

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my advisor Dr. Stern for her dedication to this project over the months of its development. It is safe to say that without her guidance and nigh-saintly patience I would still be hacking through the thicket, so to speak.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ng Yun Sian and Dr. Whalen-Bridge. Without their support, I would not have been able to even undertake this project.

Finally, it is necessary to express my deep appreciation for those figures who, despite their tenancy in those shadowy borderlands we call Fancy, ultimately shaped this project more than I have. I refer, of course, to those unreal interlocutors who so graciously offered up their aesthetic theories and spiritual experiences for vivisection. Thanks to Marius, Lord Henry, Gilbert and Ernest, Baldwin, Olivia, and Althea.

Il voulait, en somme, une œuvre d'art et pour ce qu'elle était par elle-même et pour ce qu'elle pouvait permettre de lui prêter ; il voulait aller avec elle, grâce à elle, comme soutenu par un adjuvant, comme porté par un véhicule, dans une sphère où les sensations sublimées lui imprimeraient une commotion inattendue et dont il chercherait longtemps et même vainement à analyser les causes.

—J.K Huysmans, *À Rebours*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
“This World’s Delightful Shows:” The Sensuous and the Spiritual in <i>Marius the Epicurean</i> .....	5
“Where I Walk There are Thorns:” The Aesthetics of Sorrow in Oscar Wilde.....	24
“The Use of the Soul:” Vernon Lee’s Supernatural and Social Project.....	42
Conclusion.....	58
Bibliography.....	60

## Introduction

Situated at the end of the 19th century, the late Victorian era occupies a particularly vital position in the development of western literature and culture. With the Romantic era, a tradition distant but still exerting great influence, behind it and Modernism looming ahead on the other side of the century, the later Victorian was a tense transitional period. With the massive growth of science and industry over the course of the century, new ways of thinking emerged to contend with the rapid change. Moreover, the social structure itself began to change as new conceptions of the individual and his relationship to society entered the intellectual vernacular. The burgeoning practices of economics, psychology, and genetics all played a role in shaping the form of Victorian society and lent their vocabularies to the philosophical and critical discourses of the age. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the strict sense of social propriety that prevailed was under siege by new aesthetic and philosophical positions that sought to reframe the individual's relationship to art and society. Championed in the early essays of Walter Pater, Aestheticism focused on the individual experience of an artwork and embodied the ideal of *ars gratia artis*. Conducting forth from Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, Aestheticism was decried as a perverse program of sensory indulgence, a rebirth of hedonism, and an attack on social and religious values of the time. To many, the ideas that Aestheticism represented were a considerable danger to society given their lack of ethics and alliance with pagan modes of thought. In a review of William Morris's poetry, Pater writes, "One characteristic of the pagan spirit these poems have is on their surface—the continual suggestion, pensive

or passionate, of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the blood of the world and gives new seduction to it" (qtd. in Donoghue 48). The focus on sensuousness and valorization of the pagan spirit were at odds with the larger social context, leading many to claim that Pater and his followers, including Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee, were either pagans themselves or atheists. However, the works of these writers indicate a much more complicated relationship with the religious institutions that structured life in the Victorian era.

Rather than being a complete acceptance of paganism or a complete rejection of Christianity, their writings reveal a tense critical relationship between the particular theories each critic advocates and a spiritual dimension. That is to say, spirituality, though not necessarily religion, is an integral part of the formulation of these aesthetic theories and it allows them to be turned into practice, a way of living. Most of the critical attention directed towards Pater, Wilde, and Lee focuses on the interplay between their aesthetics and psychology or the ways in which their sexualities structured their work. While a fair amount of criticism has considered the religious and mystical impulses that permeate their work, there are few studies that investigate the extent to which these spiritual aspects are integrated into their writing and how they have directed it. All three of the writers were not only authors of short stories and novels, but cultural critics addressing matters of literary and philosophic concern. Pater's early essays that defined the general shape of their theories brought into focus the particular mechanism by which a critic experiences a work of art. Therefore, their continual focus on mystical experience as an epistemological mode stresses the

importance of this spiritual element. At the same time that these writers adopt the language of modern science, they resist it by placing the experience of art in a transcendental context, i.e. the value of artwork and criticism is displaced from the material world and exists as something that must be intuited by a critical mind. This immateriality of art does not merely resemble a type of spirituality or religion, but in fact makes use of the mystical toolset such as heightened states of consciousness and revelatory experience. Despite the common critical interpretation of these figures rejecting religion, their work demonstrates an indebtedness to religious modes of thinking, though they are reframed in an aesthetic context.

Any critical analysis of these authors, especially when studied together, is a rather daunting task. All three were in close conversation with each other, reading and reviewing each other's work as well as maintaining written correspondences. Walter Pater, often placed in the position of the Aesthetic patriarch, exerts a strong influence on the other two writers, so it is crucial to disentangle their ideas and clearly demarcate the theoretical boundaries. The works themselves also pose some significant challenge, given the unusual forms that structure the pages and the dense philosophical content that fills them. Moreover, all three were prolific authors, producing a great number of major or minor works, rendering any comprehensive analysis of all three in this investigation a simple impossibility. That being said, each oeuvre was approached in a more or less chronological fashion, focusing on analyzing the emergence and development of the core ideas that define each of their respective brands of Aestheticism.

This investigation will begin by delineating the basic concepts that Pater establishes in his early work and that become the starting point for each of these writers. The section on Pater will draw special attention to his focus on Hellenic and Renaissance art and how they bring into focus the ideas that structure his aesthetics. Using his novel *Marius the Epicurean* as an example of these theories in action, the chapter will demonstrate how his approach towards aesthetics, utilizing the concept of *Heiterkeit*, blitheness, manages to locate the importance of the spiritual in the blending of heterogeneous—some might say contradictory—systems of thought. The section devoted to Oscar Wilde will challenge the idea that his work is simply a refutation of Pater's thought and show the trajectory of his spiritual aesthetics, culminating in his identification with the image of Christ. Finally, Vernon Lee's critical works, an essay and several philosophical dialogues, will outline the ways in which her sociopolitical ideals are united with her aesthetic and spiritual posture. This study aims to complicate these writers' relationship to spirituality and bring to greater attention to which the extent their critical perspectives are structured by spiritual thinking.

“This World’s Delightful Shows:” Spirituality and the Sensuous in *Marius the Epicurean*

In the closing paragraph of *Marius the Epicurean*’s twenty-first chapter, the narrator makes a curious comment on the effect of the church Marius has visited: “The very air of this place seemed to come out to meet him, as if full of mercy in its mere contact; like a soothing touch to an aching limb. And yet, on the other hand, he was aware that it might awaken responsibilities [...] and demand something from him, in return” (229). In this faint realization on the part of his creation, Pater describes the transaction inherent to institutional religion. For Pater, religion as a dogmatic regime to be interpreted and enacted, was a sticking point. As Denis Donoghue relates, after about only one year in university, Pater’s relationship to Christianity had become “frivolous” (28). However, a frivolous relationship does not necessarily mean an unmeritorious one, as Donoghue continues to explain that Pater’s “interest in religious ritual and ceremony was keen but entirely picturesque, it fulfilled itself in the charm of hieratic appearances” (28). Pater, taken as the indomitable aesthete, is thus figured subsuming all experience into a singular secular vision of the world predicated on sensory consumption. However, such a judgment—and perhaps such a characterization on the part of Donoghue—does a disservice to the depth of engagement with religious thought seen throughout Pater’s corpus. In fact, Pater’s approach to religion within the context of his aesthetic theories is as intricately wrought as his prose. Throughout his work, and especially in *Marius*, the interface between the pursuit of sensory experience

and a type of religious framework, figured as a transcendental impulse within the personality, becomes the focus of Paterian experience.

Much has been made of Marius's intellectual trajectory. Many scholars try to use it as a template for his aesthetic theory and a way to grapple with the convergence of the religious and the sensory. After all, the novel seems to be a careful accounting of the various philosophical ideas that its protagonist encounters and incorporates. Consequently, a good deal of scholarship, from its first publication to the present, is concerned with determining the precise *telos* of Marius. In other words, at the time of his death was Marius Christian or still beholden to pagan philosophy? Alfred Goodwin's contemporaneous review of the novel treats Marius as a student of Cyrenaicism through to his deathbed. On the other hand, Lee Behlman's work proceeds from the understanding of a Christian conversion at the end of the novel. These two poles are the most common readings of *Marius* and of the trajectory of its protagonist. However, the critical avenue that most successfully begins to interrogate the relationship between the spiritual and the sensuous is one that places Pater within a Romantic lineage.

The argument proceeds that Pater, in this framework, could be considered as an inheritor and finisher of a certain type of Romantic project that sought to explore the relationship between the mind and sensory experience. Harold Bloom in his introduction to a collection of critical essays, figures Pater's particular critical position as one inspired by the stress of Romantic influence. Perhaps most interestingly, Bloom identifies Wordsworth's "Ode: an Intimation of Immortality" — and especially its discussion of the loss of childhood wonderment and imagination — as a haunting

presence in Pater's work. The receptivity of Wordsworth, the passive interaction of the mind with its surroundings,<sup>1</sup> becomes a central aspect of Pater's conception of the aesthetic, or, as Bloom calls it, *perceptive* critic. Bloom also stresses that Pater combats some of the Romantics' woes by tempering deep idealism with materialism: "Pater's strange achievement is to have assimilated Wordsworth and Lucretius, to have compounded an idealistic naturalism with a corrective materialism. By de-idealizing the epiphany, he makes it available to the coming age, when the mind will know neither itself nor the object but only the dumbfoundering [sic] abyss that comes between" (8). He uses this synthesis to characterize both Pater's Epicureanism and the dreamlike quality of *Imaginary Portraits*.

The portraiture intends to capture thought and impressions on an instinctual rather than intellectual level. This notion is also sourced from Wordsworth. As Pater writes in his essay on Coleridge: "Wordsworth's flawless temperament [...] kept his conviction of a latent intelligence in nature within the limits of sentiment or instinct, and confined it to those delicate and subdued shades of expression which alone perfect art allows" (*Essays on Literature and Art* 4). The reverie of the portraits is an attempt at confining the intellect and allowing the instinctual aspects of perception to rise to the fore. Bloom says of the Romantics, "[They], as Pater understood and Arnold did not,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," in which he describes the relationship between the viewer and the scene: "For I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes / The still sad music of humanity, / Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue" (89-94).

were not nature-poets, but rather exemplars of the power of the mind, a power exerted against the object-world, or a mere universe of death”<sup>2</sup> (18). The function of the contemplative mind allows the subject to stake out some meaning in the interminable flux of the world of objects.

