly forms itself in a fair and clear mind, along with fresh knowledge, is the valuable one; and thus knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic’s great concern for himself. . . . Sometimes, no doubt, for the sake of establishing an author’s place in literature, and his relation to a central standard (and if this is not done, how are we to get at our best in the world?) criticism may have to deal with a subject-matter so familiar that fresh knowledge is out of the question, and then it must be all judgment; an enunciation and detailed application of principles. . . . Still, under all circumstances, this mere judgment and application of principles is, in itself, not the most satisfactory work to the critic; like mathematics, it is tautological, and cannot well give us, like fresh learning, the sense of creative activity. (3: 283, emphasis in original)
and with an image of a flowing stream that “obliquely evokes aesthetic free play” (Anderson 93). Though Arnold subsumes them both under the sign of distance and disinterestedness, objective realism (seeing the object as it really is) is different from a free and flexible play of the mind over received ideas (a freedom guaranteed for Arnold by noninstrumentality and removal from action).

Anderson’s study can also help us appreciate why Arnold found the metaphor of vision particularly congenial. Compared to taste, the metaphor of vision assimilates aesthetic evaluation more closely to questions of detachment that were culturally central for Victorians. By locating Arnold’s disinterested criticism against a backdrop of Victorian practices of detachment, Anderson shows that Arnold’s project is not unique. *The Powers of Distance* argues that specifically modern forms of detachment, ranging from scientific objectivity to cosmopolitanism to Bildung, were crucial Victorian concerns.12

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12 Anderson’s dual goal is to reclaim detachment as a worthwhile project, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of how Victorians thought about detachment. She argues that Victorians, including Arnold, were deeply ambivalent about detachment: disenchantment, alienation, and rootlessness were the possible dark side of distanced, objective knowledge (Anderson 4, 96). Anderson lists some of the ambiguities surrounding Victorian forms of detachment:

There are procedural and educational questions about how ideal forms of detachment might best be cultivated; there are philosophical questions about whether such procedures produce reliable forms of knowledge or valuable forms of art; there are psychological and cultural questions about whether individuals are even capable of transcending their interests, their pasts, and their racial heritage; and there are moral and political questions about whether forms of cultivated detachment uniformly promote the well-being or overall progress of individuals, communities, or nations. (Anderson 4-5)

Ultimately, Anderson argues that Victorian projects of cultivated detachment were and are ethically or politically worthwhile. In doing so, she goes against the critiques of Enlightenment, rationality, and detachment that were widespread in literary and cultural studies when she was writing (Anderson 5). While agreeing with Thomas Nagel that objective knowledge is illusory and “the view from nowhere” is actually always situated, Anderson argues that the *aspiration* toward detachment can be progressive (Anderson 5-6). In this vein, even though she critiques Arnold’s universalizing and finds his model of disinterestedness implausible, she is sympathetic to his goals.
As a metaphor for aesthetic experience, vision was more amenable to this concern with detachment than taste was. For my purposes, what matters is that Arnold is promoting a model of aesthetic evaluation that yokes reflective distance to objectivity, and in doing so marginalizes a history of treating taste as a special kind of judgment that is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective. As the following discussion will make clear, when Arnold does attempt to address art’s emotional impact, his object-centered theory puts him in a position where he must classify affective responses to literature using only two categories: valid emotions, and invalid ones. One sees the object clearly and thus feels correctly, or one does not.

Arnold’s substitution of vision for taste as an organizing metaphor expresses and solidifies a shift in the roles of subject and object in aesthetic judgment. Simply ignoring specific aesthetic experiences is another way Arnold privileges the generalized aesthetic object, and its supposedly timeless qualities, at the expense of the perceiving subject. Especially if we contrast Arnold’s criticism with Ruskin’s, it becomes apparent how infrequently Arnold attempts to describe or recreate encounters with specific aesthetic objects. Ruskin is famous for his word pictures, his detailed descriptions that attempt to recreate the affective experience of seeing a Turner painting, an Alpine landscape, or even a stucco villa. In contrast, Arnold’s criticism rarely dwells on emotional reactions to particular poems. His most famous critical formulations tend to remain at the level of generality.

13 One exception is Arnold’s essay “Joubert” (1864/65). Arnold enthusiastically agrees with Joubert’s account of the pleasures of reading Virgil: “And, indeed, there is something supreme in an elegance which exercises such a fascination as Virgil’s does; which makes one return to his poems again and again, long after one thinks one has done with them; which makes them one of those books that, to use Joubert’s words, ‘lure the reader back to them, as the proverb says good wine lures back the wine-bibber.’”
When Arnold does discuss specific texts or passages, he employs a second strategy for making evaluation seem objective. He tends to choose texts that come with pre-fabricated criteria for judgment: translations that should be judged against the original, for instance. In this way, he manages to introduce but then contain the question of how subjective reactions inform aesthetic judgments. As one example, *On Translating Homer* (1860-61/61), originally delivered as a lecture series at Oxford, is a fascinating verbal dance in which Arnold suggests that literature should produce an emotional response but simultaneously labors to delimit the role that emotional response can play in literary judgment.

Arnold’s lectures condemn a recent edition of Homer by John Newman’s brother, F.W. Newman. Specifically, Arnold criticizes Newman’s approach to historical fidelity. He characterizes Newman as thinking that his translation should affect Victorian English people the same way that the original affected the ancient Greeks. Arnold makes the reasonable point that we cannot know what Homer thought or how his verse affected his original hearers (1: 98-99). Intriguingly, Arnold does agree that we can and should evaluate a translation of Homer on the basis of how it makes readers feel. However, not just any reader’s reaction will do. We can evaluate a Homeric translation only on the basis of how it affects a limited group of qualified judges:

> These are scholars; who possess, at the same time with knowledge of Greek, adequate poetical taste and feeling. No translation will seem to them of much worth compared with the original; but they alone can say whether the translation produces more or less the same effect upon them as the original. They are the only competent tribunal in this matter: the Greeks are dead; the unlearned Englishman has not the data for judging; and no man can safely confide in his own single judgment of his own

(3: 204, emphasis in original). Although he agrees with Joubert’s high praise for Virgil, the Frenchman’s vocabulary of aesthetic temptation and intoxication is atypical for Arnold.
work. Let not the translator, then, trust to his notions of what the ancient Greeks would have thought of him; he will lose himself in the vague. Let him not trust to what the ordinary English reader thinks of him; he will be taking the blind for his guide. Let him not trust to his own judgment of his own work; he may be misled by individual caprices. Let him ask how his work affects those who both know Greek and can appreciate poetry; whether to read it gives the Provost of Eton, or Professor Thompson at Cambridge, or Professor Jowett here in Oxford, at all the same feeling which to read the original gives them. (1: 99)

In the second lecture, Arnold returns to this point: “the translator of Homer ought steadily to keep in mind where lies the real test of the success of his translation, what judges he is to try to satisfy. He is to try to satisfy scholars, because scholars alone have the means of really judging him” (1: 117, emphasis in original). Importantly, the scholar must have “poetical feeling” (1: 117). His judgment will be “worthless” if he is a pedant (1: 117).

We may hear an echo of Hume’s observation that the standard of taste is set by qualified judges. But where Hume admits that identifying qualified judges is an “embarrassing” problem,14 Arnold confidently identifies a list of men who have the requisite “knowledge” and “taste.”15 On one hand, Arnold’s assumption that the only

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14 Having stated that qualified judges exist, Hume asks, “But where are such critics to be found? By what marks are they to be known? How distinguish them from pretenders? These questions are embarrassing . . .” (17). Rather than identifying qualified judges, Hume more or less concludes that he has done his job if he has convinced his readers that true standards and judges exist, and that taste is not an entirely relative matter of sentiment (18).

15 In “Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It” (1971), Wendell V. Harris calls attention to the way that Arnold’s Homer lectures discuss reader reactions. However, Harris is primarily interested in pursuing the metaphysical implications of this observation. In a text that states that the point of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is, Arnold is asking his audience to judge Homeric translations on the basis of the impressions they make on readers (Harris 736). For Harris, this contradiction—which Arnold himself does not acknowledge—opens the door for Pater’s and Wilde’s more relativist metaphysics. That is, Arnold’s emphasis on knowing the object as in itself it really is proves untenable, and his suggestion that readers’ impressions are relevant to aesthetic judgments opens the door for the belief that we cannot know anything beyond our own impressions (Harris 733-35, 738-39).

In terms of my project, aesthetic discourse is interesting precisely because it can accommodate both claims about objects and claims about subjective impressions. The claim, “This translation of Homer is beautiful,” does not necessarily imply a wholesale endorsement of objectivist metaphysics. Nor must the statement, “This translation of Homer pleases me,” signify that the speaker considers her subjectivity to be an insurmountable barrier between herself and reality. Either statement may be a bid for social
qualified judges are men affiliated with England’s most prominent educational institutions is evidence of cultural capital at work. On the other, knowledge of Greek is a reasonable requirement when we seek an evaluation of Homeric translation. What is telling is the way that the Greek requirement allows Arnold to introduce, but circumscribe, the role that subjectivity plays in aesthetic evaluation.

Arnold’s attack provoked an irritated response from Newman. Both Newman and Arnold seem to accept that a translation should be judged by the pleasure or emotion it evokes, but they disagree about whose emotion is the deciding factor. While admitting that “Scholars are the tribunal of Erudition,” Newman contends, “of Taste the educated but unlearned public is the only rightful judge” (315). He asserts that his translation has pleased scholars, readers of average education, and even the uneducated (315-16, 322). Arnold objects to the idea that there could be “two real tribunals in this matter” of literary judgment (1: 117). People with this incorrect view “speak as if the scholar’s judgment was one thing, and the general public’s judgment another; both with their shortcomings, both with their liability to error; but both to be regarded by the translator” (1: 117).

Arnold argues that there is only one valid judgment, because “the translator is to reproduce Homer, and the scholar alone has the means of knowing that Homer. . . . He knows him but imperfectly, for he is separated from him by time, race, and language; but he alone knows him at all” (1: 117). In contrast, the uninformed public “can only like or recognize—an attempt to get others to notice certain qualities in the Homeric translation, and potentially to receive pleasure from those qualities.

Unlike Harris’s, my reading of On Translating Homer draws out Arnold’s rhetorical strategies for simultaneously introducing and delimiting the role that subjectivity plays in producing aesthetic judgments. It is not my goal to demonstrate that Arnold unwittingly held to either an objectivist or a relativist metaphysical system. I am more interested in how social factors, particularly cultural capital, affect Arnold’s theory regarding which individuals are qualified to judge Homeric translations.
dislike Chapman’s version, or Pope’s, or Mr. Newman’s, but cannot judge them” (1: 118, emphasis in original).

Limiting the pool of qualified judges is not the only way that Arnold circumscribes subjectivity’s role in literary judgment. He is evidently unwilling to take subjective reactions alone as evidence of literary merit even when they are the subjective reactions of highly educated, poetically sensitive men. Arnold is not asking whether Benjamin Jowett, fellow and later master at Oxford’s Balliol College, enjoys Newman’s translation. Arnold asks whether reading Newman’s translation makes Jowett feel the same way that he feels when reading Homer in ancient Greek. Judging a translation on its fidelity to the subjective effects created by Homer provides Arnold with a standard against which to judge Newman’s work. To summarize Arnold’s position: a successful translation of Homer will produce a pleasurable affective response in qualified readers, but the subjectivity of this measure does not mean that there is more than one valid judgment. Arnold appeals to the idea that there is only one group of qualified judges, and he assumes that their subjective responses will be homogenous. He does not ask what it might mean for literary evaluation if Professor Jowett, the Provost of Eton, and Professor Thompson at Cambridge all felt differently about a given text.

Arnold’s attitude toward biblical translation parallels his attitude toward Homeric translation. Though a full discussion of Arnold’s biblical criticism is beyond the scope of my argument, it is worth noting that in Isaiah of Jerusalem (1883), Arnold declares that editors and translators should help readers to “enjoy” Isaiah as well as improve their “understanding” of scripture (10: 122). However, readerly enjoyment alone is not an adequate marker of good translation and editing. Biblical editions should also be judged,
not precisely against the original, but against “tradition” (10: 122-23). While On
Translating Homer confidently identified an elite group of judges, the issue of judging
scripture translations is complicated by the fact that Arnold wants the bible to be
accessible, that is, comprehensible and enjoyable, to all readers.16

Arnold’s preface to his classicizing verse drama Merope (1858) provides a closer
analogue to the position articulated in his Homer lectures. Recognizing that he could not
transpose Greek meters into English, Arnold wrote Merope using English rhythms that
“produced on my own feeling a similar impression to that produced on it by the rhythms
of Greek choric poetry” (1: 62-63). Acknowledging the riskiness of this strategy, he
argues that both Pope and Dryden recognized “that there are no existing English
measures which produce the same effect on the ear, and therefore on the mind, as that
produced by many measures indispensable to the nature of Greek lyric poetry.” Thus
they, like Arnold himself, were “driven to invent new measures” (1: 63). Arnold quotes a
passage from Pope’s “Ode on St. Cecilia’s Day” that he considers “Horrible! yet how
dire must have been the necessity, how strong the feeling of the inadequacy of existing

16 In a report to his superiors at the education ministry, Arnold noted that English schools
neglected Bible knowledge because it was not measured by the examinations that, under the government’s
Revised Code, determined school funding. He recommended that students learn Bible history and
memorize excerpts like the best psalms:

Some will say that what we propose is but a small use to put the Bible to; yet it is that on
which all higher use of the Bible is to be built, and its adoption is the only chance for
saving the one elevating and inspiring element in the scanty instruction of our primary
schools from being sacrificed to a politico-religious difficulty. There was no Greek
school in which Homer was not read; cannot our popular schools, with their narrow range
and their jejune alimentation in secular literature, do as much for the Bible as the Greek
schools did for Homer? (1869 Report)

Arnold argued that making the Bible standard reading would help students learn to read and prepare them
to read the Bible more deeply, without favoring any particular Christian sect. Essentially, he proposed
treating the Bible as national literature. To this end, his edition of Isaiah was originally intended as a school
textbook, having previously appeared in shorter form as A Bible-Reading for Schools (1872) and Isaiah XL-
LXVI (1875).
metres to produce effects demanded, which could drive a man of Pope’s taste to such prodigies of invention!” (1: 63-64). Again, Arnold introduces the idea that a successful poem (whether a translation from Greek or, as in the case of Meropen, an original but classicizing English drama) produces subjective reactions similar to those provoked by the greatest ancient Greek poetry. Intriguingly, though the Homer lectures admonish the translator not to trust his own judgment for fear of being “misled by individual caprices,” the Meropen preface treats Arnold’s own affective response as adequate grounds on which to defend his verse drama.

On Translating Homer allows subjectivity to play a limited role in the evaluation of Greek translations, but the ancient Greek originals provide a standard against which to judge all modern translations. The Preface to Meropen takes subjective reactions, specifically, Arnold’s pleasure in his own verse, as the basis for aesthetic evaluation. Yet it also suggests that not only translations, but even original English poetry, should be judged against Greek models. This position is in keeping with Arnold’s well-known 1853 Preface, which urged poets to imitate classical poetry in order to produce works of lasting, universal value. In both cases, Arnold introduces the idea that good poetry will provide affective pleasure, but insists that the importance of reader reactions does not negate the existence of a universally valid judgment of the poem in question. He presses ancient Greek models into service as his standard. But how should we judge modern poetry that neither translates nor attempts to emulate classical subject matter or metrical effects?

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17 Many of Arnold’s contemporaries disagreed that poets should avoid distinctively modern subject matter, among them Arnold’s friend Arthur Hugh Clough. For a discussion of Arnold’s 1853 Preface and Clough’s negative review of Arnold’s classicizing poetry, see pages 29-34 in Isobel Armstrong’s Victorian Scrutinies (1972).
The frequently anthologized essay “The Study of Poetry” is Arnold’s most notorious answer to these questions—notorious because he suggests that timeless standards determine the canon. “The Study of Poetry” proposes that we can apply a uniform scale of literary value and arrive at the “real estimate” of any given poem simply by comparing it to a collection of “touchstones,” meaning great lines that Arnold selected from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton (9: 168-70). Arnold wrote “The Study of Poetry” as the general introduction to a groundbreaking anthology, The English Poets (3 vols, 1880-83), which was edited by his niece’s husband, T.H. Ward. Ward was one of the first anthologists to recruit expert editors who selected poems and wrote introductions on each poet, all with the goal of providing a representative survey of English verse.

Earlier British poetry collections were less systematic. The ten-volume Works of the English Poets (1779-81), for instance, though it had a chronological format and included biographical prefaces by Samuel Johnson, was produced by a consortium of printers and booksellers whose principles of inclusion and exclusion were unclear. Copyright issues certainly played a role, which perhaps explains the high proportion of very minor poets included (Lonsdale 8-10). In the preface to The English Poets, Ward wrote that “The history of English poetry is so wide, its various sections and stages have become the objects of so special a study, that a book which aims at selecting the best from the whole field and pronouncing its judgments with some degree of authority, must not be the work of one author, but of many” (v). According to Ward’s preface, the poems were “chosen and judged by those whose tastes and studies specially qualify them for the several tasks they have undertaken” (vi). The qualifications that Ward attributes to his contributors were the same ones Arnold listed in his Homer lectures.
Jonah Siegel helpfully compares *The English Poets* to Francis T. Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1861) in order to show how Ward’s chronological, author-centered, multi-editor approach differs from that of less systematic miscellanies. Palgrave’s organization was neither chronological nor author-centered. He did divide English verse into historical periods, but poems within each period were arranged, to use Palgrave’s words, “in gradations of feeling or subject” (viii). By putting the author’s name after each poem, Palgrave further emphasized themes rather than narratives of historical or authorial development (Siegel 216). Explaining that his organization scheme was “the most poetically-effective,” Palgrave wrote, “A rigidly chronological sequence, however, rather fits a collection aiming at instruction than at pleasure, and the wisdom which comes through pleasure” (vii, my emphasis). Palgrave’s editorial practice is in keeping with the traditional definition of an anthology as a bouquet of flowers to be enjoyed. In contrast, rather than offering a tasteful selection, Ward tries to provide a comprehensive canon of English verse. Though many collections of English poetry preceded it, Ward’s anthology is a turning point, the first recognizable ancestor of today’s academic anthologies (McKelvy 546).

Given Arnold’s reputation as a canon-maker, this authoritative, three-volume anthology might seem like a project after his own heart. Indeed, the touchstone method is often interpreted as a sign of a naïve or obnoxious confidence in his cultural authority and his ability to apply timeless standards of literary greatness. However, Siegel and Darrell Mansell both interpret the touchstone method as a sign of anxiety about whether “true” literary evaluation can triumph over individual preference. Both critics note that the chronological, multi-editor anthology format itself threatens to introduce evaluations
based on historical and personal criteria (Siegel 218, 220-21; Mansell 283-84). As Siegel puts it, “the modern anthology is a concrete form of the challenge of modernity”—a capitalist, democratic, pluralist modernity marked by “[t]he proliferation of aesthetic objects without careful guidance” (Siegel 228, 227). Arnold’s “The Study of Poetry” does in fact express concern that “in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it” (9: 163). Arnold goes on to distinguish among three kinds of literary judgment: the historical (based on how important a poet is to the development of poetry), the personal (based on purely idiosyncratic factors), and the “real estimate” (9: 163).

