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FIN-DE-SIÈCLE WORK ON VICTORIAN AESTHETICISM

By Jonathan Loesberg

IN *MASCULINE DESIRE: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, his study of the role of male same-sex attraction among Victorian aestheticist writers, Richard Dellamora refers to Elaine Showalter's claim that Gerard Manley Hopkins was one of a series of writers who tried to reclaim male literary dominance from women writers in the wake of George Eliot's death in 1880. Dellamora proposes instead what he thinks a more likely source of creative anxiety: "Insofar as he may appear at times to regard literary creativity as a male prerogative, his anxieties are better referred to a celibate homosocial environment than to the creative ascendancy of Victorian women writers" (56). But these two anxieties may not be entirely separate. Recent critical studies have shown that the mid-Victorian novel, whether written by women or men, was a form dominated by domestic and marriage plots, by the depiction of the bourgeois family and the construction of gender roles as principles of social regulation. Thus the emergence from the shadow of Eliot and the turning of aestheticist literature and art toward various alternative constructions of gender and desire — not merely new claims of masculine prerogative but also articulations by women writers of positions resistant to Victorian gender regularities — would be intimately connected. Oscar Wilde's trial and imprisonment, the social and legal persecution of homosexuality, and the consequent reaction of modernists against their aestheticist forebears may for a long time have occluded these aspects of aestheticism, but scholarship in our own fin-de-siècle 1990s has turned considerable attention to their importance. In particular, since Dellamora, there has been increasing attention paid to the importance of homosexuality in the aesthetic thought both of individual writers and of cultural movements in the period as well. And in the last five years, there has also been a growing attention to women aestheticists and to both aestheticist constructions of femininity and aestheticist resistances to those constructions.

Although these recent discussions of aestheticism from the perspectives of gay and feminist theory have perforce turned from the themes stressed by historicist treatments of mid-Victorian literature, in one way they have frequently continued the same more general theoretical perspectives. Recent analyses of aestheticism have shared the historicist suspicions of the category of the aesthetic and, more importantly, the historicist desire to dismantle the ideological constraints of past social constructions by the mode of unveiling something thought to have been natural as ideological and constructed. But the aestheticist movement saw itself and has long been seen as having inaugurated some of the dismantling of Victorian sureties. Earlier twentieth-century critics had paid attention to the aesthetes' different views on the justifications and powers of art. But most recently, precisely the gender resistances inherent in the stances not only of gay male aesthetes but also of less well-known female aesthetes — aspects of the movement that had been ignored or repressed — have drawn positive attention. This perspective goes back to Regenia Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace,* which by viewing Wilde's aestheticism and his sexuality as performances before a bourgeois audience, defined aestheticism explicitly as oppositional: "this aestheticism was an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress — in fact, against the whole middle-class drive to conform — but the emphasis is on engaged" (3). Sympathy with the oppositional implications of aestheticism's resistance to its audience, even in the light of Peter Bürger's definition of that resistance, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* as historically determined, has also led numbers of critics to start looking at the aesthetics of aestheticism itself more sympathetically.

One can see how the project of analyzing ideological construction in aestheticism can become one of outlining its resistances by starting with three feminist considerations of the movement that have all appeared in the last four years. The first of these, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism,* by Kathy Alexis Psomiades, is a brilliant discussion of how aestheticism, through its construction of the female body as spectacle, manages to forward the commodification of art even as it argues for its autonomy. Psomiades starts with Bürger's periodization of art since the eighteenth century, whereby aestheticism turns the original proclaimed autonomy of art upon its own content, thus delinking its represented content, for the first time, from any political and social content, without yet making the step of the avant-garde toward questioning the institution of art (Bürger 20–27; Psomiades 10–11). She then argues that the specific reason British aestheticism was able to defer the step toward consciousness of its own institutional situation was its use of the image of the female to cover over the conflict between its desire for autonomy and art's reality as commodity: "the feminine content of British aestheticist works allows for a significant deferral of the self-criticism of art. Aestheticism can sustain itself for so long in Britain because of the *way* in which it makes its own institutional nature its content: through iconic images of femininity" (11). Femininity can work this way in nineteenth-century England because of what Psomiades characterizes as a double difference: first, the feminine figures the difference from the public realm by famously having been connected with the private sphere. But second, "Victorian bourgeois femininity is also split between surface and depth, knowable exterior appearance and unknowable interior desires" (5). Because of these constructions, the image of a beautiful woman could simultaneously figure art's apartness, its autonomy, and present an object of desire that could become a commodity without exhausting an interiority that, because it remained unknowable, preserved art's autonomy yet again. With this underlying theory, Psomiades moves surely and persuasively from an opening discussion of the image of what she terms "Beauty's Body" in poetry by Tennyson and the Rossettis (with a particularly telling reading of "Goblin Market") to an entirely eye-opening two-chapter discussion of the marketing of aestheticist images of women and then of the wider cultural implications of the Aestheticist Craze of the 1870s and 1880s and the consequent concerns about what it meant when women became consumers of aestheticist art as well as embodying its images of beauty.