For Pater, experience is the primary point of departure of his aesthetic theory. Through the apprehension of experience, impressions are formed and, in Pater’s conception, impressions are the *materia dura* from which an aesthetic intensity is reached. In “The School of Giorgione,” he claims that art strives to be rid of “mere intelligence,” a strict relational attachment to things, and to become “a matter of pure perception” (*Renaissance* 126). There is certainly value in the art of “mere intelligence,” but Pater sees those valences as purely social and political, where the form and content are necessarily married. As he states, art is constantly trying to “get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material.” In his definition of art, he extends the possibility of aesthetic experience to not just visual or acoustic composition but also to the exercise of life. The possibility of apprehending a “matter of pure perception” exists at every possible moment since Pater posits a “fashion of a time, which elevates the trivialities of speech, and manner, and dress, into ‘ends in themselves,’ and gives them a mysterious grace and attractiveness in the doing of them” (126) These experiences, devoid of obligation,<sup>3</sup> are those that he sees as integral to a life of intensity, the apothegmatic mode of living he offers in the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. These are

---

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Aurelius, the exemplar of Stoicism in *Marius*, “could discern death’s head everywhere” (131).

<sup>3</sup> Compare this notion to the description of religion at the beginning of the section.

the experiences and concomitant impressions that Marius deploys during his religious and philosophical explorations of the self and through which a communion between the aesthetic and the religious takes place.

Much of Marius's evaluation of religion comes to him through his own experience with religious ritual. For him, there is a quality of the focused ritual that signals to some transcendent aspect—intimations of a great love, a great community, a great knowledge, a great experience. In *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde's long letter in which he explores the figure of Jesus, a criticism of pure spectatorship is on offer: "In *Marius the Epicurean* Pater seeks to reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion, in the deep, sweet, and austere sense of the word. But Marius is little more than a spectator: an ideal spectator indeed [...] yet a spectator merely, and perhaps a little too much occupied with the comeliness of the benches of the sanctuary to notice that it is the sanctuary of sorrow that he is gazing at"<sup>4</sup> (114). In Wilde's estimation, Marius is detached from the material world that surrounds him, especially as it relates to religious practice. He is supposedly blinded to the reality of his setting, narrowing his vision to a purely aesthetic appreciation of religious forms. While it is true that Marius primarily engages with the aesthetic and the spiritual through his spectatorship, Wilde, as it will be shown, misidentifies Marius's beholding as a purely disengaged mode of experience rather than the critical faculty through which he can conceptualize the spiritual experience. This criticism of *Marius*, does not actually apply to the character as such,

---

<sup>4</sup> Excised from this quotation is a comparison between the character of Marius and the ideal Wordsworthian poet

since it ignores Marius's clear understanding of the function of religion with society.

After arriving in Rome, Marius observes,

that strange medley of superstition, that centuries' growth, layer upon layer, of the curiosities of religion (one faith jostling another out of its place) at least for its picturesque interest; and as an indifferent outsider might; not too deeply concerned in the question which, if any of them, was to be the survivor. (119)

He does possess the capability of viewing religion just as it exists within the context of a social order, and, furthermore, has the sophistication to apprehend the various religious systems operating within the city as competing in a Darwinian manner. In fact, one might charge Marius with being a kind of spiritual tourist.<sup>5</sup> Marius discerns the various economic, historical, political, diplomatic, and social valences of religious practice as it exists in Rome. His perception of religion, at this point, could be said to be completely phatic: "Roman religion, as Marius knew, had, indeed, been always something to be done, rather than something to be thought, or believed, or loved; something to be done in minutely detailed manner, at a particular time and place" (119). Religion in this context is just empty posturing and the title of the chapter, "The Most Religious City in the World," becomes something of a joke. Rome is not home to the most devout contingent of Roman society but the exact opposite, being defined not by quality of worship but by quantity of divinities worshipped. The uncritical approach to ritual of which Wilde accuses Marius is, in fact, the chief quality of Roman worship. Marius as he

---

<sup>5</sup> The word picturesque is particularly interesting since it has a great deal of resonance with the Romantic tradition. Found within the works of both Wordsworth and Coleridge is a very conscious tension between the picturesque, as related by Burke and later Gilpin, and the sublime.

operates outside of the civic-religious complex of the Roman day-to-day does not allow the obvious veneer of ritual to obscure the spiritual importance since he takes part in them with mindfulness and intention. His experience in Rome constitutes the middle portion of the novel, but to truly highlight the importance of ritual in Marius's conception of religious and sensory experience, it is necessary to consult the scenes of ritual that bookend his development, rituals of Hellenic and Christian character respectively.

From the novel's onset, Pater wastes no time in establishing Marius as an ideal critic of the world around him. Even in his youth, Marius had adopted a Paterian doctrine: "to meditate much on beautiful visible objects, on objects, more especially connected with the period of youth<sup>6</sup> [...] such were, in brief outline, the duties recognised, the rights demanded, in this new formula of life" (26). Marius suspects the sacral to be present in "the whole of life," noting that the worshipful ceremonies that took place at White-nights, his childhood home, were a method of accessing or making comprehensible these presences (16). The selection most telling of his experience with ritual comes through a rumination on the transubstantiating effect ritual has on the humblest objects that populate his everyday life:

And those simple gifts, like other objects equally trivial—bread, oil, wine, milk—had regained for him, by their use in such religious service, that poetic, and as it were moral significance, which surely belongs to all the means of our daily life, could we but break through the veil of our

---

<sup>6</sup> This entire chapter could be considered a companion piece to Pater's imaginary portrait "The Child in the House."

familiarity with things by no means vulgar in themselves.  
(12)

Much like the art of pure perception that Pater describes in “The School of Giorgione,” the simple offerings become unshackled from the typical sets of relations that structure their use in daily life. The things become simultaneously spiritualized and aestheticized through their participation in ritual. By contrast, the rituals that Marius later comes to experience in Rome are categorized as objects of mere intelligence, their content relegated to purely political functions. The worship of household divinities also circumscribes a smaller, more tightly connected religious community that privileges nurture and development instead of the logics of control that operate in civic ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> Throughout all of these ceremonies it is important to note that Marius experiences them largely through sight, but it is through that faculty—through “beautiful visible objects”—that Marius can most clearly apprehend the spiritual. It is through the revelation of things, as in mystery cult, that Marius comes into the spiritual.

In the tradition of Greek cult, there are primarily three parts required for the revelation of mystery. These three things are the *dromena*, *legomena*, and *dykneimena*—things done, things said, and things shown, respectively. However, Marius seems to have fined his life to simply those things shown. As Wilde suggests, Marius does not act, but that does not deny the ability of his observation to impress and alter his character. T.S. Eliot, also rather critical of *Marius*, sees the novel not only as a

---

<sup>7</sup> The scenes of the arena are perhaps most indicative of this. Operating on a Girardian scapegoating mechanism, violence towards the gladiators and animals is used as a social corrective and sedative, even though Marius’s major concern is the subdued reaction of Aurelius.

structural failure, but as a philosophical or theological one. He writes, in an essay titled “Arnold and Pater,” “Marius merely drifts towards the Christian Church, if he can be said to have any motion at all; nor does he or his author seem to have any realization of the chasm to be leapt between the meditations of Aurelius and the Gospel” (6). Eliot sees a lack of commitment or action—as well as a dearth of philosophical sophistication—in the development of Marius. This inability to determine himself is, by Eliot’s measure, a failure on the part of Marius, and by extension Pater, but it denies the possibility that this lazy drift between philosophical and theological schema may in fact be the mechanism through which Marius is capable of apprehending his ultimate goal of a visionary understanding. All of his life is composed of the *dykneimena*, but that does not hinder his intellectual growth. Near the end of Marius’s convalescence in the asclepeion, he is beckoned by one of the priests through a portal concealed by a false panel in the temple: “It was like the vision of a new world, by the opening of an unsuspected window in some familiar dwelling-place. [...] Developing the ideal, pre-existent there, of a religious beauty [...] as it dawned upon him on that morning of his first visit” (30-31). Marius, attending to the ritual of his recovery, is quite literally shown a world of salutary perfection in this vale hidden from the world, accessible only through a hatch. The revelation, the vision, of the mystery is metaphorized in the movement through a sacred space, revealing what was hidden within it. Marius accepts that these things must be shown and he assents to their being shown to him.

Marius, at the end of the novel, begins his experience with Christianity in the house of Cecilia: Cornelius, lifting the latch to enter the villa where Cecilia has

established her church, asks Marius, “Would you like to see it?” (221). Not surprisingly, the experience of Christianity that Marius has is predicated on a movement from the impressions of visible objects to a transcendent intimation of a new world. His first experience is with the graves of Christian martyrs, sites populated with instruments of ritual familiar to him, but possessing a renewed effulgence in the new context. He has an epiphany among the graves: “Marius became, as by some gleam of foresight, aware of the whole possible force of evidence for a strange, new hope, defining a new and weighty motive of action in the world, in those tragic deaths for the ‘Christian superstition’” (226).<sup>8</sup> The mere presence of the tombs, transformed by Marius’s context and consciousness into aesthetic and religious loci, incites a spiritual response akin to the rituals at White-nights. It is within the domestic space,<sup>9</sup> isolated from the influence of the civic sphere,<sup>10</sup> that Marius can wed the aesthetic and religious. Still for Marius, the attraction is specular. In this same experience, he is drawn to a “more vivid and pathetic image of suffering,” the image of Christ, whose influence fills the room “like the savour of some precious incense and imparts a “tranquil hope,” “a kind of heroic cheerfulness and grateful expansion of the heart” (226). While the impressions he receives take on many forms—scent and sentiment—the originating object is an image. At one point Marius witnesses Cecilia performing burial rites for a young child and the narrator remarks, “The image of Cecilia seemed already to have become like some

---

<sup>8</sup> The intimation of the messianic here bears some resemblance to the profound aesthetic shift Marius notes in the work of Flavian before his death.

<sup>9</sup> There is also the scene that closes Part III, in the Sabine Hills, that is incredibly Wordsworthian, both in terms of its attention to the natural world and of its examination of the functioning of the mind.

<sup>10</sup> The Christianity of *Marius* is inchoate and surely as it becomes an institution of the state, its failures would become more evident. Of course, Marius never has to contend with that reality in the novel.

matter of history or poetry, or a picture on the wall” (279). It is her appearance, in the context of a religious ceremony, that impresses Marius’s sensibility and that he carries with him as a token.