The historical and personal judgments are “fallacies” (9: 164). As Mansell points out, Arnold’s worry that readers might make the “historic estimate” rather than the “real estimate” of poetry may have been provoked partly by his awareness that the poets would be presented in chronological order, and that the biographical introductions might position the poems within a story of development (283). His anxiety about the fallacious “personal estimate” may have been aggravated by the fact that contributors, who presumably were particularly fond of their respective poets, might make idiosyncratic selections for the anthology. In an 1877 review of Stopford Brooke’s *A Primer of English Literature*, Arnold had stated that the anthologist “should have one scale and should keep to it” (Arnold 8: 238). Improving grade-school primers was one of Arnold’s favored educational causes, and he praised Brooke’s efforts. Arnold added that the primer editor “should avoid, in his judgments, even the least appearance of what is arbitrary, personal, fantastic” (8: 238). Primers were aimed at children without much access to literature.
Similarly, *The English Poets*, though originally meant for adults unfamiliar with poetry, was also used in schools. Arnold’s concerns about promulgating “one scale” were probably particularly acute because *The English Poets* was intended for readers who were not already familiar with high literary standards (i.e. with Homer, Milton, and company) (Mansell 282-83).

Arnold could not ensure that all English citizens received a classical education, but his touchstone method attempts to provide untutored readers with a substitute toolbox for evaluating poetry (9: 168-70). For my purposes, what is important about “The Study of Poetry” is that its strategy for containing subjective pleasure and promoting a single scale of value resembles the strategy Arnold used in his Homer lectures, when he was addressing a classically educated audience. The touchstones are analogous to Homer’s ancient Greek. Both are supposed by Arnold to provide a quasi-objective standard that allows for subjective pleasure but delimits the role it can play in correct evaluation. The difference is that *The English Poets* is not an anthology of translations. It may seem reasonable to compare how Newman’s translation makes us feel to how Homer’s original makes us feel. Though separated by time and culture, the later text does attempt to approximate the earlier. However, the rationale for comparing Thomas Gray or John Keats to Homer or Dante in order to rank their greatness is much less persuasive. Such transcultural and transhistorical comparisons only make sense if one adheres to the belief that there is a single standard for “the really excellent, the truly classic” (9: 166).

**Emotion, Religion, and Poetry**

My analysis of *On Translating Homer* and “The Study of Poetry,” like my analysis of how Arnold uses the metaphor of vision, has elucidated some of the strategies
that Arnold uses to delimit the role that subjective perceptions play in aesthetic perception and evaluation. However, there are occasions when Arnold grants subjectivity a greater role in judgment. There are even occasions when he takes a less absolutist stance toward truth that seems at odds with his pursuit of “the really excellent, the truly classic.” Perhaps surprisingly, they occur when Arnold compares poetry’s moral utility to Christianity’s. Compared to his writings on culture and literature, Arnold’s writings on religion display a more pluralistic notion of truth, and a greater appreciation for the role that emotion plays in human understandings of truth. Arnold consistently suggests not precisely that poetry is a better version of religion, but that poetry can take over religion’s morally improving and socially unifying functions without the inconveniences of sectarianism, biblical literalism, and embarrassing supernaturalism.18

In texts from *Literature and Dogma* to “The Study of Poetry,” Arnold foregrounds emotion, not objective standards, whenever he argues that literature’s moral utility rivals that of religion. Arnold defines religion not as a body of dogmas, but as “*morality touched by emotion*” (6: 176, emphasis in original). In “Marcus Aurelius” (1863/65), which discusses the relative merits of Stoic philosophy and Christianity, Arnold suggests that emotion is not strictly necessary to morality. Moral laws and duties do exist apart from one’s feelings about them. However, only a few exemplary “sages,” like the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, have the ability to adhere to a moral code regardless of whether doing so provides any emotional payoff (3: 134). The vast majority of people need “a joyful and bounding emotion” to sustain their adherence to moral laws and duties.

18 See Guillory for a subtle reading of how Arnold attempts to instill a socially unifying literary sensibility that, unlike religion, has no specific ideological content (135-38). See also Eagleton’s “*Sweetness and Light for All: Matthew Arnold and the Search for a Common Moral Ground to Replace Religion*” (2000).
According to Arnold, Christianity historically excelled at creating emotional attachment to morality (3: 137-38). Now, he believed, modern doubts were weakening Christianity. Society needed a new force for creating emotional attachment to the moral laws Christianity promulgated. Opening “The Study of Poetry,” Arnold approvingly quotes an earlier essay that contrasted poetry with Christian supernaturalism:

There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. (9: 161, emphasis in original)

In this passage, poetry and religion have identical functions. They merely differ in their methods for evoking moral emotion, whatever that might be. Of the two, poetry has the advantage of not making literal truth claims that could be undermined by scientific discoveries or critical biblical scholarship. The “ideas” poetry promulgates are presumably Judeo-Christian concepts or attitudes. Compared to the concrete details of biblical narratives about manna appearing in the desert or water turning to wine, these “ideas” remain conveniently vague, and thus impossible to refute.

How, precisely, does poetry create emotional attachment to these moral ideas? As we have seen, Arnold’s aesthetic theories recognize but carefully circumscribe the role played by subjectivity and emotion in literary evaluation. Consequently, when he wants to theorize art’s moral effects—effects that he claims hinge on emotional processes—he has very little vocabulary with which to represent and analyze the particularity of affective engagement with literature. In “Literature and Science,” for instance, the
confidence of Arnold’s claims for literature’s emotional-moral utility is matched only by their vagueness. In this late lecture on humanistic education, he insists that literature is uniquely able to cater to the range of human needs: intellectual, aesthetic, social, and moral. By evoking emotion, literature connects knowledge to both one’s “sense for conduct” and one’s “sense for beauty” (10: 65). Science, Arnold argues, provides knowledge and caters to the intellect, but cannot provide this unifying function. Consequently, for most students, a literary curriculum “will call out their being at more points” (10: 70). Precisely how does literature exercise its power over the emotions “so as to exert an influence upon man’s sense for conduct, his sense for beauty” (10: 67)? Arnold is unperturbed by this question. “I cannot tell, and I am not much concerned to know; the important thing is that it does arise, and that we can profit by it,” he writes (10: 68). As we will see shortly, Culture and Anarchy likewise insists that culture is socially and morally beneficial without specifying any mechanism that guarantees these benefits. Even if he did specify a mechanism, it seems unlikely that Arnold (or, for that matter, anyone else) could prove that reading books or looking at paintings reliably produces good citizens.

At the end of “Literature and Science,” Arnold’s reiterates his belief that classical literature’s greatness guarantees it a place in school curricula:

As before, it is not on any weak pleadings of my own that I rely for convincing the gainsayers; it is on the constitution of human nature itself, and on the instinct of self-preservation in humanity. The instinct for beauty is set in human nature, as surely as the instinct for knowledge is set there, or the instinct for conduct. If the instinct for beauty is served by Greek literature and art as it is served by no other literature and art, we may trust to the instinct for self-preservation in humanity for keeping Greek as part of our culture. (10: 70-71)
Essentially, Arnold asserts that even if a scientific curriculum temporarily eclipses a literary one, “the nature of things” guarantees that people will always find literature, especially the ancient classics, relevant (10: 72). Time will automatically vindicate the lasting, universal value of literature. Emotional reactions to classical literature are morally improving not because the classics can provoke growth or change in the subject, but because the classics have particular characteristics that reliably connect an “instinct for beauty” to “an instinct for conduct.” Arnold here assumes not only that emotional reactions to art are homogenous, but that there is a universal human nature equipped with discrete senses for beauty, knowledge, and conduct. Even as Arnold assigns emotion a pivotal though ill-defined role in connecting aesthetics to ethics, he produces a moral-aesthetic theory that centers on literature’s intrinsic properties.

One of the very few places where Arnold acknowledges and attempts to grapple with the diverse array of subjective reactions that poetry can evoke is in his private correspondence. Written when Arnold was a young man in the 1840s and 50s, his letters to friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough show a side of Arnold that will surprise readers who are only familiar with his statements that literature’s purpose is the “criticism of life,” and thus a work’s greatness “depends upon its inherent truth” (“Joubert,” 3: 209, emphasis in original). These letters suggest that good poetry must provide pleasure. At the same time, they show the young Arnold’s recognition that such poetic pleasures do not necessarily have ethical benefits.

In early February 1849, Arnold admonished Clough, “You succeed best you see, in fact, in the hymn, where man, his deepest personal feelings being in play, finds poetical expression as man only, not as artist:—but consider whether you attain the
beautiful, & whether your product gives *pleasure*, not excites curiosity & reflexion”

(*Letters* 1: 131, emphasis in original). Interestingly, however, Arnold did not wish to judge his own poetry merely on whether his friends enjoyed it. In 1853, when Clough praised Arnold’s “The Scholar-Gipsy,” Arnold replied,

I am glad you like the Gipsy Scholar—but what does it *do* for you? Homer *animates*—Shakespeare *animates*—in its poor way I think [Arnold’s own] Sohrab & Rustum *animates*—the Gipsy Scholar at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But this is not what we want.

The complaining millions of men
Darken in labour and pain—[from Arnold’s “The Youth of Nature”]

what they want is something to *animate* and *ennoble* them—not merely to add zest to their melancholy or grace to their dreams.—I believe a feeling of this kind is the basis of my nature—and of my poetics. (*Letters* 1: 282, emphasis in original)

This letter displays Arnold’s familiar concern with culture’s moral benefits—a concern that, as we saw, appears in his later writings as a confident but hazy belief in poetry’s moral efficacy. Arnold’s question to Clough shows us a poet who wants his work to have moral and social effects, but who realizes that such effects are not automatically produced by the nature of poetry, or even by emotional engagement with poetry. Enjoying a pleasing melancholy, he suggests, does not make the world a better place. Arnold strives to connect his art to social life, realizing that the task requires conscious effort, that poetry can evoke a variety of emotional responses, and that his success is therefore contingent.

There is a continuity between Arnold’s question “what does it *do* for you?” and later texts like “Literature and Science” or *Culture and Anarchy*. Both show Arnold’s moralism, his tendency to evaluate texts in terms of their ethical effects. However, there
is a vast difference between them. The letter raises the possibility that Ruskin spent his life trying to disprove: the possible disjunction between aesthetic pleasure and moral improvement. Arnold’s mature criticism rarely expresses this anxiety, instead proclaiming that literature is fully equipped to replace Christianity’s outworn supernaturalism as a source of moral improvement and social cohesion.

What enables Arnold to move from the anxious question, “what does it do for you?” to these confident assertions of literature’s moral utility? In addition to the fact that the letter addresses a private audience and precedes “Literature and Science” by some thirty years, we may note that his letter and his lecture discuss literature’s moral utility in two different registers. Arnold’s letter to Clough describes the effects of a specific poem, and finds the poem wanting because it fails “to animate and ennoble” readers. In contrast, the lecture is about the moral efficacy of literature in the abstract. Arnold endows abstractions like “poetry” and “culture” with intrinsic excellence and moral efficacy. The frequency with which Arnold attributes agency to “culture” and “poetry” attests to their talismanic character: “culture . . . seeks to do away with classes”; “poetry” will “interpret life for us” (C&A 52, 9: 161). In such uses, “culture” and “poetry” appear as powerful, half-personified forces that transcend anything so contingent as a specific person reading a certain poem in a particular place and time. Via abstraction, Arnold insulates literature’s moral utility from contrary evidence that might be offered by the contingent outcome of any specific aesthetic encounter. To claim that a specific work, whether “Sohrab and Rustum” or even Paradise Lost, is intrinsically excellent and morally edifying is to leave oneself vulnerable to contrary evidence—specifically, to the possibility that many readers slog through Paradise Lost without pleasure or moral
improvement. Relying on abstraction seems to defuse this threat. But there is no “poetry” apart from innumerable individual encounters with specific poems, no “criticism” apart from specific attempts at understanding and evaluation. The attitude expressed in the letter is more realistic than that expressed in the lecture. Reading a poem may be edifying (imagining for a moment that there is a consensus on what constitutes edification!), but an edifying outcome is not guaranteed. In comparison to the doubt expressed in the letter, Arnold’s blithe assertion that poetry can save us is unpersuasive. Paradoxically, Arnold’s recognition of art’s affective power may be what drove him to pursue an objective standard of “the really excellent, the truly classic.” If art can evoke emotional response—we might say, if art has such potential for affective persuasion—then it is crucial that we have standards ensuring that audiences become attached to good “ideas,” and not to bad ones.

**Individuation, Liberal Individualism, and the Social Stakes of Taste**

It is so easy to feel pride and satisfaction in one’s own things, so hard to make sure that one is right in feeling it! We have a great empire. But so had Nebuchadnezzar.

—Arnold (9: 38)

. . . turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.

—Arnold (C&A 5)

In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that, in his attempts to connect aesthetics to ethics, Arnold relies on the objective-sounding category of “culture” rather than on the older discourse of taste because he fears the untrammeled expression of individual preference (what I call individuation, and what Arnold sometimes calls “anarchy”) while
at the same time, he sees individuals and not pre-existing relationships as the basic units of society. By re-theorizing the relationship between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, Arnold re-theorizes the social stakes of differentiated taste. His object-centered aesthetic theory lacks the social traction that earlier writers like Hume and Ruskin achieved when they interpreted taste differences as signs of socioeconomic factors, not just personal character.

We saw in Chapter 2 that accounting for differences in taste was a vexing but fruitful problem for eighteenth-century thinkers. Typically they held that there is a standard of taste, and/or that everyone receives aesthetic pleasure through an identical faculty. Given this uniform basis, they produced ingenious explanations regarding how social factors like one’s occupation or the stage of one’s civilization produced varied preferences. Though rarely convincing, these explanations did engage the tension between aesthetic judgments that make claims to universal validity, and the individual, subjective, yet socially embedded nature of any given aesthetic experience. In contrast, Arnold, to use his own terms, rejects the personal (subjective) and the historical (socially conditioned) estimates of literature as fallacious. He is more concerned with correcting them than with explaining them or asking how aesthetic preferences might reflect underlying social conditions.

For Ruskin, who saw society as an inescapable network of interdependent relationships, analyzing people’s preferences, whether in art or in everyday consumer objects, revealed the interdependent relationships that secretly unite all members of society. For Arnold, analyzing people’s preferences reveals only a chaos of self-interested, idiosyncratic desires; the ambiguities of taste discourse are not an adequate
solution to such anarchy. To Arnold, tastes in dress, recreation, food, and other everyday affairs are merely attributes of the unregenerate “ordinary self.” The ordinary self with its wayward tastes needs to be educated by culture. “[C]ulture indefatigably tries, not to make what each raw person may like, the rule by which he fashions himself; but to draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that,” Arnold writes (C&A 38). Where Ruskin retains an emphasis on individual, embodied aesthetic response, Arnold turns to imposing, disinterested abstraction.

Arnold and Ruskin both attempt to connect aesthetics to ethics, but they rely on different rubrics because they understand the relationship of individual to group differently. We might say that Ruskin is less resigned to modernity than Arnold is. Where Ruskin thinks of society in quasi-feudal terms as an inescapable and hierarchical network of interdependent relationships, Arnold accepts the basic tenets of liberal individualism: that the individual is the basic social unit, and that social relations arise from voluntary decisions to enter into association.19

However, Arnold is not a standard Victorian liberal. The liberal idea of “right” is that regulative principle which, without assuming any particular definition of the good,

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19 My argument that Arnold accepts that the individual is the basic unit of society is at odds with Frances Frame’s claim that Arnold’s writings on Celtic literature and Irish politics anticipate modern Communitarianism. Frame argues that Arnold prefigures the Communitarian theory that community, rather than arising from voluntary association, is a pre-existing relationship that nonetheless needs to be discovered (167). As evidence, she points out that Arnold urges the English to discover their pre-existing relationship to the Irish. Arnold’s strategy is to argue that the English need to recognize that they themselves have some Celtic ancestry, and thus the Irish are not aliens (Frame 167). While Frame accurately identifies Arnold’s strategy for persuading the English to develop a cosmopolitan sympathy for the Irish, she is incorrect to claim that this strategy includes a Communitarian recognition of the individual’s pre-existing relationship to the group. Arnold is concerned with how the English as a group relate to the Irish as a group. His writings on the Irish Question do not address the individual’s relationship to the group at all.
organizes a pluralistic society in which everyone has his or her “own aims, interests, and conceptions of the good” (Sandel 1). As Arnold skeptically puts it, the Gladstonian Liberal thinks that “freedom to say what he pleases, when he pleases” is “the chief good” (11: 190). Arnold cannot accept this pluralistic definition of the good, which he equates with “doing as one likes” (C&A 61). He recognizes that increasing democracy means that more and more people will have the power to follow their own tastes, and, with reason, he considers “doing as one likes” to be an inadequate principle of social cohesion. In other words, Arnold critiques an individualism that allows the pursuit of “ordinary” desires. He attempts to replace it with an individualism of self-improvement, of correcting desire. Gagnier probably puts it best when she describes Arnold as being engaged in a debate over what individualism should be or mean (Insatiability 107). “Culture” gives Arnold a standard by which to criticize the Philistine/Gladstonian Liberal idea that individual liberty is an adequate principle of social cohesion. Arnold calls himself “a liberal” but “above all, a believer in culture” (C&A 32). For Arnold, “culture” provides moral ideals and social unity that liberal democratic procedures cannot provide on their own.

Compared to taste, “culture” and “criticism” have the rhetorical advantage of sounding more imposing. In texts like “Literature and Science” and Culture and Anarchy, culture’s impersonal abstraction allows Arnold to position himself as a neutral seeker after truth. We have seen how the conclusion to “Literature and Science” suggests that classical literature’s timeless value, not Arnold’s own “weak pleadings,” will
permanently guarantee Homer and Virgil a place in school curricula. Culture and Anarchy likewise proclaims that disinterested culture and reflection, embodied in “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” automatically unsettle stock notions and preferences. Culture, Arnold declares, will persuade people simply because it is the best route to truth, and human minds ultimately are compelled by truth. Arnold’s theory assumes both an identifiable truth and a universal human nature. In other words, he invokes a world which does not require persuasion or rhetoric even as he tries his hardest to persuade his contemporaries to care about something other than money.

For Arnold, perhaps the greatest limitation of taste as a framework for connecting aesthetics to ethics is not just that culture seems more authoritative, but that (depending how it is framed) cultivating taste is not obviously a project that involves questioning our own preferences, desires, or “stock notions and habits” (C&A 5). I close this chapter by examining the limitations of taste and the affordances of culture for linking aesthetics to liberal individualist ethics in Arnold’s most famous text: Culture and Anarchy. In 1867, the Second Reform Act approximately doubled the number of British men eligible to vote

20 Writing a preface to the Wordsworth anthology he prepared (1879), Arnold expresses a similar confidence in intrinsic literary value. Wordsworth’s partisans (“we, to whom he is dear,” who “know and feel” his greatness) need not promote him. The intrinsic value of his works will be recognized: “he will make his way best, not by our advocacy of him, but by his own worth and power. We may safely leave him to make his way thus, we who believe that a superior worth and power in poetry finds in mankind a sense responsive to it and disposed at last to recognise it” (9: 44). What is remarkable about this touching expression of confidence in literary value is that it directly follows Arnold’s explanation that his anthology has cleared away the obstacles to enjoying Wordsworth: Arnold omits the poems he considers inferior, and dispenses with Wordsworth’s organizational scheme.