One should note that while Psomiades's specification of the role of "Beauty's Body" as feminine to British aestheticism does protect her argument from falsification by non-British counter-example, it does so at the cost of considerable generalization of her skeptical treatment of the notion of aesthetic autonomy. For instance, it might be objected that Pre-Raphaelite art — in contrast to, say, French nineteenth-century art — was, if hardly unique, at least noticeable in the creation of images of beauty that were ready-made for non-artistic uses. Rossetti's images of women were certainly not as eroticized as those of Alma-Tadema or Leighton, as Psomiades notes, and thus not quite designed merely to be consumed erotically. Still, the content of French impressionism seems hardly to depend to the same extent on images of women readily presented as objects of desire, or, in many cases, on images of women at all. And mid-twentieth-century modernist abstraction, while it eschewed represented content entirely, was wholly capable of remaining essentially unquestioning of aesthetic autonomy and of being possessed of an ideal of institutional autonomy — for this reason, the introduction to the American edition of Bürger's book insists on a distinction between modernism and the avant-garde (xiv–xv). By limiting her discussion to British aestheticism, Psomiades gives her theory the advantage of the context of Victorian constructions of gender and the special role she shows those constructions as playing in the local aestheticism. But she does so by leaving at least as a possibility an aesthetic autonomy, or at least some defense of it independent of the particular ideology of gender constructions, from which positions of resistance to those constructions might be mounted.

Psomiades, as we will see, is in fact hardly rigid about the implications of her marxian analysis. She does not deny the possibility of aestheticist art that either does not have recourse to the image of beautiful women or at least does not limit its sense of the role of women to that of spectacle. She participates as well in another strand of feminist criticism that has the project of recovering female aesthetes. The most important book here is Talia Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes,* although to this one must add the collection, *Women and British Aestheticism,* co-edited by Psomiades and Schaffer (the conflict I am describing between these two strands of feminism in terms of a belief in whether aestheticism resists patriarchal constructions or enacts them may be simply a matter of stress, since this one collection contains essays with both positions and is edited by authors of books each taking one of those stances). Schaffer's book is explicitly and impressively a recovery project. She means either to recover authors as aesthetes — Ouida — or recover forgotten women aesthetes — Lucas Malet (Mary St. Leger Kingsley Harrison). The value of such a project, in the first instance, at least, could be historical or, at any rate, literary historical, without reference to aesthetic value or even without overturning Psomiades's theory (women aesthetes could construct representations of aesthetic value in terms of images of beautiful women which then became commodifiable). But Schaffer is quite explicit that for her recovery project to work, she must refuse to consider her authors as "non-canonical": "to refuse to discuss canonical merit at all may implicitly downgrade one's subjects. If we can put Ouida, Malet, Wilde, and James on the same list, perhaps everyone on that list will benefit" (17). In other words, to recover women aesthetes in a lasting way, we must see them as involved in a valuable activity, one that is more than an ideological gender construction.

These values need not be in themselves aesthetic, though. In the introduction to their collection, Psomiades and Schaffer list a series of benefits to studying women aesthetes:

1) a revised genealogy of aestheticist poetry that would include an enlarged canon of Romantic poets and a recognition of the work of women aestheticist poets; 2) a recovery of aestheticist prose, most of whose practitioners — as Schaffer's *Forgotten Women Aesthetes* makes clear — were women; and 3) the extension of the critical interest in marginalized sexualities to same-sex desire between female as well as male aestheticist figures (Schaffer and Psomiades 10–11). From this larger perspective, one can even see value in women's handling of seemingly oppressive gender constructions for their own ends. Thus in her own essay in the book, a return to Christina Rossetti, Psomiades argues that "Christina Rossetti constructs the aestheticist woman poet as drawing authority from her privileged relationship to feminine images . . . Many feminist scholars have seen aestheticism's tendency to construct and represent aesthetic value in feminine figures as oppressive to women. But to the extent that these figures value feminine interiority and reveal femininity's artificiality, they may also be enabling for women" (Schaffer and Psomiades 103). The delineation of feminine interiority and artificiality in aestheticism is of course Psomiades's own in *Beauty's Body,* now functioning as an enabling one. All of these instances of values that either contemporaneous women found in aestheticism or feminist critics find in outlining female participation in aestheticism, of course, share an extra-aesthetic, political ground. Nor is there anything problematic with that: "extra-aesthetic" may be a bad word for formalists, but even formalists, regardless of their political sympathies, can hardly find it unreasonable to value that which leads to one's desired political ends. Feminist critics would be irrational rather than "properly" disinterested not to value that which forwards the desired end of greater freedom for women wherever they find it.