Finally, it is through these rituals of Christianity that Marius is able to attain the state of multiplied consciousness that Pater defines as success in life in the

“Conclusion.”<sup>11</sup> He listens to the congregation and the sermon:

As he followed again that mystical dialogue, he felt also again, like a mighty breath about him, the influence, the half-realised presence, of a great multitude, as if thronging along all those awful passages, to hear the sentence of its release from prison; a company which represented nothing less than—*orbis terrarum*—the whole company of mankind. (279)

The whole of mankind takes part in a single moment of worship and through his participation, Marius is granted a complete and collective experience. It is a rather profound moment that gestures towards the grand and sincere inclusivity that Marius finds admirable. Despite the gravity of the scene, it does not indicate a superiority of the Christian schema. In fact, the success of Christianity Marius encounters is the result of a fusion of Hellenic and Judaic temperaments.

Pater’s treatment of history is notable precisely because he refuses to treat history as a succession of events, choosing instead to focus on history as a temperament that defines an age. The periods he focuses on—the Antonines, the Renaissance, and his own century—are so chosen because he identifies a similarity in the intellectual

---

<sup>11</sup> The aforementioned scene in the Sabine Hills can also be read as such a moment.

topography. As the narrator identifies in *Marius*, “our own new Cyrenaicism of the nineteenth century,” he bridges the gulf between Pater and his subjects (177). The epochal temperament that substantiates these comparisons is one of a blending between a Hellenic ideal and a Judeo-Christian framework. In the first part of *The Renaissance*, “Two Early French Stories,” Pater justifies his decision to start at so historically inappropriate a time:

One of the strongest characteristics of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination, of that assertion of the liberty of the heart, in the middle age, which I have termed a medieval Renaissance, was its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time. In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian ideal; and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion. (*The Works of Walter Pater* 24).

It is figured rather neatly as time that moved past the strict boundaries imposed by Christianity, but it did not destroy Christianity. Rather, it created an altered form of it, one that brought the compositional might of the Hellenic ideal into a Christian context. The result is something radical—hence Pater’s appeal to the concept of rebirth—however it still remains firmly indebted to both. He addresses this point to a greater extent in the essay on Winckelmann, saying of the Hellenic ideal that, “In every direction it is a law of restraint. It keeps passion always below that degree of intensity at which it must necessarily be transitory, never winding up the features to one note of anger, or desire, or surprise” (108). Here Pater seeks to characterize the unplaceable quality of Hellenistic statuary, drawing attention to the discipline of passion, to *askesis*. In

contrast, he locates within the art of the middle ages something grotesque: a fixity and over-determination of expression. The abundance of particularity prevents such artworks from being truly effective generators of impressions. Pater's criticism of *Laocoön and His Sons* extends from this logic because despite its clear Hellenistic origins and styling, the agony of its central figure fixes its signification and resists a critical or interpretive response from the spectator. On the other hand, his analysis of *La Gioconda* seems to place it within such an ideal. The thousands of years of history, both real and mythological, within the painting are not pasted on the surface, but decoded through the perception of the critic. Rather, the power of the portrait is in "the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions" waiting to be excavated (71). Perhaps, by Pater's own criteria, *La Gioconda* is a work of sculpture rather than painting.

Interestingly enough, Pater does not position the intermediate age of Christian art as a negative or even as something to be contrasted to the Hellenic ideal, largely because it dressed the stage for such an art-form to return:

When the actual relics of the antique were restored to the world, in the view of the Christian ascetic it was as if an ancient plague-pit had been opened. All the world took the contagion of the life of nature and of the senses. And now it was seen that the medieval spirit too had done something for the new fortunes of the antique. By hastening the decline of art, by withdrawing interest from it and yet keeping unbroken the thread of its traditions, it had suffered the human mind to repose itself, that when day came it might awake, with eyes refreshed, to those ancient, ideal forms. (114)

He sees in this the necessity of Winckelmann. Pater has identified a rebirth of the Hellenic spirit within Winckelmann himself and that his very life has come to embody

the character of the statuary he studied and admired so deeply. Blitheness, centrality, unity, repose all come together in the Winckelmann not as a scholar, but as a man, a personality formed through encounters with aesthetic objects: “In Winckelmann, this type comes to him, not as in a book or a theory, but more importunately, because in a passionate life, in a personality” (115). Marius, in Cecilia’s courtyard, studies a particular statue that he determines to possess the characteristics of the finest Greek statuary, but “[v]ery foreign, however, to any Greek statuary was the expression of pathetic care” (227). It is in this statue that the ideal of the Hellenism can be inscribed in the context of a Judeo-Christian civilization and serves to prove the possibility of such a synthesis.

Marius considers very explicitly the various ways in which his Cyrenaicism could link with Christianity. In the chapter titled “Second Thoughts” he spends much of his time deconstructing his own philosophy. The narrator, explicating Marius’s thoughts, states, “The mere sense of belonging to a system—an imperial system or organisation—has, in itself, the expanding power of a great experience; as some have felt who have been admitted from narrower sects into the communion of the Roman church” (177). This line manages to address the reasons behind Marius’s insistence on remaining within the boundaries of some organized school of thought or dogmatic religious structure, despite his clear tendency to reject the empty gestures and ideas that both often devolve into. It provides a mode of connection, of expanding consciousness and experience—as evidenced by his experience with Cecilia’s congregation. A system provides a channel through which he can accumulate and amplify experience. Religious forms—while sometimes exercised in an empty, unthinking way—can also provide a

template on which one can build new experiences and sensations. It is in the next step that Marius's heterogeneous philosophical and theological precepts shift from a failure of devoted belief to a successful marriage of the aesthetic and the religious:

Cyrenaic or Epicurean doctrine, then [...] does but need its proper complement. Refer it, as a part to the whole, to that larger, well-adjusted system of the old morality, through which the better portion of mankind strive, in common, towards the realisation of a better world than the present [...] Our Cyrenaic finds his special apprehension of the fact of life, amid all his own personal colour of mind and temper— finds himself again—though it be but as a single element in an imposing system, a wonderful harmony of principles, exerting a strange power to sustain— to carry him and his effort still onward to perfection, when, through one's inherent human weakness, his own peculiar source of energy fails him, or his own peculiar apprehension becomes obscured for a while. (177-78)

It becomes clear that the resolution for Marius is not in the decision between conversion and non-conversion. The logic is not one of conversion, but conjugation. The weakness of the systems that Marius has encountered over his intellectual education is that none could exist alone in harmony with the nature of a critic such as Marius. The Hellenic, in its refusal of over-determination, finds its partner in a Christian ideal, in the movement towards a better world for mankind. In the figure of Marius it seems that life as ritual, life as experience, and life as art are all conflated. After all, someone with such catholicity of belief, in whom one belief is never fully extinguished—a spiritual palimpsest—by its successor, cannot truly be considered beholden to any dogmatic source other than himself. He becomes a figure similar to Hellenic statuary, *La Gioconda*, or Winckelmann—poised, but never committed.

The Catholic Church in *Marius* becomes the institutional embodiment of this ideal, but rather than being framed as such, it is figured as a piece of art unto itself. Commenting on the minor peace of the Church, the narrator claims, “now at last the catholic church [sic] might venture to show her outward lineaments as they really were, worship —the beauty of holiness, nay! the elegance of sanctity” (238). There is no attempt to disguise it. The religion is described as one possessing an “aesthetic charm,” fostering a communion between the aesthetic and transcendental impulses (239). Catholicism becomes a religion of beauty, a multifarious assemblage of systems that dovetail into an aestheticized spiritualism and a spiritualized aestheticism. This dual character of the church is made explicit:

The marvellous liturgic spirit of the church, her wholly unparalleled genius for worship, being thus awake, she was rapidly reorganising both pagan and Jewish elements of ritual, for the expanding therein of her own new heart of devotion. (239)

Marius observed in the religions of Rome a form of competition, a struggle to determine a survivor. Although there was clearly the instinct within Roman civil religion to incorporate disparate elements, it did not manage to do so completely, so as to create a religious system that operated as both a function of its composite parts and a new schema altogether.

The image of Christ also takes on this dual character, as evidenced by Marius’s first impulse to refer to him as “partly pagan” (226). As with the statue he first observed in Cecilia’s villa, the image of Christ successfully combines the *Heiterkeit*, or blitheness of Hellenism, with a purely Christian pathos. Heroic cheerfulness meshes seamlessly

with “visible mortality, death itself, more beautiful than any fantastic dream of old mythology had ever hoped to make it” (226). Christ is figured as both a symbol of chastity and blitheness, brandishing austerity and gaiety in equal measure. Christ is the singular image in which the religious impulse of Marius and his aestheticism are joined. More so than any other impression he has gathered, the depiction of Christ comes to assimilate all of the manifold philosophies Marius has accumulated. Unlike Laocoön, Christ’s suffering is not an interminable agony. Instead, it is torture and rapture, a gesture towards the death of the body and the life of the soul. He is not determined, but is perpetually becoming, moving asymptotically towards a great number of ends. The image of Jesus is repurposed as a meditative focus, a site on which Marius can concentrate his contemplative efforts, and it is on his deathbed that the most crucial utilization of Christ takes place.

Marius dies, bedridden, in a state of reflection and repose. It is during these moments of evaluation of his life that Bloom’s comment on Marius’s peculiar faith becomes clear: “The faith, to the end, is in the evidence of things seen, and in the substance of things experienced” (35). Marius determines that his life was not one of action, but rather one of spectacle and that that method was the only one that could have served him: “Revelation, vision, [...] he had always set that above the *having*, or even the *doing*, of anything” (296). He collected impressions and they rendered unto him an experience of the world as “real contact” (177). Revelation, things shown, was the central methodology of Marius’s life and he thus experienced life as “one long unfolding of beauty and energy in things” (296). However, that is not the end in itself.

He reflects on the vision of Christ and the accumulation of experience, coming to understand that he had prospered in life, but it was not a life lived with an eye towards its termination. For it was the image of Christ, and not his teachings, not what would soon be institutionalized as church dogma, that resonated with Marius and that inspired him. Instead, echoing the language of the “Conclusion,” Marius concludes that his aim was to “use life [...] as far as might be, from dying hour to dying hour, an end in itself” (296). His success is having lived a life of full experience, replete with an intensity of impressions, not having died a Christian.