As Arnold put it to his sister Frances, Wordsworth “will come out better, and more effective in my arrangement, I think, than he has ever come out before. I have gone on the plan of throwing pieces of one poetical kind together, not of classifying them, in Wordsworth’s own intricate way, according to the spiritual faculty from which they are supposed to have proceeded” (Letters 5: 21). Arnold is evidently unaware that there is any contradiction between his confidence in intrinsic poetic value, and his implicit acknowledgment that historical and material conditions, such as publishing format, will affect a reader’s ability to understand and enjoy any given poem, no matter how excellent. We might see Arnold’s concern with reading textbooks, and his own school edition of Isaiah, as parallel attempts to increase students’ access to enjoyable, comprehensible literary formats.
for the House of Commons. The same year, nearing the end of his time as professor of poetry at Oxford, Arnold delivered the lecture “Culture and its Enemies,” which became the seed of *Culture and Anarchy*.

*Culture and Anarchy* is explicitly concerned with establishing a link between art and social life. As Arnold puts it in the preface, “The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties” (5). Part of Arnold’s task is to convince his contemporaries that mid-Victorian economic prosperity is fraught with “difficulties” rather than with comforts. He is at his most trenchantly entertaining when he skewers patriotic, liberal, middle-class complacency. “Never did people believe anything more firmly,” he observes, “than nine Englishmen out of ten at the present day believe that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being so very rich” (39).

Amid this complacency, one of the “present difficulties” that Arnold singles out is the English devotion to personal liberty, which he reduces to the formula, “our notion of its being the great right and happiness of an Englishman to do as far as possible what he likes” (56; see also 58). As an example of “the anarchical tendency of our worship of freedom,” he cites the July 23, 1866 Reform League demonstration when, against the urgings of League leaders, protestors broke through Hyde Park’s railings to assemble in defiance of government orders (57).21 Even in the case of a bloodless mass meeting, Arnold can only see political agitation as the assertion of personal liberty without regard to the common good, not as collective action. The “apparition” of “the Hyde Park rough,” as he designates his emblematic figure for the working-class,

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21 See pages 52-56 in Donald C. Richter’s *Riotous Victorians* (1981) for details on the Reform League’s proposed demonstration, the involvement of riotous participants, and the government’s response.
is somewhat embarrassing, because too many cooks spoil the broth; because, while the aristocratic and middle classes have long been doing as they like with great vigour, he has been too undeveloped and submissive hitherto to join in the game; and now, when he does come, he comes in immense numbers, and is rather raw and rough. (60)

In the wake of the Second Reform Act, Arnold’s argument that personal liberty is an inadequate principle of social organization had added urgency because “immense numbers” of working-class men now had greater ability than ever before to assert their personal liberty. Arnold is fully aware that the doctrine of personal liberty has never been applied universally. Not only has the franchise been restricted to property owners, but Englishmen, he observes, feel no qualms about limiting the personal liberty of Irishmen (59). However, his primary objection to the doctrine of personal liberty is not that it has been unevenly applied, but that it leads to factionalism.

In literature, religion, politics, education, and the general attitudes of newspapers, Arnold identifies the problem of isolated communities that accept only their own standards and values (82-89). His solution is culture, a “much-wanted source of authority” that can perform the function of “fixing standards of perfection that are real” (70, 39). Culture’s pursuit of perfection involves “trying to see things as they are . . . by all aids of observing, reading, and thinking” (61). Despite the fact that Arnold fluctuates between defining culture as a timeless source of authority and defining it as an ongoing process, the problematic universalism of “fixing standards” outweighs the tentativeness of “trying to see.” Today, we would likely reject his solution as oppressive, and so did some of his contemporaries. Nonetheless, Arnold’s point that it is easy to ignore voices that contradict one’s pre-existing opinions is frequently well expressed, and still relevant.
Arnold was looking for aesthetics to offer an authoritative standard for social life and self-improvement. Given its history of debates over mental faculties, qualified judges, and the role of subjectivity in aesthetic evaluation, taste discourse could not serve his purposes. In particular, the ambiguity regarding whether taste is a capacity for judgment or a capacity for pleasure made it unhelpful as a “source of authority” for a society where individuals, in Arnold’s view, were all too eager to pursue pleasure mindlessly, whether that pleasure consisted in field sports, tea-meetings, or beer—all while taking the freedom to do so as evidence of their country’s greatness. Arnold expresses his desire for a “flexible” principle of authority, but taste proves a trifle too flexible (C&A 97).22

As we saw in Chapter 2, Hutcheson compared aesthetic taste to physical taste because he considered that beauty provided pleasure as immediately enjoyable and as universally available as pleasant flavors on the tongue. For Hutcheson, the immediacy of aesthetic pleasure guaranteed its disinterested moral status. There was no time for reflection or self-interest to intervene. Hutcheson was writing for an audience familiar with the pleasures of aristocratic connoisseurship, where the immediacy of aesthetic pleasure was partly the result of a lifelong exposure to art objects.

Arnold, in contrast, wrote in the context of mass culture and increased material prosperity, where he faced the fact that the ability to purchase and enjoy texts (if not fine art) was no longer limited to people who had a cultivated background. In this context, the immediacy of the enjoyment derived from reading, say, the British Banner, is likely to be based on the fact that this particular paper conforms to one’s opinions and prejudices

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22 To develop one’s Hellenism is “to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another” (C&A 97).
Consequently Arnold has comparatively little to say about aesthetic pleasure in *Culture and Anarchy*, or elsewhere.

In a rare instance, one of Arnold’s reports on continental education, *A French Eton* (1863-64) does discuss pleasure—though not specifically aesthetic pleasure—and declares that it is beneficial for the working and middle classes because it tends to expand their experiences or intellects. But for those who have always had the resources to achieve their desires, pleasure is more likely to be enervating. The English middle class has only just begun an “intellectual ferment” (2: 314). Meanwhile, the aristocratic class has indisputably declined intellectually, losing its devotion to “high culture” and neglecting the Greeks and Romans—as well as recent greats like Goethe—for “the *Times* and the *Agricultural Journal*” (2: 314-16). The aristocratic class has, perhaps inevitably, become too devoted to “amusing itself”:

> The triumphs of material progress multiply the means of material enjoyment; they attract all classes, more and more, to taste of this enjoyment; on the highest class, which possesses in the amplest measure these means, they must needs exercise this attraction very powerfully. But every thoughtful observer can perceive that the ardour for amusement and enjoyment, often educative and quickening to a toil-numbed working class or a strait-laced middle class, whose great want is expansion, tends to become enervative and weakening to an aristocratic class—a class which must rule by superiority of all kinds, superiority not to be won without contention of spirit and a certain severity. (2: 315-16)

These remarks, combined with his concern about providing better reading textbooks in elementary schools, are probably the closest that Arnold comes to expressing Ruskin’s understanding of the social stakes of cultivating taste. Ruskin recognized that labor conditions would need to be reorganized in order to allow working-class people to cultivate their full capacity for aesthetic pleasure. Here we see Arnold implicitly
recognizing that socioeconomic circumstances have deprived the working class of many enjoyable pursuits. Similarly, religious prejudices have cut the middle class off from such pursuits. However, Arnold does not go so far as to demand that labor conditions be changed so that the working class may better pursue intellectual “expansion.” He is much more vocal about how the Philistine middle classes should abandon their narrow religious prejudices in order to pursue intellectual expansion.

To return to *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold, eschewing Hutchesonian optimism about taste’s disinterestedness, draws on a different eighteenth-century source: Alexander Pope’s satires written for the Scriblerus Club. “The learned Martinus Scriblerus well says,” writes Arnold, that

“The taste of the bathos is implanted by nature itself in the soul of man; till, perverted by custom or example, he is taught, or rather compelled, to relish the sublime.” But with us everything seems directed to prevent any such perversion of us by custom or example as might compel us to relish the sublime; by all means we are encouraged to keep our natural taste for the bathos unimpaired. (82)

If the taste for bathos is innate, then the immediacy of a pleasure, far from guaranteeing that pleasure’s disinterestedness, renders it morally and intellectually suspect (27, 82-89, 154). Unexamined preferences are thus assertions of the unreformed “ordinary self.”

Together, the concepts of the “ordinary self” and the “innate taste for bathos” allow Arnold to read preferences in any field, from aesthetics to politics, as the assertion of individual, subjective, unreflecting desire, never as a collectively held opinion that might have been arrived at by conflict, persuasion, and negotiation. This move is the same one that Arnold made when he interpreted the Hyde Park demonstration as an overweening assertion of personal liberty, not as an expression of class conflict.

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23 Arnold quotes Pope’s *Peri Bathous* (1728), but alters Pope’s capitalization and punctuation.
Arnold’s comical caricatures of the English classes illustrate the way in which, even when he recognizes that socioeconomic position influences one’s preferences, he is unable to read taste as an index of socioeconomic relations rather than of individual moral and cultural status. Arnold habitually referred to the English middle class as “Philistines,” a catchall label designating a hodgepodge of attitudes and creeds: self-satisfaction, utilitarianism, and materialism, but also narrow religiosity. In *Culture and Anarchy*, he adds the label “Barbarians” for the aristocracy and “Populace” for the rest of the English public. Although they largely map onto the English aristocratic, middle, and working classes, these three nicknames do not designate profession, land ownership, ownership of the means of production, or any other material criteria. Rather, Arnold’s classification describes three character types defined by preferences and attitudes. For instance, his justification for calling the nobility “Barbarians,” rests on the claim that barbarians and Victorian aristocrats alike have a penchant for vigorous external display (love of sports, care for the body, chivalry, elaborate manners) accompanied by the internal traits of “courage, a high spirit, self-confidence” (76-77).

That Arnold’s three classes are actually three character types defined by attitudes and preferences becomes even clearer when he introduces the possibility that one may identify with a class not originally one’s own. Any worker who shares Philistine preferences and attitudes—smugness, for instance—is actually a Philistine, regardless of socioeconomic position (77-78). According to Arnold,

> What one’s ordinary self likes differs according to the class to which one belongs, and has its severer and its lighter side; always, however, remaining machinery, and nothing more. The graver self of the Barbarian likes honours and consideration; his more relaxed self, field-sports and pleasure. The graver self of one [middle-class] kind of Philistine likes
business and money-making; his more relaxed self, comfort and tea-
meetings. Of another kind of [working-class] Philistine, the graver self
likes trades’ unions, the relaxed self, deputations, or hearing Mr Odger
speak. The sterner self of the Populace likes bawling, hustling, and
smashing; the lighter self, beer. (80)

Putting aside the question of whether Arnold’s caricatures accurately describe any
Victorian habitus, my point here is that Arnold is defining social groups on the basis of
tastes, but does not read these different tastes as signifying anything much about
Victorian social organization. At the same time that he introduces a class-based array of
preferences, Arnold suggests that they all signify the same thing: they are “machinery,
and nothing more” (80). By “machinery,” Arnold means anything that is treated as an end
in itself when it should be treated only as a means to some worthier end, some intrinsic
good. In Arnold’s view, despite their different preferences, all people share “a common
basis of human nature” (78). This universal human nature means that any given
individual has the potential to develop the virtues and faults of another class (78). But
again, learning to prefer comfort to hustling is simply to prefer one form of “machinery”
to another, for a second aspect of this universal human nature is that people in all classes
“imagine happiness to consist in doing what one’s ordinary self likes” (80). Eighteenth-
century moral philosophy and Ruskinian aggregate analysis both read differentiated taste
as making visible social and economic conditions. By ignoring the possible social stakes
of different tastes, Arnold deprives himself of one of the methods whereby aesthetic
discourse gained traction on social issues.

In the passage quoted above, the only difference in desire that has real social
stakes is the difference between ordinary desire for machinery, and cultured desire for
what has intrinsic value: the best that has been thought and said. Like the Populace who
emulate the Philistines, Arnold has changed his own taste-based classification. “I myself am properly a Philistine . . . through circumstances which will perhaps one day be known, if ever the affecting history of my conversion comes to be written, I have, for the most part, broken with the ideas and the tea-meetings of my own class,” he writes (79). But Arnold’s disarmingly humorous confession differs from the example of a member of the Populace who has learned to prefer tea-meetings to beer, and thus reclassified himself as a Philistine. Rather than shifting his classification, Arnold has apparently transcended all three categories. Through an unspecified process, he has abandoned the tastes of his class without aligning himself with the aesthetic or political preferences of either the working class or the hereditary aristocracy. Culture, he imagines, exists in a space outside of class. A universalizing conception of human nature is at work in Arnold’s assertion that for those who pursue it, cultured perfection “tends . . . to take them out of their class, and to make their distinguishing characteristic not their Barbarianism or their Philistinism, but their humanity” (80, emphasis in original). Unlike Ruskin, Arnold fails to inquire what particular circumstances formed the individual’s ordinary desires, or what specific changes might better cultivate his or her powers.

I have been arguing that, by abandoning taste discourse and thus re-theorizing the relation between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, Arnold impoverishes his vocabulary for analyzing both the social contexts and the subjective processes that inform aesthetic judgments. As a result, despite his belief in art’s edifying effects, many of his statements influentially promote the idea that literary texts have intrinsic value—a special kind of autonomous value that transcends social context, economic value, and subjective desire. It was this ideology of aesthetic autonomy that professional literary study
inherited in the early twentieth century, and critiqued at the end of the same century. As we will see in the next chapter, the concept of aesthetic autonomy was also an idea that Oscar Wilde promoted in his own distinctive style.
CHAPTER SIX

OSCAR WILDE

In fact, Beauty had existed long before 1880. It was Mr. Oscar Wilde who managed her déb\textsuperscript{u}ut. To study the period is to admit that to him was due no small part of the social vogue that Beauty began to enjoy. . . . sunflowers and the feathers of peacocks curved in every corner, tea grew quite cold while the guests were praising the Willow Pattern of its cup.

—Max Beerbohm (46-47)

A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.

—Wilde (4: 228)

On January 2, 1882, when Oscar Wilde arrived in New York to begin a lecture tour publicizing Aestheticism, the light opera \textit{Patience}, and himself, reporters besieged him before his ship had even cleared quarantine (Ellmann 157-59). According to Ellmann’s biography \textit{Oscar Wilde} (1988),

One reporter, more knowledgeable perhaps than the rest, challenged Wilde: was it not true that the [Aesthetic] movement (the existence of which he allowed) had fostered only idiosyncratic responses rather than a correct and consistent taste for the beautiful? Wilde replied politely, “Well, you might say that it has. But then all movements develop characteristics in the individuals taking part in them. Really a movement that did not do so would be of little worth.” (159)

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\footnote{When quoting Wilde, I usually rely on the Oxford English Texts edition of \textit{The Complete Works}. This edition was begun in 2000 under the general editorship of Ian Small and remains incomplete. It includes both the periodical version (1890) and the one-volume version of \textit{The Picture of Dorian Gray} (1891); I use the longer 1891 text. When quoting from a work that has not yet appeared in the Oxford edition, I rely on Richard Ellmann’s \textit{The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde} (1968) or on the 1993 Routledge reprint of Robert Ross’s \textit{The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde} (1908).}
Although the reporter evidently believed in the existence of an identifiable standard of taste, his question and Wilde’s mild response foreground the ambiguities of taste discourse that made it so fruitful for imagining, and reimagining, the relation between aesthetic object and perceiving subject, as well as between individual and group. Is taste a matter of universally valid judgments or of individual responses? Can and should individual aesthetic preferences be brought in line with universal, or at least socially legitimated, aesthetic judgments?

We have seen how Ruskin and Arnold configured aesthetic discourse, particularly claims about the disinterestedness of the aesthetic object and/or the perceiving subject, in order to link art to their respective understandings of the optimal relation between individual and social group. Roughly put, Ruskin balanced claims about subjective experience with claims about aesthetic objects; Arnold privileged claims about objects and their intrinsic qualities. On the face of it, Wilde, who once wrote that the point of criticism is “to see the object as in itself it really is not,” seems to privilege subjectivity as he theorizes the nature of aesthetic experience and its relation to human flourishing. Of course, matters are not actually so simple.

I argue that Wilde intertwines claims for the priority of subjectivity with claims for the autonomy of the abstract category “Art” in a way that erases the social context of any given aesthetic encounter. Wilde’s theory of subjectivity is likewise removed from the social. The Wildean subject, though fluid and non-essentialized, is nonetheless modeled on a category for which Wilde does make essentialized claims: Art. For Wilde, the individual, like art, is curiously self-sufficient and isolated. In other words, Wilde,
unlike his predecessors, celebrates art’s separation from life. Furthermore, this separation underpins his individualist theory that radical independence constitutes human flourishing.

I begin by foregrounding the difficulty of characterizing Wilde’s aesthetic theory without over-simplifying it. This difficulty arises not simply from Wilde’s penchant for paradox and his unconcern with consistency. It also stems from the fact that he wrote for so many different audiences and publication venues. I indicate the limitations of even the best critical work that analyzes Wilde’s ethical aesthetics solely in terms of his philosophical idealism, without adequate reference to his theory of the relation between art object and perceiving subject. My readings of *Intentions* (1891) and *The Soul of Man* (1891/95) analyze how the mutually reinforcing dynamic between aesthetic autonomy and individual subjectivity operates in Wilde’s “aesthetic” criticism and in his most explicitly political and ethical work. *Intentions* illustrates how Wilde’s subjectivist criticism requires a new theory of aesthetic disinterestedness. *The Soul of Man* demonstrates that Wilde’s new theory of the disinterested relation between perceiving subject and art object has ramifications for his ethical theory of the relation between individual and group.

**Understanding an Aesthete’s Ethics**

When faced with Wilde’s paradoxes and inconsistency, the temptation is to pick a single text, privilege it as the most genuine representation of Wilde’s thought, and use it as a key for interpreting the rest of his writing. For instance, in their argument that Wilde’s work as a philosopher is undervalued, Philip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand
treat his undergraduate notebooks as the key that unlocks a Hegelian dialectic between idealism and materialism that runs throughout Wilde’s work. Similarly, Julia Prewitt Brown privileges *De Profundis* as Wilde’s definitive statement on aesthetics; Douglas Mao accords that role to Wilde’s early-career lectures. In order to avoid this temptation to read all Wilde’s work through the lens of a small subset of texts, this section foregrounds how Wilde, while using and revising the work of older critics, fluctuates on the questions of whether individual taste is an adequate aesthetic norm, and whether beauty and art are somehow separate from everyday concerns like the social and the economic. These fluctuations should be kept in mind even as I ultimately argue that Wilde’s most characteristic position is that art, gloriously, does not connect to life. I will show the range of positions he articulated over the course of his brief career, but my focus is on the inconsistencies in his longest and most developed criticism, which was written in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

As we have seen, the rubric of taste always incorporated a tension between individual pleasure and communal judgment, but over the course of the nineteenth century it became increasingly used to designate individual preference. As a result, aesthetic preferences were more and more frequently interpreted as signs of personality, not as the result of one’s social context. At first glance, it might seem that Wilde, in his writing and in his performative lifestyle, epitomizes both individuated taste and aesthetic autonomy. He famously used stylized taste, particularly in clothing, to position himself as the possessor of an acutely artistic, somewhat counter-cultural “temperament” or “personality.” The *Biograph and Review*, which profiled the young Wilde in 1880,
identified him “as one of the elect in a certain modern school. . . . a believer in the religion of beauty . . . a dweller in the high places of feeling” (130). According to the magazine, Wilde was one of the “elect” not only because of his “exceptional education” and “fervid and emotional” Irish nature, but also because of his “singularly enthusiastic temperament” (130). Wilde himself made similar connections between personal “temperament” and sensitivity to beauty.