This meditation also contains a critical gesture towards the transcendent through the aesthetic. Marius imagines that his entire intellectual development may have been in anticipation of some “ampler vision” (297). He supposes it to be an account, an epic composed of scattered lines detailing the “world’s delightful shows” (297). It appears that the transcendent—or one might more accurately say, *immanent*—object for Marius may in fact be a sort of totalizing experience, an artwork that confers upon its spectator an understanding of the world. This is not something that provides a panacea for the psychic ills of isolated existence, but it does serve to complete life’s portrait. It is not figured as a source from which any sort of salvific force is issued forth. *Marius’s* narrator goes so far as to say that all of the wisdom accumulated during the course of his life is not to be employed towards some “problematic end” (296). Life is lived with an eye towards the end, but the end is the life’s own and nothing else.

The work of *Marius* is not to deliver a conversion narrative, even one that might serve to reconcile Aestheticism with Christianity. Instead, the novel, very much in the

spirit of its central figure, is an exploratory overture, a gesture towards an expansive and inclusive system of experience. The question of *Marius* does not rest on religion as an institution but rather religion as an impulse, an instinctual approach towards the aesthetic. Spirituality curiously becomes an instrument in the service of this pursuit. In the context of the ritualized life, such as the one lived by Marius, it can be a way to apprehend this material vision of the world. The cultivation of impressions, the movement towards a multiplied consciousness, does not gesture towards a transcendent realm. Instead, perhaps spirituality could best be figured as a result of Marius's curious reading of Apuleius's Platonism: "the *Ideas* of Plato were no creatures of logical abstraction, but really informing souls [...] essaying to break through their mere, frivolous transitory surfaces, and reminding one of abiding essentials beyond them" (217).

## “Where I Walk There are Thorns:” The Aesthetics of Sorrow in Oscar Wilde

Despite his assertions that he wished to write without moralizing, the work of Oscar Wilde often occupies and bruits a specific posture towards the aesthetic and, more pressingly, its relationship with a spiritual dimension. Following the trajectory of his work reveals a concern that neither art nor experience is valuable simply for its own sake. Modifying the critical Paterian maxim of “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end,” Wilde provides a framework in which aesthetic and religious pursuits are necessarily intertwined. From the critical appraisal of Pater’s aesthetics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to his own essays on aesthetics—“The Critic as Artist” and “The Soul of Man under Socialism”—and finally terminating in his prison letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*, Wilde’s employment of aesthetics and spirituality indicates a teleology, an almost romantic attempt to reconcile the loss of “flower-like” youth with the experience of the world. Structuring the purpose and application of his aesthetics in this way, Wilde figures the poetic and apprehensive qualities of the critic as essential to the salvific project of the individual.

Critics have long positioned Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* as a direct response to Pater’s aesthetics, amplifying its sensuous and indulgent precepts to the point that the novel was offensive to public sensibility. In *Unmasking Oscar Wilde*, Pearce claims that *Dorian Gray* is “Wilde’s most elaborate and memorable refutation of Pater,” and that “Pater prompted the loins of Wilde’s creativity, arousing the urge to probe into the

lowest depths of human existence, life's lists and not its loves" (68).<sup>12</sup> This reading has the important effect of establishing a distance between Pater and Wilde, while not yet committing the latter to any specific doctrine, whether someone else's or one personally invented. The echoing of Pater within the novel is prominent, and these Paterian statements often form the basis for the failed actions of the titular character. The first chapter of the novel, in which Lord Henry the aesthetic dandy outlines the tenets of his philosophy, sets the stage for an upheaval of the theories outlined in Pater's infamous "Conclusion." Though far more concise and aphoristic, Lord Henry nearly perfectly mimics Pater in this crucial opening scene which precipitates Dorian Gray's corruption. Lord Henry claims "Be always searching for new sensations" (23). This same idea surfaced earlier in Pater as "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions" (*Renaissance* 120).<sup>13</sup>

In this refuting reading of the novel, one of the notions most commonly addressed is the inherent danger of experience, the idea that seeking always new sensations would lead one to something sinister. At one point, Lord Henry, our archetypal Paterian aesthete, muses on this search for sensation: "There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand

---

<sup>12</sup> Reading *Dorian Gray* as a refutation of Paterian philosophies is a common interpretation, even in contemporary criticism. Cf. Norbert Kohl's *Oscar Wilde: the Works of a Conformist Rebel*, Jay Losey's "Pater's Epiphanies and the Open Form," J.P. Riquelme's "Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Gothic: Walter Pater, Dark Enlightenment, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Heather Seagroatt's "Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

<sup>13</sup> To be fair, Wilde's reduction of the statement seems far more libertine than Pater's more measured language, but the exaggeration does produce the effect of casting the idea in a more critical light, opening the door to darker possibilities than are suggested in the "Conclusion."

their nature. And, yet, what a great reward one received! [...] One could never pay too high a price for any sensation" (51). The search for sensation earns a fatal edge in the theorizing of Lord Henry, whereas in the "Conclusion" it is a way to enhance life. Pater writes, "we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest in art and song. For our one chance is in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time" (*Renaissance* 120). While indolence is certainly a method that Lord Henry uses to pass his "interval," Pater does not consider the willful confrontation of one's mortality as a part of this aesthetic life. However, following the logic of searching for new experience, the ingestion of curious poisons and contraction of dangerous maladies can become an articulation of "expanding that interval" (120). Taking the "Conclusion" as far as it can go is what critics most often refer to when the claim of *Dorian Gray* criticizing Pater surfaces.

Perhaps Wilde's greatest excoriation of blindly following this Paterian doctrine is in the infamous eleventh chapter of the novel in which the search for new sensation becomes synonymous with willful evil and depravity. The chapter opens explaining the powerful influence of a particular book that Lord Henry has gifted to Dorian Gray, plunging him even further into his experiments with sensation. Moreover, these experiments seem to be testing the relationship between the senses and the soul that Lord Henry described to Dorian during their first encounter: "Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul" (21). It is also in this section that the most transparent of Wilde's moralizing appears. Commenting on

Dorian's induction into the aesthetic life, the narrator claims, "The more he [Dorian] knew, the more he desired to know. He had mad hungers that grew more ravenous as he fed them" (109). Taken to its extreme, it seems that aestheticism becomes divested of the refined, critical outlook integral to Pater and instead becomes an urge that can never be sated. The delicate shades and contours of thought and experience become erased in the deluge of sensation throughout the chapter, which largely takes the form of lists describing the music Dorian hears, the gemstones he admires, the cloth he feels, and the historical villains he idolizes. However, the narrator notes that Dorian is more or less aware of the nature of his consumption and addresses this criticism:

The worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less highly organized forms of existence. But it appeared to Dorian Gray that the true nature of the senses had never been understood, and that they had remained savage and animal merely because the world had sought to starve them into submission or to kill them by pain, instead of aiming at making them elements of a new spirituality, of which a fine instinct for beauty was to be the dominant characteristic. (110)

On the surface, the submission to sensation and the senses seems atavistic, there being something primal and unreasoned in the passing "most swiftly from point to point" (*Renaissance* 119). The worship of the senses had been made animal because it seems instinctual and a denial of human reason and restraint. However, Dorian insists that the opposite is true and that "a fine instinct for beauty" is the highest mark, the essential component of a spirituality based in the aesthetic. Here is the most explicit connection between the critical faculty and a spiritual dimension, but if this is to be taken as a critique of Pater, then this spirituality lacks nuance, being instead driven wholly by some

instinctual interaction with beauty. Wilde claimed that “the only error in the book” was the inclusion of a moral, but it is this inadvertent moralizing that will ultimately lead to the formulation of his own salvific theory in *De Profundis*. Though chapter 11 seems to offer some criticism of this notion of a spiritual aesthetic, at least as filtered through Pater, this is an idea that Wilde pursues and seeks to refine in his essay “The Critic as Artist.”

Despite the rather heavy criticism of Pater’s thought in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde does recover some of those ideas as he takes the first steps in formulating his own posture towards the tangled relationship between art and the spiritual. “The Critic as Artist” takes the form of a dialogue between two critics, Gilbert and Ernest, as they attempt to define the function of criticism. Gilbert, echoing the theories of Dorian Gray, claims, “By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics” (*Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems* 116). The quest for new sensation, here figured as sin, is regarded as necessary for progress as it constantly expands boundaries and pushes social institutions, such as morality, to their breaking point. It has a transcendent quality built into it since it refuses to settle for what is accepted. Moreover, Gilbert makes another claim that resonates with *Dorian Gray*, namely that, “the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul” (121). As the titular portrait of the novel becomes a transcript of the soul, so too does criticism reflect upon and crystalize the “spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind” (121). In this way, criticism itself becomes

transcendent, fettered not by the art that inspired it, but derived wholly and existing only in the soul of the critic. It is a record of the critic's mind and begins the work of disclosing its structures and processes. Closing a discussion on Pater's impression of *La Gioconda*, Gilbert says:

And it is for this very reason that the criticism which I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind. It treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself--let us at least suppose so for the moment--to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, 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. (123)

Gilbert takes the notion of the Paterian impression as its own separate work of art, a record of the beholder's soul and new way of relating to the piece. The impression of the critic does not simply belong to him, but has the potential to create meaning for others as well, to open new channels of interpretation and, thus, new impressions.

This integral social function of criticism becomes a central focus of the next section of the dialogue, in which the relationship between the critic and the spiritual is drawn even tighter. Gilbert argues to Ernest that art must necessarily be immoral since it distracts the individual from producing labor and disrupts social constructions of normalcy and propriety. He stresses "Contemplation is the gravest sin of which any citizen can be guilty, in the opinion of the highest culture it is the proper occupation of man," since it disperses the human energy that the state seeks to collect in action (137). What makes this statement even more curious is Gilbert's later phrase, "It is to do nothing that the elect exist" (137). These two statements taken together turn the practice of criticism into a spiritual act. The "elect" become a class that exists outside

the typical mechanisms of labor production not through some incorporation into a religious institution but through a strict exercise of the critical faculty, something that Gilbert describes as “do[ing] nothing at all” (131).<sup>14</sup> Already, Wilde has departed significantly from the work of Pater while still incorporating some of his thought. While the basic mechanisms of Pater’s criticism remain largely intact, the role of the critic has expanded to include a crucial social function.

Indeed, Gilbert begins to suggest that this function is not merely integral, but perhaps even messianic. He says of the ideal critic:

For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? And who the true man of culture, if not he who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent.” (140)

It becomes the duty of the ideal critic to not just contain his own impressions but to accumulate and preserve the thoughts and ideas shared across the generations.<sup>15</sup> He must be able to simultaneously identify and sympathize with the entirety of humanity. Returning from *Dorian Gray* is this notion of a refined instinct, a critical faculty yet unrealized because of the social stigma against sensation, which was so often seen as inseparable from hedonistic indulgence. Still, it is the paradox of an intelligent instinct through which the critic can be like the immortals. The contemplative life becomes the

---

<sup>14</sup> The full title of the piece is “The Critic as Artist: with some Remarks on Doing Nothing.”

<sup>15</sup> Vide Matthew Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” “The Critic as Artist” is in many ways a response to Arnold’s essay, in particular the notion that criticism must, “try to know the best that is known and thought in the world” (*Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* 51).

praxis through which a deific sensibility can be achieved. In this spirit, Gilbert closes his argument by drawing together the critic and the mystic, considering them both operating above the profane sphere:

The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always. To be good, according to the vulgar standard of goodness, is obviously quite easy. It merely requires a certain amount of sordid terror, a certain lack of imaginative thought, and a certain low passion for middle-class respectability. Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. (161-2)

The function of the critic is that of the mystic: to discern what is left undiscerned by society. The critic is inherently radical, inherently poetic, and inherently individualistic. This deviation from the “vulgar standard of goodness” allows the critic access to the aesthetic sphere in the same way that the mystic’s rejection of orthodoxy allows access to the ineffable. The critic is collapsed into the mystic, both having a sense that acquires impressions outside the reach of those bound within the sphere of normative ethics.

In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” Wilde imagines a society in which the artistic and the spiritual can be married in a social context. Using the ideas he developed in “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde imagines how society would be structured if the individual, defined as a critic, could exist. “The Soul of Man under Socialism” asserts that from socialism a “far freer, far finer, and far more intensified” individualism can be brought into existence (20). This argument extends from the notion that “The true

perfection of man lies, not in what man has, but in what man is,” and that the very concept of private ownership defines an individual by his material property. Being free from the tyranny of property, the individual personality can be cultivated. This position allows for every individual to practice the two most vital arts: “life and the perfect expression of life [literature]” (106). The liberated and authentic life becomes at once an artwork and its criticism. Wilde writes that the “true personality of man,”

will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows. It will not be at discord. It will never argue or dispute. [...] And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child. (22)

In this ideal society, the function of the critic becomes the function of everyday life. Since life itself becomes an art-object to be admired and critically appraised, the personality of an individual generates the same personal and social meaning as outlined in “The Critic as Artist.” Moreover, it is here that the Christological aspect of criticism is brought to the fore and the act of intensifying one’s personality becomes inherently spiritual. Wilde comments that “‘Know thyself’ was written over the portal of the antique world. Over the portal of the new world, ‘Be thyself’ shall be written. And the message of Christ to man was simply ‘Be thyself.’ That is the secret of Christ” (22). In this society, every individual can be the ideal critic, and if the ideal critic possesses something of a messianic quality, then this quality must be extended to the whole of society itself. Society, in this ideal state, becomes Christly in its pursuit of individuality and aesthetic spiritualism. Wilde introduces one more concept in this work that will ultimately inform the final manifestation of his aesthetics: pain. Continuing the

messianic characterization from “The Critic as Artist,” the critic adopts a Christ-like relationship with pain and martyrdom.

Wilde closes his essay with a brief treatment of the nature of pain. After excoriating public opinion and defining selfishness, he figures the individual as unselfish and sympathetic, primarily because the individual finds innate value in the personalities and lives of others. The difficulty of sympathy is then not identifying with pains and maladies of others, but by exalting their successes:

One should sympathise with the entirety of life, not with life’s sores and maladies merely, but with life’s joy and beauty and energy and health and freedom. The wider sympathy is, of course, the more difficult. It requires more unselfishness. Anybody can sympathise with the sufferings of a friend, but it requires a very fine nature – it requires, in fact, the nature of a true Individualist – to sympathise with a friend’s success. (44)

In society such sympathy is nearly impossible because of the stress of competition brought about by the necessity of conformity and labor. Despite the ideal being an identification with the best of humanity, Wilde does see utility in pain, namely that it alerts society to its own failings, though it can also be a great distraction. He writes, “the terrible truth that pain is a mode through which man may realise himself exercises a wonderful fascination over the world” (44). He goes on to say that beauty, joy, and sensuousness have never held the privileged position of society’s ideal since medieval Christianity placed pain—the sacrifice of the martyr and the mortification of the flagellant—at the forefront of worshipful behavior. The Christ of medieval Christianity, “the real Christ,” “is one maimed and marred; one who is not comely to look on, because Beauty is a joy; one who is not in fair raiment, because that may be a joy also:

he is a beggar who has a marvellous soul; he is a leper whose soul is divine; he needs neither property nor health; he is a God realising his perfection through pain” (45). Pain can become the portal through which individuals, most specifically the non-artistic, can realize their personalities since this meditation on pain has very much the same quality of being divested of property—a rejection of authority and a concentration of one’s own characteristics.

However, it is important to note that pain as a method of self-perfection is, in itself, not perfect and remains an artifact of the society that has not embraced socialism. Socialism takes on an inevitable quality, a sort of end of history, one that mimics the passage from the Earthly City into the City of God:

It desires to get rid of pain, and the suffering that pain entails. It trusts to Socialism and to Science as its methods. What it aims at is an Individualism expressing itself through joy. This Individualism will be larger, fuller, lovelier than any Individualism has ever been. Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings. When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, it will have no further place. It will have done its work. It was a great work, but it is almost over. Its sphere lessens every day. (46)

Pain is figured as an *ars magna* nearly completed and in doing so recognizes a teleological end, a state in which perfection becomes a possibility. Pain as “provisional and a protest” speaks to the radical nature of individualism as well as the necessary rejection of authority to realize perfection. Pain, though necessary only due to societal conditions, becomes a critical faculty, an element of the ideal critic. Wilde closes his essay by claiming, “what man has sought for is, indeed, neither pain nor pleasure, but simply Life” (46). If life and literature are the finest of arts and if socialism truly can

unshackle the individual from pain and pleasure, then this passage into socialism would transform the act of living into the ultimate spiritual and aesthetic expression.

In one of his last great works, *De Profundis*, Wilde brings together his understanding of action, suffering, and art into a coherent spirituality grounded in the exercise of the critical function. In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” Wilde writes that “even in a prison, a man can be quite free. His soul can be free” (24). *De Profundis*, written from prison to Lord Alfred Douglas, is an account of Wilde realizing his own freedom<sup>16</sup> within the prison cell and recognizing the captivity of Douglas. The first part of the letter outlines the many faults of their relationship, focusing on Douglas’s selfishness, Wilde transitions from his rebuke to a discourse on the nature of pain: “Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain” (88-9). Suffering is achronic, collapsing time and history into a single ceaseless moment. It is a satellite oscillating between perigee and apogee, but always present. The ahistorical nature of his socialism resurfaces here in the notion of continued suffering, and the erasure of time gestures towards a prelapsarian state, or, at the very least, the possibility of such a state. However, the true power of suffering becomes clear when he states that “[w]here there is Sorrow there is holy ground” (91). Before Wilde had figured the recognition of pain as

---

<sup>16</sup> This freedom is complicated however. While his imprisonment made it possible for him to develop his philosophy of aesthetic suffering, he also notes that it inhibits his spiritual growth, claiming that a life in prison “turns one’s heart to stone” and that “he who is in a state of rebellion cannot receive grace [...] for in life as in art the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven” (112).

a necessity brought about by the condition of an imperfect society, but in this instance, it has taken on a sacral character all its own. Even though sympathy with pain can never diminish the quantity of pain, it can bring with it love and a concomitant healing. As he has already addressed in his essays, there are many routes towards a realization and perfection of the self, but *De Profundis* reveals that the greatest of those may be a *via dolorosa*.

This new outlook is given the distinct character of a journey, one that is dotted with events but leads ultimately toward an end. Through his suffering, he has realized the humility within himself and finds it to be, “the last thing left in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting-point for a fresh development” (101). The metaphor of the road, of arrival, departure, and completion, is a decisive move away from the sensual itinerancy that defines Pater. Moreover, it reinforces Wilde’s appeal to a Christological model in this letter. Still, the basic ideas with which he had made the material of his aesthetics still remain. The notion of a refined personality is further augmented into a way to identify with Christ: “You can see to what intensity of individualism I have arrived—or am arriving rather, for the journey is long, and ‘where I walk there are thorns’” (102). All external things either distract or hinder his voyage and so he must draw from his own experience and sensations in order to persist and advance. To this end, self-reflection and acceptance become absolutely crucial. He writes:

And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one’s character. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me.

[...] There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul. (104)

The critical faculty that provides a record of the soul takes on the responsibility of tracking the progress of one's soul. Experience is transubstantiated into nourishment for the soul and through the exercise of self-awareness this growth can be made visible. All experience is valuable because each instance creates its own distinct mark upon one's character: "To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul" (105). He returns to the notion of sorrow and in no uncertain terms defines it as the true revelation, the knowledge that can unite body and mind and make possible the transformation of experience into spiritual matter.

As Wilde claimed that sorrow was the "last thing left" in him, it has become the lens through which all experience and emotion is filtered. As the perfect mode of existence, it banishes the obfuscation that denies true perception and true understanding of the world:

Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint. What one had felt dimly, through instinct, about art, is intellectually and emotionally realised with perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension. (109)

Sorrow and the reflection that accompanies it provide emotional and intellectual clarity that was not possible before. It is the hidden thread that binds relations at one time only vaguely understood. The critical evaluation of sorrow offers a unity of meaning, a way of seeing in which the soul and body are joined. Such a mode of existence is also

the ideal state of the artist. It not only joins the body and soul, but life and art.

Moreover, it allows access to truth, or rather it is itself truth:

Truth in Art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to Sorrow. There are times when Sorrow seems to me to be the only truth. (110)

The depth of sorrow is itself. While joy can deceive and obscure truth, much in the same way that Wilde identifies hate as the governing emotion of Douglas regardless of outward appearance, sorrow can only represent itself. That is to say, for Wilde sorrow is the perfect form of aesthetic expression because it enforces a consistency between the inward nature and outward appearance. It is a type of expression that is completely and essentially unmasked. Proximity to sorrow is proximity to the core of reality and an apprehension of all of its networked relations.