Though Wilde did not use the term “taste” systematically, he promoted the individuation of taste in the sense that he treated aesthetic production and consumption as activities that express and develop individuality, thus suggesting that the kind of art one produces or consumes is a sign of one’s individual personality.\(^2\) Two phrases that recur throughout his work are particularly suggestive: “artistic temperament” and “realizing one’s personality.” When Wilde refers to “artistic temperament,” he seems to be thinking of a kind of personality, not a universal capacity. In “To Read or Not to Read” (1886), he opines that “the appreciation of literature is a question of temperament not of teaching” \((Collected\ 13: 43)\). Similarly, the dandies of his dramas and his fiction have aesthetic capacities that other characters show no sign of developing. In “Pen Pencil and Poison” (1889/91), a profile of the artist, forger, and murderer Thomas Wainewright that asserts art’s freedom from ethics, Wilde repeatedly refers to Wainewright’s “artistic temperament.” According to Wilde, Wainewright understood

\(^2\) In taking this position, Wilde was hardly alone. Cohen points out that late-century female decorating advisors promoted a sensibility that ran counter to Henry Cole’s emphasis on expertise and rules. Women like Mary Eliza Haweis (1848-98) proposed that furnishing in an “artistic” manner meant “not abiding by rules or conventions, but relying upon personal inspiration” (Cohen 84). Cohen attributes this shift to modernization and urbanization that ushered in new forms of consumerism and identity formation: “As the other signs of belonging [land, titles] diminished, material belongings gained in significance. . . . Things preceded identity; what you owned told others (and yourself) who you were” (86).
the great truth that Art’s first appeal is neither to the intellect nor to the emotions, but purely to the artistic temperament, and he more than once points out that this temperament, this “taste,” as he calls it, being unconsciously guided and made perfect by frequent contact with the best work, becomes in the end a form of right judgment. (4: 109)

Taste or artistic temperament must be cultivated in order to produce reliable judgments. However, it is not a capacity that everyone possesses. For instance, when Wainewright tries to join the military, “the reckless dissipated life of his companions failed to satisfy the refined artistic temperament of one who was made for other things” (4: 106). Rather than being a potential universally present in human minds, artistic temperament is a kind of personality, an innate difference that sets Wainewright apart.

Wilde’s dandified sartorial style epitomizes the increasingly accepted idea that personal taste is a valid guide for choosing objects. However, his early lectures on home furnishings and his journalism on “Dress Reform” suggest that aesthetic choices, far from being a matter of pure self-expression, are governed by standards. In “The English Renaissance of Art” (1882), he tells his American audience, “as in your cities so in your literature, it is a permanent canon and standard of taste, an increased sensibility to beauty (if I may say so) that is lacking” (Collected 14: 267). But instead of concentrating on “sensibility,” his lecture on “House Decoration” (1882) offers Americans some rules of good taste. These aesthetic standards, though leavened with Wilde’s characteristic humor, would have been familiar to Henry Cole and his followers in the 1850s: flat surfaces should be decorated with conventionalized ornament that expresses flatness; deceptive materials should be avoided (14: 287, 290). Wilde probably received these design reform “laws” filtered through William Morris’s Arts and Crafts movement. His lecture is
fortified with statements drawn directly from Morris’s and Ruskin’s ethical arguments that the working class have the right to enjoy beautiful surroundings and creative freedom.

Wilde most clearly connects aesthetic experience to life and ethics when he discusses the beauty of everyday objects like furniture and clothes.\(^3\) In two reviews (February 21 and 28, 1885) for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde’s disagreement with the iconoclastic painter James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) leads him to suggest that Whistler has forgotten an important truth: that “the arts are made for life, and not life for the arts” (*Collected* 14: 69). Whistler advocated art for art’s sake. Wilde humorously depicts Whistler as insisting on the artist’s absolute separation from his social environment, even “mocking” his audience and telling them that, not being artists, they should not try to appreciate art, to dress beautifully, or to decorate their homes aesthetically (14: 63-65). According to Whistler, the artist will produce his own vision of beauty without reference to the public. Throughout his career, Wilde would be similarly dismissive of public taste. Yet his disagreement with Whistler on the topic of aesthetic dress and home decoration here leads him to a less avant-garde stance, exhibiting an

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\(^3\) This aspect of Wilde’s thought has only recently received extended attention. Focusing on the lectures Wilde delivered during his U.S. tour (1882), Douglas Mao’s *Fateful Beauty* (2008) argues that Wilde inherited from Pater an understanding that aesthetic experience promotes ethical development in two distinct ways. First is the familiar method: in contemplating art, the perceiving subject transcends instrumentality and material necessity. Second, argues Mao, Pater and Wilde shared a belief that an artistic environment will sponsor unconscious ethical development, especially during childhood (80-81). Mao’s book concentrates on this second, unconscious, operation, which is distinguished by an emphasis on the transactional relationship between children or adolescents and their everyday environments, and thus on decorative rather than fine art. Mao contextualizes Victorian discussions of art’s morality against concerns about children’s environments, the invention of the juvenile delinquent, and “unprecedented philanthropic and state-sponsored intervention in the lives of minors” (2-3). Mao positions himself as making a new contribution to the aesthetic turn by pointing out that while art’s possible social functions are frequently discussed, there has been little analysis of how moral concerns about aesthetic experience have often centered on what he calls the “stealthy” determining influences of environment on developing individuals.
unusual insistence on art’s connection to life and the artist’s connection to society. In an argument that moves between fine and applied arts, Wilde links beauty to utility, arguing that if modern costume were more functional and thus more beautiful, “then would painting be no longer an artificial reaction against the ugliness of life, but become, as it should be, the natural expression of life’s beauty” (14: 70). These affirmations are at odds with the more familiar picture of Wilde as a dandy-aesthete who, one assumes, would agree with Whistler’s stance, however much he personally disliked the pugnacious American painter.4

These lectures and reviews complicate Wilde’s reputation as a proponent of art for art’s sake. The familiar picture of Wilde the dandy-aesthete stems from the fact that it is so easy to find Wilde proclaiming art’s autonomy and non-instrumentality, not to mention the absolute irrelevance of ethical considerations to aesthetic judgments, and doing so in highly quotable terms. His defense of The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890/91) provides some of his most pointed declarations about the uniqueness of aesthetic value. Though the reviewers of Wilde’s novel were not uniformly hostile, some condemned the text in moral terms, even casting aspersions on Wilde himself. Writing to the editors of the St. James’s Gazette, the Scots Observer, and the Daily Chronicle, Wilde responded in no uncertain terms. In a prolonged exchange with the St. James’s Gazette, he wrote “The sphere of art and the sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate” (Letters 428). If

4 Wilde had met Whistler around 1879. Initially, they were on friendly terms. Whistler sent Wilde and Constance Lloyd a gift when they married in 1884. However, Whistler, who tended to be irritable, came to regard Wilde as an unoriginal dilettante. With some justification, Whistler felt that Wilde was borrowing his ideas about art. To be fair, however, Whistler was not alone in advocating art for art’s sake. The years 1885-86 saw the two men sparring in the pages of the World (Beckson 404-06). Whistler went on to mock Wilde in “The Home of Taste; The Ideas of Mr Blankety Blank on House Decoration” (1888) (Mendelssohn 211). Also published in 1888, Wilde’s fairytale “The Remarkable Rocket,” about a self-important firework who explodes without anyone noticing, parodies Whistler’s anti-utilitarian aesthetics.
his work had been published in France, he added, no critic from “any paper of high standing . . . would think for a moment of criticizing it from an ethical standpoint” (432).

In response to the charge that he had chosen sordid subject matter, Wilde insisted on the prerogative of artistic freedom, a prerogative founded on art’s essential difference from life and action:

> It is proper that limitations should be placed on action. It is not proper that limitations should be placed on art. To art belong all things that are and all things that are not, and even the editor of a London paper has no right to restrain the freedom of art in the selection of subject-matter. (432)

To Wilde, “The rights of literature” are the same as “the rights of intellect” because art “is the highest mode of thought” (434). Art’s affiliation with contemplation has freed it from moral strictures on subject matter. The artist is concerned with form.

What are we to make of Wilde’s inconsistencies? Critical opinion has been divided over whether Wilde’s aesthetic theory and practice actually eschew ethics and politics. For instance, in *Conditions for Criticism* (1991), Ian Small suggests that the self-consciously rarified character of Victorian Aestheticism renders aesthetic experience private and apolitical, a matter of one’s exceptional ability to perceive beauty (5-8). In Small’s account, this emphasis on an elite Aesthetic subjectivity attempted to dispense “with all the rich social, institutional, political, and moral values” that were associated with art before the mid nineteenth century (8). In contrast to Small’s view, Gagnier sees Wilde as lured by the private pleasures of “taste, distinction, style, subjectivism, and individualism,” but as ultimately retaining an earlier Victorian dedication to the social
Allison Pease encapsulates the problem underlying this debate. “Does art for art’s sake really mean a divorce from the social sphere? Or does it suggest a separate sphere for art that, in being separate, acts as a socially redemptive sphere of being?” she asks (100). Answers to these questions tend to focus on how to understand Wilde’s formalism and his celebration of art’s “immoral,” “useless” status. I focus instead on how Wilde theorizes the relationship between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, and on how this relationship shapes his ethical theory of the ideal relationship between individual and group.

I suggest that Wilde’s willingness in his journalism to posit a beneficial relationship between art and life attests to the possibility that he did see an ethical function for art and aesthetic experience. When, in his longer criticism, he set himself to articulate what that ethical function was, he predicated it upon art’s autonomy from life, and not on the more unambiguously moralistic arguments he had used earlier (beauty, at least in costume, derives directly from utility; beauty is related to the working conditions under which an object is produced). Following Pater, Wilde proposes a subjectivist criticism that attempts to know, not the object itself, but the subject’s impressions of the object. He reconfigures the relation between perceiving subject and aesthetic object, and thus reimagines the way that the aesthetic encounter models the ideal relation between

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5 My own analysis of Victorian criticism is inspired by Gagnier’s insights in The Insatiability of Human Wants (2000) about the ways that aesthetic autonomy and individuated taste both function to separate aesthetic discourse from ethics. However, both my approach to and my assessment of Wilde differ from her Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public (1986). Gagnier attributes Wilde’s inconsistencies to the fact that he addressed different audiences, and she develops an interpretation of Wilde as “public, erotic, active, formally dialogic, and concerned with the inversion of middle-class language and life” (5). My choice to focus on Wilde’s ideas rather than on his audiences is a result of my goal: historicizing Victorian aesthetic philosophy in order to ask what these past theories have to offer us today as scholars in a discipline that is defined in relation to that capacious concept, the aesthetic.
individual and group. Yet given that the purpose of subjectivist (or “impressionist”) criticism is to record all the particularities of one’s own perceptions and sensations, a surprisingly large percentage of Wilde’s critical prose consists of assertions about the characteristics of the abstract category “Art.”

By looking more closely at the interaction between Wilde’s statements about the perceiving subject and his statements about the aesthetic object (abstracted into the category “Art,” for which he makes essentializing claims to absolute autonomy), my analysis of Wilde’s aesthetics supplements the traditional critical focus on his support for formalism and aesthetic autonomy. So far, we have seen how earlier thinkers used claims about art’s disinterestedness, its separation from life, in order to claim the aesthetic as a realm that enriches both individual and social life. The overall result of Wilde’s dual emphasis on subjectivist criticism and on art’s autonomy is to extract from social contexts not just the art object and the aesthetic encounter, but any self-development they catalyze. Wilde couples aesthetic autonomy (predicated not on the perceiving subject’s attitude, but on the art object’s disinterestedness and the artist’s hostility to public taste) to a specifically asocial goal of self-development according to the laws of one’s own being. In circular fashion, this ethical goal is modeled on the autotelic artwork. In this scheme, the redemption offered by art is individual rather than social. The Wildean subject, as we shall see, is fluid and non-essentialized, yet self-sufficient and curiously isolated. Wilde’s vertiginous theory of aesthetic autonomy as the model for human flourishing erases not just oppressive societal demands on the individual, but even a bare
recognition of interdependence. His theories are thus much more individuated than Arnold’s or Ruskin’s.

By untangling how Wilde theorized the connections (and disconnections) between art and life, this chapter contributes to the debate over whether, and how, Wilde’s aesthetic theory is also an ethical theory. Julia Prewitt Brown’s *Cosmopolitan Criticism* (1997) is still the most authoritative study of Wilde’s work in the context of European aesthetics. According to Brown, Wilde’s position is much more complicated than the “conventional” Aesthetic platform of “the autonomy and disinterestedness of art” (xv). Brown casts Wilde as an idealist philosopher who “takes his place in a European tradition of thought that stretches from Kant and Schiller, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the preeminent cosmopolitan artist-critics of this century, Benjamin and Adorno” (xviii).

The continental tradition that Brown wants to place Wilde within both overlaps with and diverges from the tradition of taste discourse and aesthetic philosophy in which I locate Wilde. We both discuss Kant, but I accord much more weight than Brown does to the formative influence of eighteenth-century British moral philosophy on Victorian aesthetics. Brown makes the excellent point that Wilde’s protests against morality are specifically aimed at conventional Victorian pieties, and not at the concept of morality per se (xv-xvi). Furthermore, Wilde’s objections to didactic subject matter do not preclude a belief that art could contribute to individual ethical growth (Brown xvi).

Though Brown is right that Wilde saw art and aesthetic experience as intimately connected to human flourishing, she mischaracterizes both Victorian aesthetics and Wilde’s relationship to his English predecessors. Brown argues that Wilde “was always
aiming to overcome, and ultimately for a moment did overcome, in both his life and his writing, the separation of morality and aesthetics that governed the thought of so many nineteenth-century writers, and that in the course of the century was more and more experienced as an opposition” (xvi). There can only appear to be a yawning gap between nineteenth-century aesthetics and ethics because Brown dismisses British moral philosophy as so much uninteresting empiricism. In contrast, the burden of my dissertation is to argue that ethics, aesthetics, and even society and economics were often discussed together at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and only gradually separated into specialized discourses.

To be fair to Brown, strict Victorian Protestants and Utilitarians alike did not see much ethical value in art or fiction, which could be viewed with suspicion as an unproductive waste of time, a sensuous distraction, or a dangerous influence on

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Brown provides only two brief examples in support of her questionable claim that Victorians saw a dichotomy between art and morals: Carlyle and Arnold. In Brown’s reading of Carlyle’s “Signs of the Times,” the separation of “the mechanical and the dynamic” signifies a theory of mental faculties that distinguishes between the moral and the aesthetic (xvi). Carlyle’s “Lecture III. The Hero as Poet” and “Lecture V. The Hero as Man of Letters” in Heroes and Hero-Worship (1840/41) would suggest that though Carlyle did not equate the beautiful with the good, Brown exaggerates the dichotomy between them in his thought.

Brown’s claim that Arnold saw a dichotomy between aesthetics and ethics is even more questionable. Her evidence is that Arnold’s theory of Hellenism and Hebraism separates conduct from intellect, and thus morals from art. As I have argued, when Arnold depicts culture as detached from life and action, he is doing so in order to argue that this detachment provides just the reflective distance that British society so desperately needs. Even though he privileges intellect and literature over rigid Dissenting morality, he also tries to persuade his contemporaries that great literature connects our sense for beauty to our sense for conduct.

When Brown claims that ethics and aesthetics were seen as opposites in the nineteenth century, she is referring specifically to philosophy and criticism. If we turn to nineteenth-century discourses surrounding material goods and consumption, her claim is even less persuasive. Chapter 1 in Cohen recovers the moralistic, and specifically religious, overtones of early Victorian discourses on material culture. Similarly, Mao demonstrates the pervasiveness of the belief that a beautiful aesthetic environment played a crucial role in children’s moral development. Amy Woodson-Boulton’s Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain (2012) discusses how Victorian beliefs about art’s socially ameliorative function shaped specific practices for viewing and interpreting visual art.
vulnerable populations. However, the onus against fiction decreased over the century. Victorian writing about art and literature did frequently link them to ethics, placing particular moral emphasis on subject matter and on the evocation of sympathy.

In Brown’s terms, Wilde is an important thinker not just because he linked aesthetics to ethics, but because he did so while defining the aesthetic as a unique category:

Wilde found himself confronted with the great encompassing problem of his career and of his life: that of reconnecting art and life on a new basis, or on a basis in which the differences between art and other ‘sensations’ are preserved, but preserved in a way that does not lead back to the Victorian opposition between art and life, or aesthetics and ethics, or beauty and truth. (4)

For Brown’s idealist philosophical analysis, what makes art and criticism unique is the way they allow for critical distance and intellectual freedom. I question whether we should really embrace the idealist definition of art as a realm of distance and freedom. In contrast to Brown’s argument that Wilde’s great accomplishment consists of connecting art to life while preserving an idealist account of art’s uniqueness, Chapter 2 attempts to recover discourses that located art within the broad category of human production. Essentially, Brown ignores discourses from moral philosophy to design reform that linked art to ethics. In her terms, these discourses would not be of interest because they fail to preserve (or create) the dynamic of distance that, in her view, makes the aesthetic a unique category of production and consumption.

Wilde is less at odds with other Victorian aesthetic theorists than Brown claims. It is true that Wilde, unlike Ruskin and Arnold, celebrates art’s separation from conventional morality. It is also true that this antinomian declaration is actually in service
of a vision of human flourishing, an ethical vision distinctly more individualist than either Ruskin’s or Arnold’s. However, rather than seeing Wilde’s project as opposed to common Victorian theories of art and human flourishing, I argue that Wilde’s strategy for connecting aesthetics to ethics has general continuity with other Victorian attempts to maintain the connection between art and life, and has specific continuity with Arnold’s project of keeping art available as a moral resource precisely by insisting on its separation from life and action.

The point here is that, though Wilde’s formalism represents a departure from Ruskin’s and Arnold’s thinking, the older men cleared the way not just for Wilde’s declaration of aesthetic autonomy, but even for the strategies he used to make that declaration. In the last three chapters I have traced how Ruskin and Arnold, largely inadvertently, opened the door to claims that artists, art objects, and aesthetic judgments exist on a higher plane, unmediated by material need, political action, or social determination. Though both men sought to show the relevance of art to life, they often deployed binary oppositions—between interested action and contemplative distance, between utility and uselessness, between instrumental value and intrinsic value—that tend to emphasize art’s removal from life. Unlike Wilde, neither endorsed the slogan “art for art’s sake.”8 This slogan was an avant-garde provocation, especially when it came from a towering young Irishman with flowing hair and eye-catching attire. Yet Wilde’s most extreme declarations encapsulated a notion of aesthetic autonomy that was nascent

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8 It was Victor Cousin (Gautier’s teacher) who originated the slogan l’art pour l’art. Gautier and Baudelaire were important proponents of it (Pease 98).
in Ruskin’s and Arnold’s writings.\(^9\) Besides relying on formalism, Wilde uses a number of rhetorical and conceptual strategies for asserting art’s autonomy that will be familiar from the writings of Ruskin and Arnold:

1) As in his letters to the press about *Dorian Gray*, Wilde often relies on programmatic assertions, usually in very abstract terms. This abstraction diminishes his ability for analyzing the specificity of aesthetic experience, just as it did in Arnold’s case.