As strongly as he feels this, Wilde recognizes his considerable distance from the goal he seeks. In a rather Romantic moment, he sees the City of God<sup>17</sup> glittering in the distance, but remarks that a child could reach it more easily than himself (110). The Earthly City had appeared in a slightly different form in “The Soul of Man under Socialism.” Whereas Wilde originally represented rebellion as a means of attaining the spiritual, in *De Profundis* it is sorrow that propels the individual forward on this quest. Indeed, rebellion must be tempered by acceptance, since “in life, as in Art, the mood of rebellion closes up the channels of the soul, and shuts out the airs of heaven” (112).

---

<sup>17</sup> Wilde’s language here certainly invites a comparison the works of St. Augustine, particularly *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei*. Both figure themselves as reformed sinners and attempt to offer their own hamartiologies and soteriologies.

Humility and the acceptance that it leads to are the primary tools furnished by his sorrow. Through them, every experience becomes at once spiritual and aesthetic, enacting a heightening of both the personality and the soul. He continues to discuss the path his imprisonment has set him on by saying,

Yet I must learn these lessons here, if I am to learn them anywhere, and must be filled with joy if my feet are on the right road and my face set towards 'the gate which is called Beautiful,' though I may fall many times in the mire and often in the mist go astray. (112)

Again, the language of a journey and its end—"the gate which is called Beautiful"—surfaces here. The City of God is accessed through the apprehension of the beautiful, and finally, the passage contains another recognition of his own humility, of his own ability to falter despite the knowledge that he has earned through his suffering. This knowledge, he claims, was present in all of his art, secreted away within his words as signs towards this grand moral. Summarized rather plainly, "the artistic life is simple self-development. Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences, just as Love in the artist is simply that sense of Beauty that reveals to the world its body and soul" (113-4).

The great work of Christ then, whom Wilde depicts as both an individualist and a great artist, was to recognize this humility and love and enact it through an "imaginative sympathy" that extends to the whole of human creation (114). For Wilde, Christ is an artist and the very image of art. He demolishes and redefines precedents of life and art, representing perfectly Wilde's notion of life as the *ars magna*. Addressing this idea, Wilde writes,

And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing. (120)

Here Christ is limned as a true artist and a cause of art, a life lived and a life made symbol. Christ was an artist through his charisma and enchanting storytelling, but his life story and his image also became art-objects themselves. If Wilde claims that he “stood in symbolic relation to the art and culture of my age,” then Christ stands in symbolic relation to every man in every age (100). Whereas Pater saw Christ as operating at the juncture of Hellenism and Medievalism, Wilde figures him as purely Romantic, the admiration of child-like innocence and perception was his doctrine; and, perhaps most importantly for Wilde, “He felt that life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death” (125). There are no laws save their exception. It is through life’s changes that personalities are made distinct, that love becomes possible, and that art illuminates through imagination. The life and image of Christ form the basis for this marriage between body and soul, life and art. It is through the contemplation of sorrow, of humility, and of love that one is able to take steps toward the City of God.

Due to his anti-authoritarian proclamations and anti-institutional rhetoric, it may be tempting to frame Oscar Wilde’s work as in tension with the spiritual. His venerating treatment of art, on the other hand, does invite one to draw parallels between art and worshipful practice. As *De Profundis* and his earlier corpus illustrate, these concerns—

the anti-institutional, the artistic and the aesthetic, the spiritual, the salvific—are necessarily joined. With concepts adapted from Pater, but retooled to fit his own posture, Wilde describes a road towards understanding and acceptance of the world through the twofold path of the aesthetic and the spiritual. The critical faculty that he defines in his early work becomes instrumental in realizing this union, one that ultimately concludes with an actualizing of the self in the joining of body and soul.

“The Use of the Soul:” Vernon Lee’s Supernatural and Social Project

Vineta Colby, in her chapter on the development of Lee’s aestheticism, claims that Vernon Lee “had no problem reconciling her convictions about pure beauty and

perfect form with her earnest belief in humanitarianism and the moral obligation of the educated and affluent to work for social reform” (152). It comes as little surprise then that her works following *Belcaro*—the turning point that Colby mentions—attempt to synthesize, in some way, the abstract aesthetic considerations of the critic and the human concerns of the ethicist. As Marcel, one of her many created interlocutors, says, “It is extraordinary [...] how aesthetical questions invariably end in ethical ones when treated by English people” (*Baldwin* 209). Lee, exploring these concepts by way of her essays and dialogues, seeks to join these two dimensions through a third: the spiritual. The cultivation of the spiritual life in the critic—an individual more capable than the layman of discerning subtle gradations of thought—is transformed into a social good, and therefore an ethical necessity. As outlined in her two volumes of philosophical dialogues, *Baldwin* and *Althea*, the aesthetic development of the self runs alongside spiritual development, ultimately converging in the betterment of the whole society.

This expanded social responsibility of the critic distinguishes Lee from the other aesthetes she is most often associated with: Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Compared to Lee, these other two critics possessed an aesthetic vision that was too tightly bound to the individual. Pater and Lee enjoyed a friendly and productive relationship, although, according to Colby, “she detected his limitations” and saw *Marius the Epicurean* as somewhat a failure (65).<sup>18</sup> Lee also had some rapport with Wilde, but again Lee

---

<sup>18</sup> Though they remained friends up until Pater’s death, the critical and creative relationship between Pater and Lee was considerably more complicated. Laurel Brake in her essay “Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle” writes that “Lee regularly ‘returns’ to Pater in a series of written critiques largely of *Marius*, which grew increasingly hostile” and that her dissection of his work “continues past his death in 1894, well into the twentieth century” (Maxwell and Pulham 41).

considered his perspective somewhat flawed as her portrayal of him in her *roman á clef* *Miss Brown* might suggest (Colby 106).<sup>19</sup> From the perspective of Lee and her social principles, these two critics were much too insular, since the trajectory of their aesthetics primarily plotted the spiritual development of the individual and did not give great consideration to the possible growth of the social sphere. As suggested by Colby, it is Lee's belief in the responsibility of the capable to aid the incapable that reframed her aesthetics as for the good of society, instead of centering the critic. However, before the relationship between the aesthetic and the spiritual can be investigated, it is necessary to define what these terms mean in the context of Lee's oeuvre.

Her essay "Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art," first published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1880 and collected in *Belcaro* a year later, elaborates upon the fragile balance of artistic creation and the half-formed, mythological dimension she refers to as the supernatural. While art may on the surface seem to mesh with the supernatural, since both act upon the imagination and furnish the mind with intimations beyond the immediately rational, the two are in fact antithetical. Here, Lee draws on the apollonian aspects of artistic creation, namely shaping and effecting distinct form. She writes, "the synthetical definiteness of art is as sceptical as the analytic definiteness of logic. For the supernatural is necessarily essentially vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague, and it ceases to exist" (*Hauntings* 295<sup>20</sup>).

---

<sup>19</sup> In *Miss Brown*, Wilde is "Posthethwaite, 'an elephantine person...flabby, flat-cheeked face,' wearing a Japanese lily for a boutonniere and scattering epigrams of not remarkably brilliant wit" (Colby 106).

<sup>20</sup> All citations from this essay are from the Broadview Editions *Hauntings*, which collects this essay in its appendix. It is the same as the version published in *Belcaro*.

The tension that she introduces here is one based on the problem of representation: in the case of the supernatural, to represent it is to destroy it. However, it must be clarified what 'material' the supernatural consists of. It is made of myth and mythological thinking; it is the fear, awe, and sense of immensity that the primordial inspires: "This is the real supernatural, born of the imagination and its surroundings, the vital, the fluctuating, the potent" (299). The gods, beasts, angels, and demons that populate the mind's corridors are made semi-distinct through the merging of sense and surrounding, erupting from this free-floating cultural inventory called the supernatural. When forms become fixed and the representation of a divinity exceeds the simplicity of votive symbolism, the divinity ceases to possess any power and instead becomes whatever form the artist chose, be it beast or man. It is the inconstancy of temperament, form, scale, and identity that gives potency to myth. Like Pater, Lee had a great interest in Heine's notion of gods in exile,<sup>21</sup> however she contends that in the modern the most potent manifestation of the supernatural is the ghost, "a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness" (310). The ghost, for Lee, is not a thing in either a corporeal or incorporeal sense, but an intimation, a brief connection to the supernatural, a higher order of knowledge and experience. The difficulty of art is then to represent without representing, to suggest and offer the presence of the supernatural, but without concretizing. The task is by no means simple and she is able to offer only one example of

---

<sup>21</sup> Heine's *Die Götter im Exil*, first collected in 1854, was a critical influence on both Pater and Lee as it stressed the continuing vitality of myth and mythological types. See Pater's "Denys L'auxerrois" and Lee's "Dionea."

successful supernatural art, but the result is access to the inherited treasury of cultural knowledge and experience.

The supernatural becomes an epistemological mode through which an individual can not only come to possess knowledge that originated outside of the self, but knowledge that does not necessarily have a particular source, grounded in one single individual, text, event, etc. The supernatural might be framed as similar to the anamnestic storehouse of Plato,<sup>22</sup> in which insight may be recovered through certain types of experience, notably spiritual and didactic ones. It should come as little surprise that Lee utilizes the form of a philosophical dialogue for the advancement of her own aesthetic and social arguments. The dialogues of *Baldwin* and *Althea* utilize the structure of dialogue in order to approach some understanding of the religious belief's role and responsibility within the social context, ultimately homing in on a particular mode of being, the so-called "spiritual life" (*Althea* x).

Dennis Denisoff's "Decadent Contamination and the Productivist Ethos" identifies within Vernon Lee's dialogues a critique of the materialist, exploitative market economy that operated in England at the time of her writing. In these works, the "privileged members of society are chastised for leading lives of pleasure and excess that depend on the labour of others who are not themselves given any opportunity for cultural growth or refined aesthetic knowledge" (Maxwell and Pulham 81). Lee herself

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Meno*, 82b. This begins the section in which Socrates reawakens the slave's knowledge of geometry not through an explicit pedagogy, but by coaxing him into realizing (again) essential properties of squares. The importance of this selection is in the focus on accessing knowledge that one does not consciously know exists.

comes to say this, along with articulating a subtle criticism of Pater's voracity towards sensory experience, in her introduction to *Althea*: "For the sweetness of life is quickly exhausted if we seek only to find and consume it; it is pretty well inexhaustible if we work, however little, to increase it" (xvi). Her fictive critics, Baldwin and his protégée Althea,<sup>23</sup> take on vital social roles since it is through their philosophic exercises that the issues of the larger society are addressed and potential solutions are offered. Baldwin is presented as a chameleonic figure, of somewhat uncertain provenance and ideological allegiance, seemingly favoring the work of producing criticism over its ultimate application in society. Lee's introduction to *Baldwin* casts him as an individual for whom the objective world is something that impresses upon him, but does not receive any action in response:

To be brief, Baldwin exists; and it matters not whether in the kingdom of the subjective or in that of the objective. What is more important, is of his mode of existence. [...] He has [...] lived a life of exclusively mental experiences, never doing or being done to, but merely receiving a series of impressions and responding thereto by a series of opinions. (4)

Baldwin appears as an approximation of the spectator-critic that Pater's detractors often describe.<sup>24</sup> His relationship to the world, apart from being wholly fictional, means he can never meaningfully interact with it. Instead, Baldwin represents a position of right reason that must necessarily be located outside of the workings of society; his

---

<sup>23</sup> A note on the characters and their names: Baldwin, a common English surname, is typically traced to a Germanic name meaning "bold friend," perhaps an indication of his simultaneously intrepid and jocular philosophizing. Althea, sharing a name with the mother of Meleager, is derived from ἀλθαίνω, meaning to heal or alleviate; it also bears some resemblance to ἀλήθεια, truth. Moreover, Catherine Maxwell identifies both figures as literary analogues for Lee's half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, representing Baldwin and Althea respectively (Maxwell and Pulham 28).

<sup>24</sup> Vide Wilde's criticism of *Marius the Epicurean* in *De Profundis* (114).

marginal and protean status forever denotes him as an outsider to the structures he critiques and this is perhaps why despite Lee claiming that she can certainly identify with the other interlocutors in her dialogues, “I agree with Baldwin, and, agreeing, I sometimes dislike him” (13). This is also why Baldwin’s arguments, though derived from knowledge and logic, seem much more conceptual—despite his claims that he only argues when “a definite solution or practical result seems possible”—than those of his intuitive pupil and “perfecter” Althea (*Baldwin* 313, *Althea* xvii). On the other hand, she is “at first, inarticulate, unreasoning, ignorant of all why and wherefore, and requires to be taught many things others know” (xvii). However, once she becomes acquainted with the terminology of the discussion, she is led by instinct through her arguments as they develop into more complete and socially actionable versions of Baldwin’s reasoning. Still, it is through Baldwin and his dialogue with Olivia, “the beautiful transcendentalist” whom Lee “love[s] and [is] dazzled by,” that the very question of the critical relationship between aesthetics and spirituality receives its importance and ultimate development in *Althea* (*Baldwin* 13).

The dialogue of most concern in this regard is the closing section of *Baldwin*, “On Doubts and Pessimism,” in which a pleasant gondola ride descends into a discussion on the value of metaphysics, spirituality, and non-logical thinking. Olivia, who possesses “a bodily perfection more transcendent for its very immateriality,” becomes his main sparring partner, insisting on the primacy of emotional and intuitive modes of knowing—as opposed to the strictly logical and empirical ones Baldwin champions—in certain contexts, especially aesthetics and personality (315). Baldwin, accused of being

an optimist because of this, posits that it may be one day possible that “seeing lucidly and judging justly” become the paradigms of society through which conflict is replaced with compromise (319). Whereas Baldwin framed these two modes of relation as products of practiced reason, Olivia advances the notion of lucid sight as being a mystical experience, outside the ken of pure logic. For Olivia, this type of sight is no less than revelation, one that annihilates the personality and insists on a great enmeshed unity of real things. She relates her own experience with such intimations:

But what do we see in the moments—very rare moments—when the scales of personality seem to fall from our eyes, when there comes to us a revelation of the real reality of the world and our position in it? I see that every creature is a centre, a meeting-point of incongruous ideas; [...] And thus on, circle cutting circle, centre touching circumference, rays uniting and diverging in all directions, all moving, whirling, acting, reacting; an universe of egos, of wills and judgements and feelings, to which the stars in the heavens, with their interlacing systems, are as a diagram in the first book of Euclid. Have you ever grasped that; and if you have, do you not know the paralyzing awe of that moment of comprehension?” (320-1)

While this is certainly couched in the language of mystic revelation, Olivia seems to also be gesturing towards the supernatural as Lee defines it in her own work. This mystical experience is a manifestation of the supernatural, a sudden intimation into the primordial mechanics of the world, a paralyzing insight that renders the primacy of the individual inert and subsumes all things into a previously inaccessible knowledge.

Baldwin’s response is that the infinite is inherently contradicted by our nature as conscious beings—that is, in order to maintain such an understanding consciousness would need to be eliminated. Olivia insists that not only is some understanding of the infinite achievable for the conscious mind, but it can also be acted upon to influence the

world. Echoing Pater's "thick wall of personality,"<sup>25</sup> Olivia argues that what separates us from an experience of the spiritual are the "barriers of personality" and "the narrow vessel which contains it," and that it is by pressing forward through these obstacles that human ideals can be actualized (322). As opposed to the critical figures of Pater and Wilde, individuals who seek to achieve a mode of living beyond that of typical experience through the intensification of personality, Olivia's proposition requires a contraction of the individual in order to enter a new mode of being, one that is based on an integration of the self into the tissue of "real reality" (320). The goal is not an improvement of the self, as Baldwin incorrectly assumes, but rather an erasure of the self in the wake of "vision and feelings vaster than ours" (323). Keeping in mind the sociopolitical aims of Lee, this integration is considered to be beneficial for the whole of society since those capable of enacting such a transformation, "the nobler of us" as Olivia puts it, become the engine through which positive social ideals can be realized (322). The dialogue does not close the matter decisively, but rather has Baldwin espouse the value of literature as a tool by which one can come to know other personalities. Still, the dialogue complicates Baldwin's position by introducing uncertainty into his logic when he describes to Olivia the feelings he had regarding a dead friend: "The dead—yes, even the dead may be lost to one, I grant it you; but the creature born of one's fancy and one's desires, the unreal cannot be lost. She [Agatha, the deceased friend] remains, and remains a certainty" (344). This admission in the failure of ratiocination

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Pater's "Conclusion" in *The Renaissance*.

sans metaphysics is precisely what allows the dissection of the spiritual life that Baldwin and his pupil Althea undertake in later dialogues.

At the conclusion of "On Doubts and Pessimism," the argument has not still been resolved. Rather, there are several concepts which are brought into close proximity, but never truly united in a moral, actionable way. That is to say, that Olivia advances the notion of spiritual experience being a form of knowing that can benefit society, whereas Baldwin offers an encomium on the power of literature to bring one into conversation with a great many personalities. In many ways, the project of *Althea* is to marry this spiritual experience and this aesthetic one, creating a new mode of living as an individual within society. As Lee states in her introduction, the dialogues are merely sketches of her own ideas regarding a variety of topics, but the one that receives the most attention is "what I have ventured to call by the venerable and desecrated name of *spiritual life*" (*Althea* x). The closing two dialogues of the volume, "The Spiritual Life" and "The Use of the Soul," seek to address these problems of converting experience into material for social good.

The former dialogue between Baldwin, Althea, and the professor, a man recently having rediscovered his faith, begins the process of defining just what the spiritual life is and how it is to be lived. The dialogue opens with a peculiar discussion about the pageantry of religious rite; Baldwin calls the Roman Catholic mass a longstanding work of art: "things, to be as perfect as these Roman rites, must be manipulated by unconscious centuries, welded by them into one homogenous work of art: church, priests, vestments, lights, incense, chants; and, on the top of everything, the

venerableness of old age. Nothing in the future will ever replace them” (208). This notion of blending a religious ritual with an aesthetic experience is common among Pater, Wilde, and Lee, but it is only in Lee that this type of experience becomes a way to better society.<sup>26</sup> The curious picturesque nature of ceremony becomes the starting point of the argument as the professor rejects Baldwin’s supposed assertion in the superficiality of the rite, “Can you not understand that saintliness is not *picturesque*, but [...] *holy*; and that what is holy is ineffably beautiful?” (210). The ways in which the religious is aestheticized differs between the two, but the ends of such a maneuver are in fact the same. The discussion moves on to the natures and uses of pain and sympathy, and Baldwin, perhaps taking a cue from Olivia, makes the first steps towards synthesizing the spiritual life. Baldwin determines that the problems of sympathy are located in the divide between an individual’s perceptions of the “*myself*” and the “*not-myself*” (220). The work of religion and the experiences that it provides is to create a greater intimacy between the individual and the other, to make visible the sufferings in others that are so easily perceived when they afflict the self. Baldwin reconciles the two positions of “On Doubts and Pessimism,” becoming something of a metaphysician himself in the process:

[T]he philosophy of pleasure and pain [...] must teach the only valuable lesson of all religions and all philosophies: the lesson of a life transcending the senses and the ego, a life with all men and in all things. We exist in the beginning enclosed in our shells. [...] ‘Tis something else, infinitely complex, something comprising intelligence, memory, imagination, the power of living in the past and future, in the distant and problematic, which liberates us from this hide of impervious

---

<sup>26</sup> Practically the entirety of *Marius the Epicurean* is devoted to this idea of the religious rite being a work of art that meshes the spiritual and aesthetic. Wilde’s notorious eleventh chapter in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* sees the titular character engage in Catholic ritual as part of his hunt for new sensations.

personality. It is this by which, more and more, man knows the pleasure and pain of others, by which his life merges into the life beyond. (221-2)

This position of Baldwin's seems to be a careful blending of his own and Olivia's from the earlier dialogue. The 'it' that enables such relation is, using Baldwin's terminology, the soul. The perfection of the soul conducts forth from this identification of the pain and pleasures of others, and to accomplish this, a social life in which the sympathy with the "not-myself" is the primary feature becomes necessary. The professor, of course, objects, claiming that asceticism is the true method of perfecting that soul and that this path makes the soul merely useful, not noble, since its development is propelled by an examination of bodily sensation. Althea, closing the first part of the dialogue, remarks on the professor's notion that the nobility of the soul is in direct reference to its capability to be united with God:

For I think you must mean something real—something that can be thought and understood—when you say that the soul can be united with God. Of course you cannot mean a God whom man could ever approach, except in thought. But if that were so, do we not, after all, mean the same thing when we say that the soul, through perception of cause and effect and perception of beauty, through sympathy and memory and fancy, can participate in the life of all times and all things; and can find its complete life and joy only in the life and joy of the universe? (230).