2) He privileges contemplation over action, as both Ruskin and Arnold tend to. As we will see later, this preference for contemplation is due to Wilde’s neo-Platonic philosophical idealism.

3) He guarantees the aesthetic object’s disinterestedness by insisting on its inutility. This was a treacherous strategy for Ruskin, who found beauty in the natural world as well as in art. By consistently preferring artifice to nature, Wilde avoids the conceptual contortions that drove Ruskin to insist that we can only appreciate a tree’s beauty when we forget its utility.

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\(^9\) Bromwich examines the relationship between Arnold’s objective criticism, and Pater’s and Wilde’s subjective criticism. Bromwich sees this relationship as disjunctive: Arnold emphasized objectivity; reacting against Arnold, Pater and Wilde tried to renew the Romantic belief that subjective reactions and emotional investments have a valid role to play in criticism.

Where Bromwich sees disjunction, DeLaura influentially argues that there was continuity between Arnold’s and Pater’s Hellenism, their search for transcendence, and their struggles to transfer religion’s traditional functions to art (see especially xi-xviii, 166-70). More recently, Anderson and Thomas also suggest that the relationship between Arnold’s criticism and the work of younger Aesthetic critics should be seen as a relationship of continuity, not rupture. When Arnold emphasizes the importance of the critic’s stance, Anderson sees him as accepting the idea that critical disinterestedness, rather than being something substantive, must be subjectively enacted. Despite the different roles that the two men assign to stance and temperament, Anderson sees their shared interest in critical stance as a sign of continuity between Arnold and Aestheticism.

Where Anderson is specifically interested in Victorian practices of detachment, Thomas’s approach to the continuity between Arnold and Aestheticism is part of a larger argument about the unacknowledged role that liberal agency plays in contemporary criticism as well as in Victorian thought. In Thomas’s view, Arnold’s ideal of cultured inaction (the free play of thought) gets incorporated “by many late Victorian artists and critics, who take up this strategic suspension of pressing realities in their construction of the aesthetic sensibility, itself a strategy of active refusal” (37).
4) Extending Arnold’s critique of middle-class Philistinism, Wilde guarantees the artist’s disinterestedness by insisting that the true artist is indifferent to Philistine public opinion, indeed to external authority of any kind.  

As with his predecessors, these declarations of art’s autonomy are “moral” in the sense that they are made in the service of a vision of human flourishing. Wilde forged a certain kind of connection between art and morals—one that, paradoxically, depended upon art’s freedom from, or even opposition to, life and that thus contributed to the ideology of aesthetic autonomy. This strategy resembles Arnold’s, even though Wilde’s ultimate ethical goal is very different from Arnold’s dream of a society organized by “right reason.”

**Intentions: Subjectivist Criticism and the New Disinterestedness**

Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

—Wilde (3: 288)

Calm, and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplates life, and no arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the joints of his harness. He at least is safe. He has discovered how to live.

—Wilde (4: 179)

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10 When defending *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, Wilde wrote, “The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. . . . He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write” (*Letters* 438-39). Almost a decade earlier, in a “Lecture to Art Students” (1883), he had stated, “Popularity is the crown of laurel which the world puts on bad art. Whatever is popular is wrong” (*Collected* 14: 312).

But see Ian Small and Josephine Guy’s *Oscar Wilde’s Profession* (2000) for a materialist argument that Wilde shaped his work to fit the publishing industry’s demands. See also Wilde’s review of George Sand’s letters (1886). One ought to be inured to Wilde’s contradictions, but it is nonetheless surprising to encounter his statement that, “Art without personality is impossible. And yet the aim of art is not to reveal personality, but to please” (*Collected* 13: 50, my emphasis). Wilde’s critical dialogues, which are some of his best-known work, do not pursue the audience-oriented aesthetics that he once advocated in this review for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. 
The original title of “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde’s longest critical essay, highlights the degree to which, despite (or because of) his departures from his predecessors, Wilde was placing himself in relation to Arnold. When it was originally published in the Nineteenth Century (July and September 1890), the essay was called “The True Function and Value of Criticism: With some remarks on the importance of doing nothing: A Dialogue”—an obvious allusion to Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” Arnold’s essay suggested that the critic’s cultural role is as important as the poet’s, at least in an unpoetic age like Victoria’s. Wilde’s dialogue, which features a primary speaker named Gilbert and an interlocutor named Ernest, suggests that criticism is both more important and more creative than poetry or fiction.

Along with another dialogue (“The Decay of Lying”) and two essays (“Pen Pencil and Poison: A study in green” and “The Truth of Masks”), “The Critic as Artist” was revised and collected in Intentions (1891). Wilde secured the avant-garde book designer Charles Ricketts to ensure that the volume had an attractive appearance (4: lxiv). Up to this point in his career, Wilde had written poems, short stories, and two relatively unsuccessful plays. He also supported himself writing reviews and longer pieces for periodicals of varying prestige. As Josephine Guy points out, Intentions, with its

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11 Wilde revised all four of the essays included in Intentions. In the case of “The Critic as Artist,” he added back some of the material in his MS that was deleted from the Nineteenth Century version due to requests from the editor (4: xlix-li).

“The Truth of Masks” was originally published in the Dramatic Review (March 1885) as a short essay called “Shakespeare on Scenery.” A longer version, titled “Shakespeare and Stage Scenery” subsequently appeared in the Nineteenth Century (May 1885). The version included in Intentions is even longer, the most dramatic change being additions to the conclusion.

“Pen Pencil and Poison” first appeared as “Pen, Pencil, and Poison: A Study” in the Fortnightly Review (January 1889).

“The Decay of Lying” first appeared in the Nineteenth Century (January 1889). It was reprinted in the U.S. in the Eclectic Magazine (February 1889), an anthology reprinting the best recent English periodical writing. From the partial MS now at the New York Public Library, it is unclear when Wilde decided to make it a dialogue (4: xl).
“Aesthetic” visual format, was Wilde’s bid to take up the mantle of an authoritative cultural critic (4: lxxxiv-lxxxv).

In *Intentions*, Wilde swings the balance of aesthetic judgments away from the object and toward the subject. He adopts and develops the impressionist criticism first made famous, or notorious, by a book that, as a young man, he read avidly: Pater’s *The Renaissance*. Compared to Kant’s formulation in *Critique of Judgment*, Wilde retains the idea that aesthetic judgments are non-rational and based on individual, subjective experience. But he drops the question of how those judgments become communicated and socially legitimated.

While older theories of aesthetic disinterestedness posited that aesthetic pleasure and judgment could take one beyond the limits of one’s desires and subjectivity, Wilde’s impressionist criticism grants the validity and inevitability of subjectivity and desire in the aesthetic encounter. Consequently, Wilde’s theory requires a new incarnation of disinterestedness. Unable to locate aesthetic disinterestedness within the perceiving subject, Wilde instead locates disinterestedness within the abstract category “Art,” ratcheting up his claims for art’s self-sufficient formalism and supreme inutility, including its moral inutility. This aesthetic disinterestedness cannot be invalidated by the perceiving subject’s desires. Indeed, Wilde celebrates art as a realm in which to cultivate one’s sensuous, intellectual, emotional, or ineffably “aesthetic” responses no matter how idiosyncratic or biased.

Wilde does not try to guarantee aesthetic disinterestedness by producing a model of the mind in which beauty appeals to a specific mental faculty without the mediation of
thought or self-interest. He never theorizes anything like Hutcheson’s inner sense of beauty or Ruskin’s theoretic faculty, which were mental faculties possessed to some degree by everyone. Instead, within “The Critic as Artist” alone, Wilde suggests that art and beauty appeal to the physical senses, but also to “taste” (4: 191), the “aesthetic sense” (4: 160), the “beauty-sense” (4: 191), the “soul” (4: 195), and the “artistic temperament” (4: 197). Wilde probably realized that modern psychology and scientific materialism made Hutcheson’s and Ruskin’s rather mechanical models of the mind less credible. In addition to appearing implausible, a universal theory of mind was incompatible with Wilde’s aesthetics precisely because he had a relativist, subjectivist theory of beauty.

Ruskin balances competing loyalties to subject and object, particularity and abstraction, as he uses the rubric of taste to connect aesthetics to a paternalistic, communitarian ethical vision centered on pre-existing social relationships that are hierarchical but interdependent. Unlike Ruskin, Arnold accepts the premises of liberal individualism. Arnold assumes that, in order to be of ethical and social use, the aesthetic (usually meaning poetry) must be an arena of objective judgments, even though it also offers emotional experiences. In the process of proposing an objectivist literary criticism, he evacuates aesthetic judgments of their social and subjective complexity and indeterminacy.

Reacting against Arnold’s moralistic aesthetics and objectivist criticism, Wilde associates the aesthetic with subjectivity, desire, and the validity of individual taste. According to Vivian in “The Decay of Lying,” people project their own ideas onto external reality. Wordsworth, for instance, “found in stones the sermons he had already
hidden there” (4: 83). Though his interlocutor, Cyril, disagrees with Vivian’s assertion that we have no access to external reality unmediated by our own minds, Vivian goes on to make even more exaggerated claims for the defining role of subjectivity in experience (4: 84). For instance, he declares that “the whole of Japan is a pure invention” perpetrated by artists like Hokusai and Hokkei, and that the Englishman wishing to see Japan is better off staying home and looking at Japanese art than going on a trip to Tokyo (4: 98). Later, Wilde would write in *De Profundis*,

I said in *Dorian Gray* that the great sins of the world take place in the brain, but it is in the brain that everything takes place. We know now that we do not see with the eye or hear with the ear. They are merely channels for the transmission, adequate or inadequate, of sense-impressions. It is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings. (*Letters 748*)

In *Intentions*, criticism is to be a practice of recording one’s impressions and intensifying one’s personality, not of setting aside personal considerations and arriving at an unbiased estimate of an artwork.

At times, Wilde’s statements suggest that he saw impressionist criticism not only as the best form of criticism, but as the only form possible, given subjectivity’s inevitable

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12 Though *De Profundis* is available in Oxford’s *The Complete Works* volume 2 (2005), edited by Small, I quote from the version in Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland’s *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (2000). This version, which originally appeared in Hart-Davis’s 1962 edition of Wilde’s letters, takes Wilde’s MS as its copy-text.

*De Profundis* is a letter that Wilde wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas but evidently intended for wider circulation and possibly for publication. The textual history of this work—which Wilde wrote in Reading Gaol, then handed over to his literary executor Robert Ross for typing and editing—is complex and confusing. The four sources of information on its textual transmission (Wilde, Ross, Douglas, and the governor of Reading Gaol) contradict themselves and each other. Small deals with this confusing situation by producing two separate eclectic texts, one representing what Small believes Wilde wanted the public to read, and one representing a private letter to Douglas. I prefer Hart-Davis’s edition of *De Profundis* because it is simpler to make claims about what Wilde did write than about what he possibly intended people to read.
role in shaping one’s perceptions.\textsuperscript{13} At any rate, whether or not Wilde consistently held that subjectivity cuts one off from external reality, his longest and most prestigious critical dialogue, “The Critic as Artist,” unabashedly endorses impressionist criticism. Pater’s Preface to \textit{The Renaissance} is of course a key predecessor. Pater had gently but totally reformulated Arnold’s objectivist claims about the function of criticism. “To see the object as in itself it really is,” has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever;” writes Pater, then continues, “and in aesthetic criticism 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” (3). Wilde’s Gilbert ostentatiously follows in Pater’s footsteps. Ernest encapsulates Gilbert’s subjective criticism as “to see the object as in itself it really is not” (4: 159). According to Gilbert, the aim of criticism is not to uncover authorial intention, “for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it” (4: 157). In

\textsuperscript{13} Given Wilde’s characteristic inconsistency both within individual works and across his oeuvre, it is not surprising that there is critical debate over whether or not his subjectivist criticism amounts to full-fledged solipsism. Despite Wilde’s statements suggesting that there is no escaping one’s own subjectivity, Smith and Helfand argue that “Wilde favored a creative and subjective mode,” but did not consider such impressionist criticism to be “epistemologically inevitable” (45). Although some of Smith and Helfand’s claims for Wilde as a Hegelian idealist are overstated, this specific characterization (if not their underlying reason for making it, which is that Wilde maintains a dialectic between subjectivist and objectivist modes) seems fair. Wilde \textit{does} favor a subjective mode of criticism, but there are also times when he suggests that a great deal of historical and literary knowledge is necessary in order to interpret a text’s meaning.

For instance, according to Gilbert, the critic may sometimes turn his attention from the higher task of recording “his synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole” to the “lower sphere” of interpretation and analysis (4: 163). Interpretation may seek to deepen a work’s mystery rather than to explain it (4: 163-64). The task of interpretation can require a great deal of scholarly knowledge. For example, Gilbert states that when the goal is interpreting Shakespeare’s plays rather than recording one’s impressions, an impressive familiarity with Shakespeare’s sources, with Elizabethan stage practice, and so forth, is required (4: 163-64).

Furthermore, Suzy Anger has demonstrated that Wilde did not treat \textit{all} texts as needing or benefitting from a subjective, creative approach to interpretation. Instead, he distinguished between “literature” (a category of texts marked by a rich indeterminacy of meaning that makes subjectivist interpretation rewarding) and non-literary texts (a category in which meanings are largely unambiguous) (Anger 142, 152). See also Gerhard Joseph’s brief discussion, more suggestive than conclusive, of Wilde’s investment in having his words clearly understood (184).
keeping with his emphasis on the subject rather than the object, Gilbert thinks that the individual personality is in no way a block to interpretation. “[O]nly by intensifying his own personality” can the critic approach and “interpret the personality and work of others” (4: 164).

Impressionist criticism, says Gilbert, “has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing” (4: 154). In other words, criticism, like art, has intrinsic value. Impressionist criticism is autonomous, for it “treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation” (4: 157). The emphasis on constantly creating new forms tends to erase social context; the past is not worth considering. The separation of form from content enables the reader to create new interpretations at will. According to Gilbert,

> The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem. (4: 159)

Because Wilde wants to define aesthetic experience as a unique realm while at the same time leaving relativist room for a variety of subjective responses to any given art object, he must locate the defining characteristic of the aesthetic in the art object. To do so, he relies on a new version of a venerable idea: aesthetic disinterestedness. The difference is that this disinterestedness is a guaranteed result of aesthetic form, not an ideal that the perceiver strives to attain.

> “The Critic as Artist” appeared in July and September 1880. That same summer, between June and August, Wilde’s letters to the press defending *Dorian Gray* echoed
Gilbert’s statements about the separation of form from subject matter—a separation which meant that the artist was authorized to treat any subject, even immoral behavior. The Soul of Man includes Wilde’s admission that, although they may be separated “intellectually,” “form and substance cannot be separated in a work of art” and necessarily produce a single “aesthetic impression” (4: 253-54). However, his more programmatic insistence on the divorce between form and matter has dominated the reception of his ideas on aesthetic disinterestedness and autonomy. For instance, Susan Sontag, whose “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964) are dedicated to Wilde, identifies Wilde as a pivotal figure in the formation of a new, formalist aesthetic sensibility that, by divorcing aesthetic success from moral content, culminates in “Camp taste.”

Intriguingly, Sontag links the formalism of Wilde’s aesthetics and of Camp taste to their shared emphasis on subjectivity. Camp, according to Sontag, is primarily a mode of relating to objects, and not an attribute of objects. Sontag initially identifies Camp as “one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. . . . not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (277, emphasis in original). For Sontag,

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14 Sontag’s “note” #47 explains that Wilde is “a transitional figure” between old-style dandyism, which relies on the rareness of objects as a sign of aesthetic worth, and a “more modern” Camp sensibility directed toward mass-produced objects: “It was Wilde who formulated an important element of the Camp sensibility—the equivalence of all objects—when he announced his intention of ‘living up’ to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a door-knob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonniere, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic esprit of Camp” (289). Aestheticism and Camp are both forms of dandyism (288). Where the nineteenth-century dandy’s sensibility fetishized special objects like “Latin poetry and rare wines and velvet jackets,” the Camp sensibility is a special mode of relating to objects, deriving pleasure even from the vulgar and mass-produced (289).

Bourdieu similarly observes that for those who cannot afford to solidify their class status by owning fine art, developing a unique mode of aesthetic appreciation is an alternate strategy for accumulating symbolic capital. For instance, an intellectual who appreciates kitsch is pursuing one of “the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power . . . to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, but in another mode, by other classes or class fractions” (282).
depoliticization is the corollary of such formalism: “To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (277). By setting aside moral and political concerns, Sontag claims, Camp’s formalist sensibility frees the spectator to enjoy all sorts of objects, not just fine art: “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy” (291). The obvious objection to Sontag’s reading of formalism is that ignoring politics is in fact a political move. But what I wish to highlight is the fact that Sontag narrows the debate over whether Wilde’s aesthetics are “moral” to the question of whether or not formalism can suspend political and ethical judgments.

Sontag’s essay, full of acute observations about Wilde and Camp, rehearses some of the central, and productive, confusions surrounding the aesthetic. Sometimes she seems aware of these confusions, and sometimes she seems to enact them unconsciously. For instance, although most of Sontag’s essay emphasizes aesthetic consumption and the spectator’s taste or sensibility, she does explicitly point out the duality of the aesthetic, the way it is an attribute of both subjects and objects. More directly relevant to my discussion of the way Wilde emphasizes the subjective pole of the aesthetic situation is the fact that, seemingly unwittingly, Sontag rehearses the conundrum of how subjective experiences can give rise to judgments about objects. After all, she identifies Camp as “a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment” (291). Yet, she says, despite being a

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15 Despite initially defining Camp as a mode of perception, Sontag later identifies it as both “a way of looking things” and “a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons” (277). “True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience,” she continues, “But not everything can be seen as Camp. It’s not all in the eye of the beholder” (277, emphasis in original). Perception may not determine reality, but it does have the upper hand in Sontag’s essay.
mode of pleasure, the Camp sensibility gives rise to judgments based on purely aesthetic standards (286).

In Sontag’s account, the spectator with Camp sensibility faces both mass culture and a great many art objects that fail to turn serious moral intentions into effects. The Camp response is playfulness and pleasure, not anger at moral failure. The individual with Camp taste is able to glean some kind of self-nourishment from aesthetic encounters, even under the conditions of late capitalist vulgarity. Sontag’s account of Camp thus incorporates a vision of aesthetic experience catalyzing human flourishing, in however circumscribed a manner. Many of Sontag’s observations about Camp could apply equally to Wilde’s aesthetics, and I would argue that this is one of them. Wilde likewise has a narrowly circumscribed vision of art’s ethical functioning. For Wilde, art’s autonomy from moral and material concerns is the precondition for its contribution to individual self-development.

Art’s autonomy is grounded not just in formalism, but also in the artwork’s inutility. Characteristically, Wilde takes assertions of art’s inutility to avant-garde extremes. As Vivian puts it,

> The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art. (4: 82)

For both Arnold and Ruskin, the disinterestedness of the aesthetic experience provided access to some kind of freedom or distance from self-interest and our own subjective

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16 The “somebody” is Gautier, in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) (Wilde 4: 376-77n82.21).
limitations. Wilde changes the way that art’s inutility and separation from life underwrite its disinterestedness. The relationship between subject and object is supremely disinterested in that it is divorced from needs, actions, and consequences. However, because the aesthetic encounter is inescapably shaped (even produced) by the perceiver’s subjectivity, the encounter is not disinterested in the sense of being unbiased. Inutility comes to serve as evidence of art’s intrinsic value and its separation from life, from the social and ethical, but without taking the spectator beyond his subjective limitations and preferences.

Art is now about intensifying personality, and Wilde’s Gilbert emphasizes that the ideal critic will not be fair:

> It is only about things that do not interest one that one can give a really unbiassed opinion, which is no doubt the reason why an unbiassed opinion is always absolutely valueless. The man who sees both sides of a question, is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all. . . . It is only an auctioneer who can equally and impartially admire all schools of Art. No: fairness is not one of the qualities of the true critic. . . . We must surrender ourselves absolutely to the work in question, whatever it may be, if we wish to gain its secret. (4: 188, my emphasis)

Economic evaluation here serves as the opposite of aesthetic evaluation, but not for the reason we might expect. It is instructive to compare Gilbert’s remarks on disinterestedness with earlier versions that Wilde published in his own voice. On March 22, 1890, four months before “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde’s review of Pater’s *Appreciations* appeared in the *Speaker*. Wilde begins by explaining his youthful attachment to Pater’s essays in *The Renaissance*, which became to me “the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty.” They are still this to me. It is possible, of course, that I may exaggerate about them. I certainly hope that I do; for where there is no
exaggeration there is no love, and where there is no love there is no understanding. It is only about things that do not interest one, that one can give a really unbiased opinion; and this is no doubt the reason why an unbiased opinion is always valueless. (Collected 13: 539, my emphasis)

Nonetheless, Wilde moves on to describe Pater’s new essays, lest his review “degenerate into an autobiography” (13: 539). Gilbert is more daring, asserting, “That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one’s own soul” (4: 154).

A more compressed version of Gilbert’s remarks appeared four years earlier in Wilde’s “To Read or Not to Read” for the Pall Mall Gazette (February 8, 1886). This brief piece of journalism pokes fun at his own editor, W.T. Stead, who had recently convinced prominent men including Ruskin, Morris, and Algernon Swinburne, to contribute lists of the “Best Hundred Books.” Wilde suggests that it is more important to compile “The Worst Hundred Books” for readers to avoid (Collected 13: 43-44). Although he declines to list the best books, Wilde does suggest that the Greek Anthology, Poe, and Baudelaire should be added, perhaps at the expense of Southey and Keble:

No doubt, both in [Southey’s] the Curse of Kehama and in [Keble’s] the Christian Year there are poetic qualities of a certain kind, but absolute catholicity of taste is not without its dangers. It is only an auctioneer who should admire all schools of art. (13: 44, my emphasis)

17 Stead’s project originated in a classic Victorian attempt to edify the lower orders. Inspired by Sir John Lubbock’s list of the best hundred books for working men, Stead asked a number of prominent men to identify the “Best Hundred Books.” The compilation of such lists was not an exercise in disinterested evaluation, as at least some participants recognized. In their replies to Stead, both Swinburne and Morris made it clear that their lists were based on personal taste. Swinburne went so far as to write,

I do not think—judging from what I have seen—that any man’s or woman’s opinion on the relative value of a hundred books of all kinds which he or she might select as the most precious to humanity in general could itself be of any value to any one not concerned in the diagnosis of that man’s or woman’s morbid development of intellectual presumption and moral audacity. (Letters 5: 131; see also Morris Letters 2B: 514-17)

Writing in the journal Progress, S. Britton similarly noted that the book lists published in the Pall Mall Gazette could hardly be considered definitive, but would doubtless garner readers interested in celebrities’ tastes (March 1886).
Wilde’s aphorism about auctioneers and art is highly suggestive. Through rhetorical sleight-of-hand, Wilde, like his character Gilbert, translates lack of bias into lack of discrimination. The Arnoldian critic’s ability to judge disinterestedly becomes the auctioneer’s ability to admire indiscriminately. The auctioneer’s economic interest, paradoxically, both denies the possibility of disinterested judgment, and epitomizes impartiality. On the one hand, his aesthetic responses are polluted by sordid commercial motives. On the other, when all art objects can be exchanged for cash, it is impossible to have a prejudice against any particular one. The fungibility of the commodified artwork negates any estimate that, in Arnold’s terms, is merely “personal” or “historical.”

To return to “The Critic as Artist,” the key point here is that, in keeping with an emphasis on the perceiving subject as the determining factor in the aesthetic encounter, Gilbert proposes that the individual personality is in no way a block to interpretation (4: 164). Interestingly, despite the fact that Gilbert reverses Arnold’s dictum about seeing the object as in itself it really is, his rampant subjectivism leads to the same result as Arnold’s objectivism: a retreat into abstraction. Arnold’s object-centered aesthetics tends to diminish his vocabulary for talking about the subjective processes and social conditions that shape aesthetic experience. Wilde’s fiction, like Dorian Gray and the hard-to-classify “Portrait of Mr. W.H.” (1889), does explore a vocabulary for describing the pursuit of sensation and the experience of aesthetic pleasure. But his most self-conscious criticism, by which I mean Intentions and De Profundis, has recourse to abstract assertions about “Art” with a capital “A.” Even Arnold did not award such fetishistic typographical distinction to “culture.”
Given that both men make lofty claims for abstract categories of aesthetic objects, we might pause to enquire why Wilde, unlike Arnold, did not serve as a scapegoat in late-twentieth-century controversies about canon formation and aesthetic ideology. One answer is that, unlike Arnold, Wilde pairs his claims for the autonomy of aesthetic objects with an insistence that the perceiver’s subjectivity shapes, or even determines, perceptions of such objects. This subjectivism is at odds with Arnold’s object-centered model, which takes the innate characteristics of art objects as the definitive ingredient in aesthetic experience. Furthermore, Wilde promulgates an anti-essentialist account of subjectivity that further protects him from accusations of promoting bourgeois hierarchies. Yet, as I demonstrate below, the Wildean subject, however fluidly constituted, is problematically isolated. In *The Soul of Man*, this fact will have serious repercussions for the way in which Wilde uses the relation between unstable perceiving subject and autotelic aesthetic object to configure the ideal relation between individual and society.

Unlike the stable, self-regulating subject of bourgeois aesthetic ideology, Wilde’s perceiving subject is fluid, porous, performative: in sum, anti-essentialist. The familiar critique of bourgeois subjectivity is that self-regulation is merely the internalization of power. Consequently, unstable, desire-driven Wildean subjectivity can seem a liberating alternative. However, I argue that any celebration of Wilde’s anti-essentialism should acknowledge the paradox that even as Wilde theorizes an unstable aesthetic subjectivity, he simultaneously models the perceiving subject on a category of objects for which he makes essentializing claims. That is, the subject is restricted by Wilde’s claims for the
autotelic artwork’s self-sufficiency in a way that erases social context, thus rendering the subject grandly isolated. In his dialogues and in *The Soul of Man*, Wilde ignores the subject’s existence in, and formation by, social interaction. The result is an ethical aesthetics with no place for the social.

For instance, in “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert explains that the ideal critic is not sincere, meaning that the critic is open to change and does not hold onto any single idea or custom. Gilbert takes Arnold’s idea that culture will unsettle dogma and allow a fresh stream of thought to flow around old subjects to an almost paradoxical extreme. Gilbert’s ideal critic “will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view” to such a degree that it calls into question what Wilde in “Pen Pencil and Poison” calls “[t]he permanence of personality” (4: 189, 118). Change and inconsistency are good; they are a method of development. “What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities,” Gilbert declares airily (4: 189). Early in the dialogue, Gilbert rises from the piano and remarks,

> 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. Music always seems to me to produce that effect. It creates for one a past of which one has been ignorant, and fills one with a sense of sorrows that have been hidden from one’s tears. I can fancy a man who had led a perfectly commonplace life, hearing by chance some curious piece of music, and suddenly discovering his soul, without his being conscious of it, had passed through terrible experiences, and known fearful joys, or wild romantic loves, or great renunciations. (4: 127-28)

This passage anticipates how Gilbert will use the sociologist Herbert Spencer’s (1820-1903) inaccurate evolutionary theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics in
order to theorize how art and biology combine powers to allow the anti-essentialist subject to experience sensations and points of view not his own.

Wilde’s Oxford notebooks include entries on Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862) and *The Study of Sociology* (1873). Unlike Darwin’s, Spencer’s evolutionary thinking relies heavily upon the inheritance of acquired characteristics. This hypothesis originated with Lamarck, who theorized that over its lifetime, an organism can gain traits that are then passed down to offspring.¹⁸ For Lamarck and for Spencer, species change is the cumulative effect of such inheritances. Where Darwinian natural selection does not provide any mechanism whereby ideas and impressions can influence matter, Spencer’s Lamarckian theory does. Since humans are shaped by culture as well as by physical environment, the cumulative effects of ancestral cultural experiences are passed down to the next generation. Unfortunately, Spencer used this theory to buttress racist ideology, arguing that Europeans inherited both more brain matter and more cultural memory than did people from other parts of the world (Smith & Helfand 226-27n67).

¹⁸ Darwin did not originate the idea of species change. His accomplishment was to identify a persuasive mechanism for that change: natural selection, whereby organisms best adapted to their habitats are most likely to survive and reproduce similar offspring. *Origin of Species* (1859) identifies natural selection as “the main but not exclusive source of modification” (75). In *Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin theorizes that a second evolutionary mechanism, sexual selection, explains the presence of characteristics, such as colorful plumage, that do not confer an obvious benefit in the struggle for survival. These characteristics instead confer an advantage in the struggle to reproduce, as male birds with the most spectacular plumage have an advantage attracting mates.

*Origin of Species* went through many editions, and though the fifth edition (1869) accepted the likely role of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, this Lamarckian explanation was never as central to Darwin’s thinking as it was to Spencer’s. Importantly, Darwin was also more skeptical than Spencer was of the teleological thrust of Lamarck’s thinking, in which change connoted progress, rather than non-teleological adaptation to environment. Twentieth-century genetics discredited the possibility that the inheritance of acquired characteristics plays a meaningful role in evolution. However, recent work in epigenetics provides evidence that, at least in some plants, changes in how genes express themselves during an organism’s lifetime may sometimes affect the phenotype of future generations (Bird 396).
As Smith and Helfand point out in their edition of Wilde’s Oxford notebooks, Wilde latches onto the theory that culture, ideas, and experiences could be a biological inheritance from one’s ancestors (28-29). “The Critic as Artist” suggests that impressions drawn from art supplement the meager range of impressions that the individual subject receives from his own life experiences. Drawing on Spencer to translate this idea into biological terms, Gilbert proposes that the individual inherits the historical and artistic experiences of “the race” (4: 176-77). Gilbert identifies imagination with biologized collective memory, which he calls “concentrated race-experience” (4: 178). When, channeling this collective memory or “soul,” we can sympathize with all moods and all of history, “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. . . . It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode” (4: 177). The gothic undertones of this passage make Gilbert’s anti-essentialist account of experience, multiplied personalities, and collective soul sound a bit like a case of demonic possession.

_The Picture of Dorian Gray_, Wilde’s updated version of the Faust legend, represents the multiplication of personality in similar, and similarly uncanny, terms. Dorian falls under the spell of a “poisonous book” about a man who pursues sensation and attempts “to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed” (3: 274). In Dorian’s opinion, it is foolish to imagine that “Ego” is “a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence” (3: 288). Underlining this point, he gazes at ancestral portraits and wonders whether he is reliving his
predecessors’ lives (3: 288-89). In addition to the multiplication of personality through literal heredity, Dorian also multiplies his personality through imaginative engagement with history: “There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions” (3: 289). In keeping with the tale’s darkly decadent atmosphere, Dorian imagines himself in the roles of historical tyrants like Caligula (3: 289-90).

In comparison, Gilbert’s anti-essentialist account of experience is uncanny, but hardly so sinister. Gilbert suggests, in Arnoldian fashion, that pursuing new sensations and viewpoints through aesthetic contemplation will ultimately benefit the group. The individual subject’s experiences will pass into biologized collective memory and be inherited by the next generation. Gilbert’s biological-cultural theory of heredity depicts the subject as a porous entity open to alien sensations and viewpoints. Collective memory “can teach us how to escape from our experience, and to realize the experiences of those who are greater than we are”; it “can help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages” (4: 177). Importantly, however, the subject’s transactions with the outside world are relegated to “other ages,” to absorbing impressions from the past, and transmitting them to the future.

Gilbert’s temporal scheme in “The Critic as Artist” is simply one of the ways in which Wilde theorizes a perceiving subject that, although anti-essentialist, porous, and insincere, is unaccountably isolated from alterity. Wilde never theorizes the possibility of an object that resists the perceiving subject. There is no friction between the porous
Wildean self and its outside, whether that outside is constituted by an art object or by humanity’s entire past history. Difference is seamlessly assimilated to the self. No resistance, conflict, or negotiation is ever involved. Not only in “The Critic as Artist” but throughout his oeuvre, Wilde’s account of aesthetic experience fails to acknowledge that there might be an object that cannot be smoothly assimilated to the viewer’s subjectivity. Because Wilde’s aesthetics inform his ethics, his theory of the individual’s relation to the group consequently suffers as he imagines that this relation could be as frictionless as the aesthetic experience he describes. Wilde celebrates individual pleasure and simply ignores the question of how such subjective pleasure might undergird judgments that are non-rational but shared. For this reason, as we will see when I discuss *The Soul of Man*, his vision of how aesthetic experience contributes to human flourishing and even his vision of a socialist future seem more like escapist fantasies than like utopian challenges to the status quo.

The opening of the dialogue “The Decay of Lying” registers not just Wilde’s valorization of artifice, but also the isolated—or perhaps more accurately, insulated—nature of aesthetic experience for the Wildean subject. Cyril tries to convince the younger Vivian to come outside and “enjoy Nature” (4: 73). Vivian objects that he prefers to remain inside, where “Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and pleasure” (4: 74). In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert also suggests that art provides safety or escape.

*Ernest.* Must we go, then, to Art for everything?

*Gilbert.* For everything. Because art does not hurt us. . . . It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and
through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence. (4: 173)

Through his speakers, Wilde dramatizes the possibility that part of art’s attraction is that it offers a degree of control impossible in life. “There is no mood or passion that Art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be. We can choose our day and select our hour,” Gilbert declares (4: 167-68). Though the perceiving subject can develop, the art object remains static, always available to offer an identical experience. Gilbert’s assertion about art always offering the same experience is at odds with Wilde’s suggestions that art mirrors the spectator. One would think that if the spectator changes, then what he sees in art would change, too.

Gilbert asserts that literature is greater than the visual arts because it can contain more emotions and experiences, and can express change over time, all while keeping this variety eternally available (4: 151-52). As examples, Gilbert describes the experiences of reading Dante and Baudelaire (4: 167-72). Speaking of his own feelings as a reader, Gilbert observes, “It is a strange thing, this transference of emotion. We sicken with the same maladies as the poets, and the singer lends us his pain. Dead lips have their message for us, and hearts that have fallen to dust can communicate their joy” (4: 172). Wilde’s use of the present tense and the first person plural in these passages suggest that Gilbert’s descriptions are meant to evoke for the reader a sensation of sharing Gilbert’s reactions to Dante and Baudelaire. Yet the hint that the aesthetic may be an arena in which present-day subjects come to share judgments remains merely a hint. The emotional transaction is between the individual reader and the dead poet. Overall, the emphasis seems to be on
how art offers repeated access to specific sensations and emotions, not on how those experiences can become shared (4: 167).

Surprisingly, even Wilde’s use of the dialogue form contributes to a model of isolated subjectivity. In choosing to write a critical dialogue rather than univocal treatise, Wilde was following both classical and contemporary models. Writers like Vernon Lee and H.D. Traill contributed dialogues to Victorian periodicals (4: xliii, xliii n58). In an entertaining metacritical touch, Gilbert and Ernest discuss the multivocality that dialogue affords (4: 186-87). When Ernest notes that the dialogue writer “can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument,” Gilbert responds,

Ah! it is so easy to convert others. It is so difficult to convert oneself. To arrive at what one really believes, one must speak through lips different from one’s own. To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one’s last mood. (4: 187)

Gilbert, a character in a dialogue, articulates the view that the author of a dialogue can use the form to explore possibilities internal to the self. This self contains a series of opinions, sensations, and moods. Gilbert does not suggest that the dialogue form enables writer or reader to encounter anything outside this shifting self.

At the end of “The Critic as Artist,” when it seems that Ernest is about to accede to Gilbert’s theories, Gilbert exclaims, “Ah! don’t say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong” (4: 199). Ernest obliges by refraining from stating his opinion of Gilbert’s aesthetics. Ernest’s silence may simply be Wilde’s tactic for refusing final interpretation or truth. Yet Gilbert’s disavowal of the
desire to persuade is suggestive. He prefers that his opinion remain unique and
oppositional rather than shared. Thus, despite all Gilbert’s sensuous descriptions of the
mystical world created by art, this dialogue stands as an anti-example to the question I
have been treating as a defining one for the aesthetic: the question of how judgments
based on subjective reactions become socially recognized.

Although I take issue with both Arnold’s and Wilde’s different claims for art’s
autonomy and disinterestedness, my purpose is not to discredit them, but to show how the
claims they make for aesthetic autonomy are an extension of their (again, different)
ethical visions. My overall purpose is to demonstrate the extent to which, even within the
scope of a geographically and historically circumscribed discourse like Victorian cultural
criticism, the aesthetic did not have a predictable ideological function. We saw how
Arnold hoped that “culture” would provide a “much-wanted source of authority” in a
society he feared was degenerating into anarchy (C&A 70). Arnold’s ethical aesthetics
relied on the edifying qualities of great poems. Because of humanity’s natural taste for
bathos, he thought, we need something external to press us to relish the sublime. We must
continually strive for disinterestedness, though our human nature may render its
achievement impossible. In Wilde’s thought, however, the ethical principle is a potential
located within each individual subject, waiting to develop. Wilde and Arnold both want
people to interrogate their habitual assumptions, but Arnold sees “culture” as the way to
achieve this goal while Wilde tends toward paradox, epigram, and counter-cultural
performance in order to challenge convention.
The Soul of Man: Radical Independence

One’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living. . . . Now, nothing should be able to harm a man except himself. Nothing should be able to rob a man at all. What a man really has, is what is in him. What is outside of him should be a matter of no importance.