In Althea's summary of the argument so far, she completes the ideas Baldwin and Olivia developed earlier, bridging the spiritual and aesthetic experience with the social moral, of having transcendence become the state from which social good can be achieved.

Though the professor complains, saying that words are ultimately futile, the point is still clear: the spiritual life is the process by which one cultivates a relationship with the supernatural, a relationship that provides insight into personalities beyond the self, an

identification with the whole of creation. There is a certain degree of selfishness in the asceticism that the professor describes, but the approach that Althea limns is not unlike Olivia's mystical revelation, though here the critical faculties of the individual are foregrounded and made the device through which such a relation is possible. Asceticism is selfish because it hoards its spiritual treasures, cloistered away not just in monasteries and anchorholds, but in the self, effectively severing the ascetic from the rest of humanity. Baldwin sums up the purpose of the spiritual life, insisting that a relationship with God is only possible through a relationship with man:

They [those who practice the spiritual life] increase their points of contact with the rest of Nature, and live in a greater number of its processes; becoming, through sympathy and dutiful activity, not merely men, but limbs of the bigger man, Humanity; and, through aesthetic perception and philosophic thought, clients, frequenters, familiars of the nearer and further circles of the great life beyond mankind. (242)

The spiritual life is totalizing, combining the social—duty, sympathy—and the critical—aesthetics, philosophy. Like Olivia's vision, such a life insists on the connectedness of all things at every level. This is to the extent that the only way to live for oneself is to live for others and the only way to know God is to know others. Althea, as she often does in these dialogues, closes the matter in the concise and actionable way that Baldwin is so incapable of by asking of the professor, who still values the austerity of a religious life lived alone, "Why should there be a spiritual life set apart? Life should be honest, and intelligent, and appreciative, and loving; is that not being spiritual?" (244).

If the previous two dialogues were setting the stage conceptually, "The Use of the Soul" is the translation of these ideas into a way of acting in the world. To this end,

Baldwin and Althea face off against Philip, a young man who takes a materialist stance on the subjects of history and human nature. Philip, emblematic of a certain type of modern skepticism,<sup>27</sup> is the true test of these theories because as Baldwin and Althea would admit, they have thus far advanced them largely in an abstract sense. Philip's materialism forces the pair into articulating the specific ways in which such a life could come about in the modern context and develop throughout the course of a normal life. Philip sets the tone by claiming, "Surely what matters is the great unconscious movement of human arrangements, the material, almost mechanical, changes of position, like the sliding of glaciers and the advancing and receding of seas. This is the only real progress, this perpetual heaving in various directions of nations, classes, powers" (251-2). By agreeing, Baldwin and Althea assume the challenge of proving that the spiritual life is not incompatible with material reality. Baldwin accomplishes this by reframing happiness in the context of gift-giving; the spiritual life transforms happiness into a commodity that increases in value and abundance when exchanged and that its increase can be termed human progress since those vices that impede happiness arise from its very lack. Moreover, increase in human progress becomes the marker by which one can observe the growth of the spiritual life: "physical and economic ties, under whatsoever name, sanctioned by religion or enforced by law, are vital only inasmuch as

---

<sup>27</sup> The dialogue's narrator describes him as "a curious example of the reaction against the cant of idealistic optimism which pushes our youngest contemporaries into disbelief in all formulated ideals" (251).

they imply this interpenetration of the soul” (261). It is the nature of the spiritual life to perfect itself since it engages in a positive feedback loop with itself.<sup>28</sup>

Althea asserts that “[t]he spiritual life is no remote region of existence, it is a mode of living,” continuing the argument from the dialogue prior (258). When Philip criticizes the position, claiming that the spiritual life “deals with realities, but turning them into visions,” Althea responds by claiming that the speculative, abstract sphere that the spiritual life seems to occupy is in fact inseparable from the practical, material sphere that Philip insists upon (258). Since human action and relations are grounded in considerations of the past and the future, the practice of life is derived from speculation and abstract thinking. In that sense, the spiritual life is a feature of human communities since the identification with others is a speculative practice that is transformed into action. Furthermore, by incorporating Baldwin’s argument, she defends against the charge that the spiritual life she describes will become another moribund and bankrupt institution: “there is nothing presumptuous or dangerous in each man and each woman trying to become disinterested in thoughtful, trying to enjoy the things to be shared, truth and beauty, as much as is possible. The future, whatever it be, will know how to profit by whatever is good in the heritage of the past and the present” (278). The spiritual life is not structured by fixed precepts or under the influence of corruptible dogma, but rather constructed at each moment through the practice of criticism, of

---

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hegel’s *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. These notions of self-perfection and the awareness of the mind corresponding to a greater form of intelligence bear some meaningful resonances with Hegelian aesthetics. See also Christa Zorn’s *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* in which she draws together Lee and a Hegelian vision of history (43-4).

sharing and increasing what is true and beautiful. This heritage of the past and present further connects this type of spirituality to Lee's supernatural since, as Althea suggests, the spiritual individual will continually access the treasure-house of the past in order to expand its stores. As Baldwin states, "the only spiritual communities which have ever existed, are the living, fluctuating communities of thought and sympathy, of free individual belief and aspiration" (277). There is no particular form to be achieved since this spiritual life is constantly becoming, altering its own characteristics in response to the ways it alters the world. From this perspective, the act of living becomes spiritual and aesthetic since each human life becomes archived in the supernatural dimension.<sup>29</sup> The last lines of the dialogue are Althea's, regarding the nature of the relationship between the individual and this heritage of ideas and emotions: "We shall take as much of it into our life as we can; or, rather, it will take as much of our life as is worthy" (278).

Althea's final statement, both in the context of the book and her own created life, is one final gesture towards the supernatural and its function as a cultural inventory. Lee through the course of her philosophical and aesthetic investigations creates a dense relationship between aesthetics, criticism, religion, and social good. Whereas Pater and Wilde's aesthetics concentrated their efforts on the development of the individual, Lee's version has a strong sociopolitical component, in which the individuals' spiritual character is engaged in an almost economic relationship with others individually and all of humanity collectively. However, rather than dwelling on

---

<sup>29</sup> Baldwin, in the earlier dialogue "The Spiritual Life," refers to this idea with the goddess Temperantia "reading in the book of the world" (228).

the grim conditions of the social and economic reality she was responding to, Lee imagines a potential utopia in which the development and circulation of aesthetic experience and philosophical insight become the foundation for a continual growth of the human species. Her vision of sensations and impressions is not limited nor does it champion the unquenchable search for experience that other aesthetics are accused of. Rather, hers is a generative aesthetics, rejecting the notion of the market scarcity that structured the inequality she wrote against, because, just like Baldwin's and Olivia's deceased friend Agatha, the unreal and abstract never diminish with use and the knowledge contained within the supernatural can only grow.

## Conclusion

The Victorian age was certainly one of great anxiety. The rapid social change and scientific development worked to instill a sense of unease regarding the position of the individual within the world. It is not surprising then that the various institutions of social life—the government, the church, etiquette—were relied upon to provide some remedy to the psychic, social, and spiritual ills furnished by modernity. Even as science demystified the world and industrialization mechanized the everyday, spirituality and its

divine methodology maintained their importance in the public consciousness. After all, the most read collection of poems by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Edward FitzGerald's questionable translation of Omar Khayyam's poetry. If anything, the age called for ways of relating to the world that did not depend upon logic and empirical sciences, of constructing a personality that was greater than the material conditions of life. Aestheticism, as instigated by Pater's early theories of sensory impression and developed by his friends and colleagues Wilde and Lee, represented another method to contend with the reductive tendencies of modern scientific discourse. Despite appraisals of hedonism and atheism, their work offers strategies for an aesthetic life in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to such ways of living. Their philosophies, though denounced as hedonistic and amoral, offered a way of integrating the grim materialism of modern England with a form of mysticism that allowed individuals to reaffirm their position within the world. Whether it was Pater's ceaseless, integrative approach that channeled experience into an idiosyncratic spirituality, Wilde's Christological teleology, or Lee's ethical aesthetics, all three critics reestablished the individual and essential nature of the artist as well as providing an antidote to some of the problems their transitional era introduced. This treatment can only scratch the surface of their richly nuanced positions since their philosophies, all distinct from one another's, are totalizing and integrate a great deal of philosophic, scientific, social, and economic discourse that could not be meaningfully addressed in a study of this scope. Though woefully incomplete, ideally this work could bring the integral mystical dimension of their work back into a critical focus.

## Bibliography

- Arnold, Matthew. *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913. Print.
- Behlman, L. "Burning, Burial, and the Critique of Stoicism in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*." *Nineteenth Century Prose* 31, no. 1: 133-69, 2004. Web.
- Bloom, Harold. *Walter Pater*. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. Print.
- Colby, Vineta. *Vernon Lee : a Literary Biography*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003. Print.
- Donoghue, Denis. *Walter Pater : Lover of Strange Souls*. 1st ed. New York: Distributed by Random House, 1995. Print.

- Eliot, T.S. "Arnold and Pater." *The Bookman* 1 Sept. 1930: 1-7. Print.
- Goodwin, Alfred. 1885. "Review of *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*." *Mind* 10 (39). Oxford University Press, Mind Association: 442–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2247181>. Web.
- Kohl, Norbert. *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*. Trans. David Henry Wilson. 1st Pbk. Ed.: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print.
- Lee, Vernon. *Althea: Dialogues in Aspirations and Duties*. John Lane co., 1910. Print.
- . *Baldwin : Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations*. Roberts Brothers, 1886. Print.
- . *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2006. Print.
- Losey, Jay B. "Pater's Epiphanies and the Open Form." *South Central Review* 6.4 1989: 30–50. Web.
- Maxwell, Catherine. *Vernon Lee : Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Pater, Walter. *Essays on Literature and Art*. Dent, 1973. Print.
- . *Marius the Epicurean : His Sensations and Ideas*. 1st Valancourt Books ed. Kansas City, Mo.: Valancourt Books, 2008. Print.
- . *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.
- . *The Works of Walter Pater*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.
- Pearce, Joseph. *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000. Print.
- Seagroatt, Heather. "Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in the Picture of Dorian Gray." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38.4 (1998): 741–759. Web.
- Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*. London, England: Penguin, 2013. Print.
- . *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- . *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*. London: C.E. Tuttle, 1996. Print.
- Zorn, Christa. *Vernon Lee : Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. Print.