—Wilde (4: 238)

The interaction between the autotelic artwork and the “biased” subject whose personality is no impediment to interpretation provides the model for Wilde’s argument that human flourishing consists of a breathtaking freedom to follow the laws of one’s own being. This ethical goal exhibits the dynamics of both aesthetic autonomy and individuated taste. For Wilde, art’s separation from life does not function primarily to provide critical distance from the status quo and self-interest. Rather, it functions to provide a realm of attenuated consequences where one can realize one’s personality without being impeded by the claims or desires of others. As a side effect of their claims for art’s moral utility, both Ruskin and Arnold somewhat inadvertently promoted the idea that the aesthetic is an autonomous realm. Wilde embraces the idea because, in the words of the narrator of “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” aesthetic autonomy means that art can be an “imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life” where one can “realize one’s own personality” or develop according to one’s own internal laws (152). In this way, the developing human subject resembles the autotelic artwork. For Wilde, human flourishing is not primarily a matter of norms, interdependence, or social order.
Wilde’s aesthetic and ethical emphasis on development according to internal laws, whether of art or of personality, tends to disembod from social context not just the art object and the aesthetic encounter, but also the subject’s resulting growth. Instead of using the aesthetic to reconcile individual to society or to model a noncoercive consensus, Wilde uses the aesthetic to configure an ethical vision of the individual’s freedom not just from constraint, but even, I argue, from interdependence and relationship. Of all the authors in my study, Wilde comes closest to endorsing the now-hegemonic model of taste that Gagnier has labeled “individuation.” For Wilde, different tastes are to be expressed and celebrated, not explained, because they are simply an expression of the individual. As we saw in Chapter 2, Gagnier has shown how individuation disconnects art and consumption from comparisons across persons, and from norms other than individual desire, thus negating the ability to read such choices the way Ruskin did: as a sign of society’s moral health and of the status of relationships among people. My reading of The Soul of Man will analyze how Wilde’s idealist metaphysics and his anti-authoritarianism, coupled with his Spencerian understanding of evolution, contribute to an individuated ethics in which social contexts recede into the background. However, as I will demonstrate, Wilde never quite succeeds in erasing the uneasy possibility that one’s self-development might impinge on others, and that the individual’s ethical development might be bound up in, rather than antithetical to, the social.

Wilde’s ethics are underpinned by an idealist metaphysics that militates against the social. For Wilde, as for many philosophers since Plato, contemplation is higher than action. Wilde’s Oxford notebooks include notes on Hegel’s and Plato’s statements about
the superiority of contemplation and philosophy over action in the social sphere

(\textit{Notebooks} 189/145-46). His notes on Pater’s essay “On Wordsworth” (1874) sound a similar theme:

\begin{quote}
The end of life is not action but contemplation, not doing but being: to treat life in the spirit of art is to treat it as a thing in which means and end are identified—To witness the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions[.]
To withdraw the thoughts from the machinery of life to fix them with appropriate emotions on the great facts of human life which machinery does not affect [.] (172A/141-42)
\end{quote}

Wilde not only considered such idealist sentiments worth noting, he reused them in “The Critic as Artist.” Echoing Wilde’s notes on Pater, Gilbert declares that “the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not \textit{doing} but \textit{being}, and not \textit{being} merely, but \textit{becoming}—that is what the critical spirit can give us” (4: 178, emphasis in original). Like the gods, Gilbert imagines, we could “set ourselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature afford” (4: 178-79). He does not indicate what “appropriate” emotion might be.

Gilbert denigrates action, calling it “a blind thing dependent on external influences, and moved by an impulse of whose nature it is unconscious. It is a thing incomplete in its essence, because limited by accident, and ignorant of its direction, being always at variance with its aim” (4: 147). The idealism of this passage implies that the purity and self-sufficiency of the realm of ideas and essences is superior to the realm of matter and accidentals. Gilbert’s rejection of action is also a rejection of life and of the social. Art produces emotion for its own sake; life produces “emotion for the sake of action” (4: 174). This rejection of the social culminates in Gilbert’s declaration that “All art is immoral”—in other words, autonomous (4: 174).
Wendell V. Harris’s “Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It” (1971) focuses on Platonic idealism to explain why Gilbert, and Wilde, treat art’s autonomy as a necessary condition for its ethical functioning. According to Harris, Wilde out-idealizes Plato:

As everyone knows, Plato condemns art for being merely an imitation of appearance, which in itself is only a poor imitation of the ideal. The obvious lines of rebuttal are two: one can argue that art is not an imitation but a means of transcending experience and gaining direct access to the world of ideal forms; or one can argue that art is not an imitation but a wholly new creation which is of interest in itself. Wilde accepts the position that imitation per se is paltry . . . and takes the second route, that art and criticism are valuable precisely because they create something wholly new. Art and criticism thus become identified, except that criticism, being further removed from experience, is more creative. Plato is inverted, and the further one moves from immediate experience, the more creative one is. (Harris 743)

Harris’s description of Wilde’s high-flown claims for criticism is helpful as far as it goes, but it seems inaccurate to identify the underlying dynamic as one of “inverted” Platonism. Wilde in fact shares Plato’s preference for removal from material experience. He takes Plato’s ideal of contemplation to an extreme, just as he takes earlier nineteenth-century claims for aesthetic autonomy to an extreme. Harris is more interested than I am in what metaphysical systems Arnold, Pater, and Wilde implicitly adopt. I want instead to highlight how the aesthetic is an arena in which there is socially-mediated negotiation over claims about objects and about subjective impressions. Because Harris focuses on Wilde’s use of Plato, he does not discuss how Wilde uses the aesthetic to envision a highly individuated model of human flourishing (as autonomy and autotelic self-realization) that resolves the conflict between individual and group basically by doing away with the group. Wilde’s ethical goal differs from that of earlier theorists, who saw
the aesthetic as a means to imagine (or defuse) tensions between individual desire and group consensus. This asocial dynamic appears even in his most explicitly political piece of criticism, *The Soul of Man*.

When Wilde first published *The Soul of Man* in the *Fortnightly Review* under the title “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (February 1891), debates over the relationship between socialism and individualism, which were assumed to be incompatible, were appearing in the British press. Moving to reconcile these two supposed opposites, Wilde argues that socialism will allow a larger percentage of the population to develop their individuality. The main political characteristics of Wilde’s socialism are the abolition of private property and the abolition of authority. The abolition of authority is a natural outgrowth of Wilde’s argument that the artist should be free from any kind of authority, whether of government censorship or public demand. He expands his anti-authoritarian position to include any kind of political authority. For Wilde, even democratically elected political authority is wrong (4: 244, 261-62). He seems to be advocating something close to anarchy, since government’s only role should be to produce and distribute necessities (4: 246). Wilde is against authoritarian forms of socialism that would dictate what work people would do and for how long. Such a situation would be incompatible with realizing one’s personality, which he regards as the goal of life.

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19 Between the 1880s and 1910, there was a political movement called “Individualism.” Wilde shares some of its libertarian positions, but not its defense of private property and its antipathy to collectivism (4: 555-56n233.7). An Individualist group, the Liberty and Property Defence League, pursued a propaganda campaign that included pamphleteering and public debates between Socialists and Individualists (4: lxix n97).

20 Wilde’s emphasis on individuality and how society stifles it has some parallels with Mill’s complaints about how custom and conformity hamper the cultivation of genius and individuality. See “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being” in Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859).
Individualism can develop under socialism because no one will be concerned about survival, because no one will be distracted from developing his own perfection by performing pointless reform efforts that only act as band aids on a broken social system, and, finally, because without capitalist competition, people will realize that they should expand their being, not their property. Wilde writes,

Under the new conditions [i.e., socialism] Individualism will be far freer, far finer, and far more intensified than it is now. I am not talking of the great imaginatively-realized Individualism of such poets as I have mentioned, but of the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally. For the recognition of private property has really harmed Individualism, and obscured it, by confusing a man with what he possesses. It has led Individualism entirely astray. It has made gain not growth its aim. So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be. The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is. (4: 237)\(^2\)

In Wilde’s socialist utopia, individuals will no longer conflate having with being.

Realizing our personalities, developing our own perfection, requires freedom and individualism, not just material security. Realizing one’s personality appears to be, for Wilde, the ultimate good.

In seeking to reconcile “Individualism” and socialism, Wilde is addressing the same problem that Ruskin and Arnold used the aesthetic to wrestle with: the relationship between individual and group, the likely incompatibility between individual desire and common good. For Wilde, this reconciliation can only occur in two spheres: in art and in a utopian future. Notably, in Wilde’s theory, art does not reconcile individual needs to group needs so much as it provides a sphere of attenuated claims and attenuated consequences in which a few individuals (necessarily those who have material security)

\(^2\) The final sentence was underlined in the MS and italicized in the *Fortnightly Review*, but not in volume publication.
are able to realize their personalities under current conditions. Self-realized individuals will pursue a policy of non-interference toward others.

According to Wilde, the claims of others, and particularly the claims of authority, coupled with material insecurity and perhaps with other conditions that limit action, mean that it has never been possible to pursue Individualism (that is, to realize one’s personality) in the sphere of life and action. Even paragons like Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius, hampered by the claims of others and by the insecurity of political power, did not achieve “the full expression of a personality in the realm of action” (4: 239). Art has been the only sphere in which an individual could realize his personality (4: 239). As Wilde puts it, “Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism that the world has known” (4: 248). The artist is the summit of human flourishing: “The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself” (4: 252). Likewise, the true Individualist will be “perfectly and absolutely himself” (4: 243).

Wilde elaborates on the idea that reference to any kind of authority (whether it is public demand or government censorship or periodical reviewers) is fatal to artistic creation (4: 248-62). He almost defines art’s value against public taste, asserting that artists must ignore the public in order to produce good work (4: 248, 252-53, 259). The creation of art is asocial, if not downright autotelic: “But alone, without any reference to his neighbours, without any interference, the artist can fashion a beautiful thing; and if he does not do it solely for his own pleasure, he is not an artist at all” (4: 248). Likewise, Wilde’s ideal individual develops without reference to authority and according to internal
imperatives.22 “[T]he true personality of man,” Wilde declares, will not “admit any laws but its own laws; nor any authority but its own authority” (4: 239-40). This ideal individual resembles the autotelic artwork.

But what of the possibility that “realizing one’s personality” and pursuing one’s own desires will interfere with other people’s projects of realizing their personalities? In The Picture of Dorian Gray, when Dorian enacts Lord Henry’s directive “‘to live his life out fully and completely . . . to give form to every feeling, expression to every thought, reality to every dream’” the result, directly or indirectly, is two suicides (Sybil Vane and Alan Campbell), a murder (Basil Hallward), accidental homicide (James Vane), and Dorian’s own ambiguous, self-inflicted demise (3: 21). Yet in The Soul of Man, Wilde proposes that a similar project of realizing one’s personality contributes to the common good. Under current conditions, the “sordid necessity of living for others,” means that only an exceptional man like Darwin, Keats, or Flaubert is able to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others, to stand “under the shelter of the wall,” as Plato puts it, and so to realize the perfection of what was in him, to his own incomparable gain, and to the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world. (4: 231, my emphasis)

22 In his Oxford notes on “Punishment as a motive,” Wilde was already focusing on internal ethical imperatives (emphasis in original). He writes,

Whether the dead rise or not it is at least a good thing to have fought with the beasts of unrighteousness at Ephesus or elsewhere• the incapacity of severe criminal legislation to produce higher morality or even order may be paralleled by feeble practical influence exercised on men by the conceptions of heaven and hell: nothing speaks so well for the noble nature of man as his showy indifference to any system of rewards or punishments either heavenly or terrestrial• (Notebooks 115)

Although Wilde here echoes Shaftesbury’s distaste for systems of religious rewards, his rejection is differently inflected. For Shaftesbury, the pursuit of heavenly rewards amounted to a system of bribery that undermined the love of good for its own sake. Wilde, in contrast, expresses admiration not for disinterested love of the good, but for the rejection of any external inducements or constraints, whether religious or governmental.
Here the great man’s contribution to “the whole world” depends upon his ability to isolate himself from “clamorous claims” in order to develop his innate potential. However shifting and unstable the Wildean subject may be, it is undeniably asocial in its avoidance not just of “authority” but also of the “claims” of others. And social relationships inevitably involve claims. Wilde imagines a utopian future where even outside the sphere of art, people will cease impinging on each other. The individual subject’s contribution to the common good is simply to pursue his own perfection while refraining from interfering with others who are doing the same.

Elsewhere in *The Soul of Man*, Wilde reiterates the suggestion that autotelic self-realization aligns neatly with the common good. Today’s Individualists “are the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men, the men who have realized themselves, and in whom all Humanity gains a partial realization” (4: 233, my emphasis). If a man is subject to any external compulsion, “his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others” (4: 236). Similarly, Wilde asserts, the fully developed human personality “will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is” (4: 240).

Despite this brief talk of love, *The Soul of Man* rejects the popular Victorian moral emphasis on sympathy as an affective, interpersonal solution to societal conflict. In fact, Wilde proposes that sympathy and altruism perpetuate the unjust social system by making it bearable, when it would be better to allow people to realize the dreadfulness of
the system and rebel against it. This stance has the added benefit of allowing him to produce witty aphorisms like “Charity creates a multitude of sins” (4: 232). According to Wilde, the most common form of sympathy under private property is sympathy with pain. He would like to see a future where, no longer competing economically, people can sympathize with each other’s joy. Yet this vision of “wider sympathy” is coupled to a future where humanity sounds like an incredibly varied array of monads who, despite their “wider sympathy” could barely be socially legible to each other as they pursue their idiosyncratic desires. In Wilde’s paradigm, “unselfishness is letting other people’s lives alone, not interfering with them” (4: 264-65).

Wilde once again harnesses evolutionary theory to his vision of personalities growing perfect according to their own internal laws. “Evolution is the law of life, and there is no evolution except towards Individualism,” he writes (4: 263). Wilde is referring to Spencer’s theory that evolution results in increased differentiation between organisms. A stricter understanding of Darwin shows that evolution occurs through non-teleological interaction of a species with its environment, not through some principle of development that is internal to each unique organism. However, popular understandings of evolution, both in the 1890s and today, often equate evolution with teleological change motivated by a principle of development.

Appealing to evolution gives Wilde a pseudo-scientific basis for his assertion that each individual contains a principle of growth and development. However, he overlooks an important part of Spencer’s application of evolution to sociology. Spencer’s theory of differentiation accounted for the increasing division of labor as human civilizations
developed from tribes of hunter-gatherers to cities of specialized workers. Far from modeling autonomy or self-sufficiency, the division of labor meant that people increasingly relied upon others for the goods and services necessary to survival and comfort. By appropriating Spencer’s theory in order to support his proposal that individuals can and should develop autonomously according to their own internal imperatives, Wilde is neglecting the flip side of increased differentiation: increased interdependence. He reads the division of labor as if it were not a theory of social relations, but a theory of how individuals pursue their different inclinations. Spencer himself optimistically held that increasing differentiation would, spontaneously, be accompanied by greater cooperation among interdependent individuals. On a practical level, this meant that he supported a severely limited role for government, since social cooperation would proceed from natural laws. Wilde’s vision replaces spontaneous cooperation with the equally unlikely dynamic of universal non-interference: no one will impinge on anyone else. From a pluralist perspective, Wilde’s emphasis on autonomous development is a liberating alternative to Victorian conformity. “There is no one type for man,” Wilde writes, “There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men” (4: 243). Although Wilde’s insistence on the validity of individual desire can be refreshing, his focus on it is so relentless that he appears strangely complacent about the ease with which the diversity of individual desires contribute to the common good.

Wilde’s complacence contrasts with Ruskin’s and Arnold’s thinking on the same topic. Ruskin attempted to align individual desire and common good by imagining society in paternalistic terms as a network of interdependent beings who, though unequal,
rely upon and care for each other because their interests are ultimately allied. Arnold tried
to solve the problem by offering culture as an education in desire, an education that
would bring order to the anarchy that he feared would ensue if all citizens did as they
liked. Wilde, in contrast, welcomes the day when everyone will be free to do as he or she
likes, to develop according to internal laws without reference to the “claims of others.”
In *The Soul of Man*, at least, Wilde attempts to solve this problem partly by referring to
evolution, and partly by ignoring or imagining it away. *The Soul of Man* stands apart
from the decadent short novel and from the witty society comedies for which he is
famous. Although much of his fictional work may be read as oblique social critique, *The
Soul of Man* may be grouped with “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” as an unusually explicit
social critique. Gagnier has characterized Wilde’s fiction, specifically *Dorian Gray* and
the short stories, as “thought experiments on the social limits of this aesthetic autonomy”
(*Insatiability* 134). Yet in *The Soul of Man*, when Wilde sets himself to articulate an
ethical vision, he abandons the question of “social limits” and offers instead a vision of
human flourishing modeled on the self-sufficiency of the supposedly autotelic artwork.
Wilde develops the idea that one’s contribution to the common good depends not just on
freedom from constraint, but freedom from even the most attenuated reference to the
needs or wishes of others. Self-realization that seamlessly benefits the group requires
imagining a frictionless society in which there not only is no authority and no conflict,
but no interdependence, no impinging on others in any way.

This is the utopian future that Wilde proposes: a future of isolated individuals
who must remove themselves from action and implicitly even from social relation in
order to realize the laws of their own being. Wilde proposes that “When each member of
the community has sufficient for its wants, and is not interfered with by his neighbour, it
will not be an object of any interest to him to interfere with anyone else” (4: 245).23
Although private property is unknown in this utopian future, Wilde’s ideal of human
flourishing mirrors the capitalist imaginary in which each individual is responsible for his
own economic success. While he recognizes that capitalism pits people against each other
in material competition, his Individualism is the metaphysical equivalent of laissez-faire
economic policy. In Wilde’s time as in our own, free marketeers tended to treat the
market as an even playing field where social inequalities do not affect anyone’s
participation. In this view, market regulation constitutes unfair meddling. Although
Wilde identifies self-development as a matter of boundless being, not competitive having,
he recommends what amounts to an idealist version of laissez-faire economics: each
individual is responsible for his own self-development. Depending upon or claiming help
from another individual constitutes unwarranted “interference.” His utopian future is a
fantasy in which individuals can coexist peacefully because they simply do not affect
each other. For Wilde, the aesthetic provides a model for human flourishing precisely
because the ostensible separation between aesthetic experience and life makes the
aesthetic a realm of attenuated consequences. It is thus an ideal realm for self-
development through self-expression and sensuous exploration of desire.

Where Ruskin’s paternalistic ethic of interdependence does not provide enough
safeguards against the abuse of authority, Wilde’s individualist ethic of autonomy
neglects the existence of social relationships and material interdependence. He sees

23 “Its” is probably a printing error, since Wilde’s MS reads “his” (4: 245n29).
contemplation and “cultivated leisure,” not work, and certainly not work for others, as the proper end in life (4: 247). Providing for the needs of others is so at odds with Wilde’s model of human flourishing that it is literally dehumanizing. “[C]ivilization requires slaves,” he observes, but those slaves can and should be mechanical (4: 247). He envisions a future where machines do all the unpleasant labor (4: 246-47). Material necessities (or “useful things”) will be made by machines, and “the beautiful things will be made by the individual” (4: 247).

Here Wilde sets utility and beauty at odds at with each other at the same time that he promotes the idea that the individual should not defer to any kind of authority. For Wilde, even creating an object for another person’s use constitutes an unacceptable deference to external authority: “An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and their wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him” (4: 247-48). Wilde continues to articulate a fantasy of self-sufficient autonomy—a fantasy here supplemented by the idea that machines will produce any object needed for material survival. Wilde is right to refute facile assertions that labor is intrinsically dignified or enjoyable. However, his vision of a machine-driven future evades the difficult task of imagining and negotiating a reconciliation between individual and group. Again, remembering that Wilde’s oeuvre is not consistent, it is fair to say that in *The Soul of Man*, when he explicitly promulgates an ethical theory, that theory is individuated. In other words, the ethical goal of “realizing one’s personality” goes beyond liberal
individualism by taking the individual as the origin of ethical imperatives and assuming that the paths pursued to self-development are not comparable across persons.

Despite Wilde’s optimistic predictions in The Soul of Man, the possibility he explored so disturbingly in Dorian Gray sometimes reappears. Though he emphasizes the danger that others may impinge on the individual’s self-realization, Wilde cannot completely suppress the possibility that the individual’s self-realization may impinge on others. By repeatedly making statements about collective “man” rather than about individual men, Wilde mitigates the possible tension between individual and group, the possibility that realizing one’s personality might not actually be for “the incomparable and lasting gain of the whole world” (4: 231). For instance, Wilde writes about “the true personality of man” and not about the true personalities of multiple individuals (4: 239). Similarly, Wilde’s Christ “said to man, ‘You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. . . . Your perfection is inside of you.’” (4: 240-41). Wilde’s revisions to a key passage show him finessing this linguistic tension between individual and collective. The published line reads “The true perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is” (4: 237). Wilde’s manuscript originally read “what a man has” and “what a man is” (4: 237n27-28, my emphasis). Removing the article “a” creates a verbal fusion between individual and humankind generally.

Intriguingly, the unpleasant possibility that self-realization could be at odds with the good of others appears more clearly when Wilde harnesses the figure of Jesus to his argument for Individualism. As one might expect, Wilde’s reading of Christ’s message is
far from mainstream Victorian Christianity. Alluding to Matthew 8:22 and Luke 9:60,

Wilde reminds readers that Jesus rejected the claims of family life, although they existed in his day and community in a very marked form. “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” he said, when he was told that they wished to speak to him. When one of his followers asked leave to go and bury his father, “Let the dead bury the dead,” was his terrible answer. He would allow no claim whatsoever to be made on personality. (4: 243)

With its radical call to abandon every vestige of one’s current life to live a new life in God, “Let the dead bury the dead” is one of those troubling verses that seems to require explanation whenever it is read from the pulpit. Wilde uses it to turn orthodox Christian altruism on its head. Yet despite the fact that Christ is being held out as a model of Individualism, his breath-taking freedom from human bonds is “terrible” rather than appealing. Later, Wilde suggests that the weakness of Christ’s example is its asociality:

Christ made no attempt to reconstruct society, and consequently the Individualism that he preached to man could be realized only through pain or in solitude. The ideals that we owe to Christ are the ideals of the man who abandons society entirely, or of the man who resists society absolutely. But man is naturally social. (4: 265)

What Wilde does not acknowledge is that his own theory of human flourishing is likewise asocial. His method of self-realization requires rejection of or isolation from the claims that social relations make upon the individual. Once self-realization is achieved, the result sounds less like a society and more like a disjunctive collection of monads who will not impede each other’s preferences. Without a common vocabulary for speaking about self-development, these perfect individuals will not even understand each other’s preferences.
Coupled with the ideal of “realizing one’s personality,” Wilde’s aesthetic relativism—his statements that beauty and meaning arise from the spectator and not from the art object or the creator’s intention—would seem to cast individual preferences as a valid norm, not just in aesthetic matters but in life. Wilde does not grapple with the issue that so worries Arnold: that humans may have an innate “taste for bathos.” At the same time, however, Wilde’s journalism and his society comedies mock stereotypically bourgeois preferences in clothing, literature, even religious and political opinions. His recurrent, witty tirades against vulgar public opinion are at odds with his assertion that each individual should realize his own desires. It seems that artists are the elite few who need to reform “the popular want of taste” (4: 257). For instance, The Soul of Man states that Henry Irving’s work at the Lyceum Theater “has created in the public both taste and temperament” (4: 257). George Meredith is another example who, by ignoring the public, has taught them to appreciate his art (4: 259-60). Having this kind of effect on others hardly seems like the policy of non-interference that Wilde vociferously promotes throughout The Soul of Man. Nor is it in keeping with his faith in individual taste. More problematic than this inconsistency is the fact that, when he sets himself to formulate an ethical aesthetics, Wilde fails to acknowledge that no one, from a Philistine banker to a sensitive artist, can live apart from the social, pursue being without having, or avoid actions that affect others.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Wilde treats the aesthetic as a realm of subjective desire and pleasure in order to link aesthetic experience to an anti-authoritarian ethics of freedom and radical individualism. Where earlier theorists attempted, however
unconvincingly, to preserve some link between art and life, Wilde celebrates art’s autonomy. In doing so, he takes earlier claims for aesthetic disinterestedness to their logical conclusion, while at the same time cutting off his theories from the long tradition of linking the aesthetic to the social and ethical that gave rise to such claims in the first place. He asserts the creative supremacy of subjectivist criticism by modeling it on the autotelic art object. In other words, aesthetic criticism can only be a realm of subjective creation and formal innovation because it is inspired by objects that have no relation to life or need. True, an individual reader freely (and privately) interpreting a poem or a play performs an action that does not necessarily have immediate, material consequences. Yet Wilde’s ethical aesthetics are impoverished because he treats art—a realm in which consequences are indeed attenuated, but which is not truly autonomous of life, materiality, or social structures—as a resource only for self-development, and not for encountering objects and realities beyond the self.
POSTSCRIPT

The classics can console. But not enough.
—Derek Walcott, “Sea Grapes”

Ruskin balances claims about subjective processes and objective properties in order to link aesthetic experience to a paternalistic, communitarian ethics; Arnold privileges claims about objects and their qualities in order to link aesthetic experience to an ethic of socially beneficial self-development and self-regulation; Wilde pairs radical subjectivity with radical autonomy in order to link aesthetic experience to an ethic of anti-authoritarian, asocial self-development. The history of how Victorian cultural critics used aesthetics to reimagine the relationship between individual and group demonstrates that aesthetic categories are too protean to have a single, stable ideological function. It also demonstrates that ethical judgments are historically just as variable as aesthetic ones. The aesthetic, whatever it may be, has been an important ethical resource, and it can be so today.

Lest this study become too earnest, it seems wise to end with a parable from Wilde. Despite Wilde’s programmatic statements about “Art,” few texts explore the unpredictable results of aesthetic experience more entertainingly than his hybrid piece of short fiction and Shakespearean criticism, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”¹ The tale, told by

¹ Horst Schroeder’s Oscar Wilde, the Portrait of Mr. W.H.—Its Composition, Publication and Reception (1984) gives a detailed account of the text’s complicated history. It first appeared in Blackwood’s Magazine (July 1889). By 1893, Wilde had expanded but not republished it. The manuscript disappeared, to reappear in New York in 1920 (Schroeder 33-36). The following year, in a limited edition of 1000 copies, the expanded text was published for the first time (40-41).
an unnamed narrator, begins with a visit to an older man named Erskine. Erskine tells the narrator that in his youth, he had an impossibly handsome friend named Cyril Graham. Basing his theory on internal evidence, Cyril identified the male addressee in Shakespeare’s sonnets as a boy actor named Will Hughes. Convinced, Erskine spent “‘a wonderful evening’” with Cyril, “‘reading and re-reading the sonnets’” almost till dawn (162). Upon more sober reflection, however, Erskine told Cyril that the theory needed external corroboration. After months of research, Cyril produced what he claimed was an early modern portrait of “Will Hews.” Upon discovering that the painting was forged, Erskine angrily confronted Cyril. Cyril responded that the forgery was irrelevant to the truth about Shakespeare’s sonnets. In an act of literary martyrdom meant to transform his own faith into evidence supporting the Will Hughes theory, Cyril killed himself. He left a suicide note charging Erskine to publicize the truth about Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Erskine recounts this strange tale to the narrator without any intention of promoting the Will Hughes theory, and is astonished when the narrator, moved by Cyril’s martyrdom, becomes a believer. Much of the essay consists of the narrator’s readings of Shakespeare’s sonnets and his research on boy actors, with which he tries to persuade Erskine that Cyril had indeed discovered the only logical explanation for the sonnets. In the process, he produces a highly intellectual defense of homoerotic “romantic friendship” between early modern men and teenaged boys (187). The narrator records all his evidence in a missive to Erskine, only to find that he has lost his own belief as soon as

2 Because the Oxford English Texts edition of Wilde’s works does not yet include “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” I quote from The Artist as Critic, edited by Richard Ellmann, which reproduces the expanded text of 1920.

3 The homoeroticism of Shakespeare’s sonnets was commonly recognized, though not commonly approved, by Victorian Shakespeare scholars (Ablow 168-69).
he mails the letter. Erskine, however, is persuaded. Dying of consumption, he attempts to make his inevitable death appear another suicidal martyrdom to Cyril’s theory. The narrator, however, discovers that Erskine died of natural causes. He inherits the forged portrait from the older man.

Unusually in Wilde’s oeuvre, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” both depicts and invites shared (though fictional and temporary) aesthetic responses. Not only do Cyril and Erskine stay up together reading the sonnets, but Erskine observes that Cyril “felt, as indeed I think we all must feel, that the Sonnets are addressed to an individual,—to a particular young man whose personality for some reason seems to have filled the soul of Shakespeare with terrible joy and no less terrible despair” (159, my emphasis). Describing the sensation of identifying with Shakespeare’s characters, the narrator proclaims, “There are few of us who have not felt something akin to this. We become lovers when we see Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet makes us students” (209). When expounding his evidence for the Will Hughes theory, the narrator includes long sections from the poems, sometimes even entire sonnets, as if inviting the reader to share his excitement at rereading them.

At the same time, this bizarre piece of fictional criticism foregrounds the affective and ideological unpredictability of any given aesthetic encounter. Aesthetic experience can catalyze attempted manipulation (the forged portrait, the real suicide, the fake suicide) and unexpected results (the narrator becomes persuaded by a theory that Erskine related as fiction). The final sentence, in which the narrator describes hanging the forged

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4 Stefano Evangelista points out that when the characters reread the sonnets in the light of a sexual secret, they are participating in a cultural practice whereby Victorian men constituted homosexual identities through “mythic identification” with canonical, homoerotic texts (242).
portrait on his wall, foregrounds indeterminacy. The skeptical narrator concludes, “sometimes, when I look at it, I think there is really a great deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (220). The possible reasons for entertaining such a theory are myriad: internal evidence, external evidence, attraction to Erskine’s account of the handsome Cyril, attachment to Erskine’s memory. “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” is thus a parable that goes against Arnold’s proposal that a literary curriculum will reliably produce any definite result, let alone the desirable result of forming model citizens by forging connections between students’ senses of beauty and conduct. Wilde is willing to embrace a possibility that both Ruskin and Arnold feared: that art might not be a source of guaranteed edification.

In conclusion, then, I wish to insist on two things. First, literature does matter, and it matters because it connects to life, to the wide fields of the social and the ethical. Second, there is nothing intrinsic about literature that guarantees my first statement. There is nothing stable anchoring the aesthetic to the social and the ethical. Those connections are contingent, varying with all the contextual and subjective factors that shape any given aesthetic experience. The ethical status of any aesthetic encounter is contingent. As academics, we cannot guarantee that either the literary texts or the textual skills that we share with our students will have progressive or conservative effects, or any significant effects at all. Literature matters, but only because writers and readers make it matter.

Ruskin, Arnold, and Wilde all attempted to make art matter, but in different ways and for different reasons. We might, for example, read Ruskin’s critical career as an
attempt to make art available as a moral resource. For Ruskin, art’s ethical function cannot be separated from the insistently subjective pleasure afforded by aesthetic experience, even as he worries that such pleasures cannot bring about social justice. He affirms the validity of individual aesthetic pleasure, and of the responsibilities that interdependent individuals owe each other simply by virtue of existing. Despite the eccentric and problematic nature of his thought, Ruskin offers us the recognition that making art matter takes work. Furthermore, that work is not limited to the aesthetic arena. It includes efforts to change the social contexts that shape each aesthetic experience, contexts like labor and education. For Ruskin, making art matter meant not just writing criticism, but also sponsoring young artists, teaching at a working men’s college and at a girls’ school, giving public lectures, founding a museum, and digging ditches.

Arnold likewise did the pragmatic, non-aesthetic work of making art matter. For him, the task entailed both grand public pronouncements about culture, and less grand reports on teacher training, reading textbooks, continental education systems, and English primary schools. In short, Arnold knew that advocating a literary curriculum meant working as a bureaucrat as well as working as a critic. Though we should eschew his objectivism, his arguments for maintaining a literary curriculum and for government funding for public education remain relevant in our age of privatization. Like Ruskin’s and Arnold’s, our efforts to make art matter cannot completely avoid elitism, self-interest, and class interest. This impurity does not make them worthless.

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5 See Chapters 1 and 2 of Richard E. Miller’s As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education (1998) for an intelligent discussion of Matthew Arnold as a bureaucrat and of what kind of agency academics can exercise as bureaucrats.
Wilde’s work is an important reminder that art can matter because of its playfulness and unpredictability. He is willing to face the possibility that aesthetic experience does not “improve” us, and to assert the validity of individual pleasure, anyway. On some level, interpreting and teaching literature are efforts to get other people to enjoy what we enjoy. If we also allow ourselves to be persuaded by beauties we previously did not recognize, then perhaps our project of sharing aesthetic pleasure can avoid imposing standards without regard to context. We have the opportunity to expand the range of things that, by personality and by socioeconomic position, we are predisposed to like.

 Crucial to today’s aesthetic turn is the idea that if literary study is to return to the aesthetic, it must be with a difference. We cannot pronounce grandly on the pleasure of poetry, as if that pleasure were identical for every reader no matter what the reader’s background. Analyzing the history of how Victorians read taste as mediating between individual and group provides one possible model for a return to the aesthetic that incorporates social and historical awareness. I hope it also opens further questions about the relationships among beauty, pleasure, and judgment, not to mention metaprofessional questions about how those relationships have played out in the academy at large, in our own discipline, and in the professional subject positions we inhabit as twenty-first-century literary critics.

 As we saw in Chapter 2, Coleridge created a classification scheme for differentiating pleasures, but had little power to enforce it. Regardless of the motives of individual English professors, the history of literary study is a history of institutionalizing
similar distinctions by creating a mode of literary consumption that is marked as distinct within the quasi-sacred space of the university. In other words, the emerging nineteenth-century discipline of English offered a way to differentiate literary pleasure from other textual pleasures. In this institutional context, aesthetic difficulty functioned as an index of literature’s presumed disinterestedness and non-instrumental value.

The specific state of affairs in which difficulty attests to literary merit is relatively recent. Hutcheson, for instance, took the immediacy of aesthetic pleasure as proof of its disinterestedness. When Hutcheson made this connection, he was writing within the context of aristocratic connoisseurship. Socioeconomic stratification meant that art ownership and even literacy were only available within a certain social echelon. In the upper ranks of society, taste judgments were so customary that they seemed unmediated. In the nineteenth century, when artistic judgment was an activity increasingly available outside the aristocracy and when mass culture offered a growing host of entertainments, the immediacy of a pleasure could no longer function as a plausible guarantee of its disinterestedness. In the context of mass literacy and mass culture, a context we share with the Victorians, the difficulty of aesthetic pleasure functions as a stronger guarantee of non-instrumentality and thus disinterestedness.

Difficulty is related to disinterestedness in a way that owes more to Coleridge’s disinterested pleasure than to Shaftesbury’s disinterested judgment or Hutcheson’s disinterested inner sense. Rather than offering immediate pleasure, difficult literature requires study and a careful mode of attention. The idea that literature’s difficulty guarantees its disinterestedness and its aesthetic status was not universal, but it proved
amenable to the institutional norms of modern research universities where, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first English departments were defining their object of study and forging a disciplinary identity.\(^6\)

Wordsworth’s “Advertisement” and Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* illuminate how literary difficulty functions to differentiate literary value. In both texts, Wordsworth asserts that poetry succeeds when it provides the reader with pleasure. Paradoxically, he also asserts that if his poems fail to please either inexperienced readers or readers who are well acquainted with poetic conventions, then the fault is with those readers, whose tastes are unformed or ill-formed, respectively (34-35, 85-86). Difficulty is the solution that allows Wordsworth to assert that good poetry gives pleasure, but that his poetry is not bad just because it fails to please. Enjoying and judging poetry is difficult, and Wordsworth summons a recognized member of the art establishment to back him up.

According to the “Advertisement,” “An accurate taste in Poetry and in all other arts, Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought and a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition” (35). The *Preface* reuses this language almost verbatim, adding italics to “*acquired* talent” (86). The criterion for successful poetry can thus become providing pleasure to those who have put in the hard work that it takes to possess taste.

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\(^6\) See Gerald Graff’s classic *Professing Literature* (1987) and John Guillory’s chapter on New Criticism in *Cultural Capital* for enlightening analysis of how New Criticism exemplified the problematic role that aesthetic difficulty has played in defining our discipline. See also Poovey, who argues that class-inflected differentiation of reading habits paved the way for modern disciplinary reading practices that are inaccessible to non-professionals (307-08). Poovey identifies influential nineteenth-century criticism that connected aesthetic value to difficulty and to specific (eventually professionalized) reading habits. Her list includes Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” and Ruskin’s “Of King’s Treasuries” (1864).
If we are to return to the aesthetic without returning to canonical hierarchies of literary value, we must avoid fetishizing difficulty, avoid treating it as a guarantee of aesthetic disinterestedness or of our own critical purity. However, Wordsworth identifies an important problem. His solution is facile, but we might wish to grapple with the question he raises: if audience pleasure is a meaningful measure of literature’s worth (and I would argue that it is), must a reader’s displeasure mean that a work is not good? The answer, I would suggest, requires thinking of aesthetic pleasures on a continuum. Rather than assigning pleasures to the binary categories “easy mass culture pleasures” or “difficult high culture pleasures,” let us recognize that aesthetic pleasure exists on a continuum from ease to effort.

Literature can be difficult. Studying it with extended attention can reward us with new pleasures, not least because authors from other times and places assume that their readers already have a great deal of contextual knowledge that twenty-first-century Americans are unlikely to possess. We may be instantly struck by Ruskin’s gift for linguistic imagery, by Arnold’s pointed turns of phrase, by Wilde’s witty paradoxes. Or we may learn to like their writing despite Ruskin’s more purple prose, Arnold’s overly lofty tone, and Wilde’s tendency to repeat himself. Whether a reader derives immediate pleasure from a work, or whether enjoyment requires effort, will depend as much on the reader’s capabilities and context as on the work in question.

We might add that these pleasures exist along a second continuum, one that ranges from recognizing the self to encountering the other. There is a pleasure, even a dignity, in finding that someone thought that people like ourselves were worthy of
representation. And there is a pleasure in encountering represented alterity, in exposing ourselves to new thoughts and feelings. These pleasures are different, but not antithetical.

Likewise, we might wish to think of the social and the aesthetic as different, but not antithetical. If we do not define the aesthetic as the opposite of the social, then we do not need Arnoldian disinterestedness to bridge the gap between them. Instead, we can treat aesthetic experience and social experience as overlapping much more messily. Yet Arnold, and Wilde too, are right to identify art as a realm that is typically removed from immediate material or political consequences. Art can impinge and offend, but it does so less immediately and intensely than most forms of action do. It is precisely this attenuation of consequences that allows imaginative literature to be a realm for the play of interpretations. Rather than leading us to ultimate truth, interpretive play can unsettle our mental habits and prejudices, allowing us to encounter truths that compete with our own. Because it can introduce us to difference without immediate social effects, the aesthetic still offers us what it offered the Victorians: a crucial field in which to encounter the other and pursue shared ideas of the good.
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