But Schaffer, quite explicitly, in order to link the women writers she recovers with the already valued male writers, praises them in terms that are recognizably those of literary evaluation. Thus, recovering Ouida both from the dismissals of contemporary male reviewers and from her current neglect, Schaffer argues that "as a producer of art, Ouida standardized the genre of the aesthetic novel . . . she set new standards for the passionate descriptions of *objects d'art* . . . Finally, in her 'facile aphorisms,' her witty epigrams, Ouida pioneered a new form of discourse that eluded the demands of realism" (Schaffer 123–24). Ouida is at least a novelist whose name is recognized and whose most popular novel, *Under Two Flags,* is still read. Schaffer's most impressive work of recovery is Lucas Malet. Schaffer makes Malet look, at least to me, like a writer whose works I want to get to know and thus forces us to entertain the possibility that the view that there were no women writers of import between Eliot and Woolf needs considerable revision (in this larger project Schaffer is joined by the critical reevaluation of Mary Ward as well as works such as Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*). And about Malet, Schaffer concludes that "Malet's aestheticism is an antirealist technique that is fully as significant as Hardy's 'incoherence'" (240). In each of these cases, Schaffer revalues her subject in the recognizable terms of literary praise: Ouida pioneers a new form of discourse and Malet creates a significant antirealist technique.

And there is in fact a logic that leads from valuing the work of female aesthetes for political or ethical reasons to valuing them for aesthetic reasons. After all, the writers Schaffer analyzes in her book and the authors her and Psomiades's collection discusses do not see themselves primarily as polemicists or political philosophers. Their achievements, even their resistances and social advances, occur through their aesthetic engagement. And while this might be said of any novelist, poet, or essayist, many of whom have primary commitments that have nothing to do with their literary practice, it has a more telling point with regard to aesthetes. These writers participate in a movement that, whether as "high art" or interior decoration, quite consciously insisted on concentrating on and sometimes managing the aesthetic appearance of objects, artworks, and even their environment. If one sees a valuable resistance specific to aestheticism, at some point that resistance will have to occur through the movement's defining concerns. Thus, to recover female aesthetes, Schaffer will naturally analyze them in terms of the values they themselves held. To do otherwise would be to treat them as found art, a perfectly coherent possible approach and one that would certainly have bemused some aesthetes, but not one on which to build a feminist recovery of female writers.

Even Psomiades's marxian critique in *Beauty's Body* gets caught up in this logic. Her argument for the working of Beauty's Body as an image of art insists on the contradictions and occasional unreadability of that image as part of its effectiveness in capturing the contradictions of an autonomous art that also works through its exchangeability as a commodity. But an unreadable surface can also become an impermeable surface and then a surface that carries its meaning on its face. Thus in her reading of "Goblin Market," having analyzed Laura's body as made by the goblins into "the location of aesthetic, erotic, and economic value" (48), she then depicts Lizzie as achieving an impermeable surface in her response to the goblins: "Covered in fruit and bruises, but having neither spent money nor ingested fruit, she returns to Laura with a body important not for what it signifies but for its function as bearer of fruit. The surface of this body does not point to any meaning: it *is* the meaning" (50). Psomiades has given here the working definition of symbolic embodiment, the reigning definition in the nineteenth century since Coleridge in England and Hegel in France, of the difference between art objects and objects of all other kinds. Starting with a surface whose ambiguous meanings allow the containment of a contradiction, the distance to an unreadable surface is a short one, and from there to a surface that cannot be read into because it bears its meaning on its face is no distance at all. And indeed, this idea of a surface without depth and thus too profound to be exhausted in exchange leads to a chapter on Swinburne that poses him as the one figure in the book who escapes the ideological forces of Beauty's Body. He does so not by desexualizing the imaged female body but by so sexually charging it that the sexuality cannot be appropriated or exchanged. Swinburne creates "a body whose insistent sexuality returns the viewer to the problem of his or her own embodiment" (57). Thus, in Swinburne, "the figure of the body may, even for a moment, be used as the basis of resistant art" (60). Psomiades adds quickly and wittily that Swinburne is hardly "a girl's best friend." There are other aestheticist writers and painters whose explicit themes and concerns are either more politically progressive or more questioning of patriarchy. But just as the female body, in Psomiades's argument, is more than represented content, is the image of a contradictory aesthetic autonomy that is also exchangeable, so Swinburne's version embodies an art that opposes the ideological complicities of aestheticism. And while one can imagine Psomiades having avoided this chapter to write a more unidirectional argument, the logic that produces it is precisely the logic by which aestheticism's various contortions of Victorian values can always become implicit resistances to them.

The passage between a valuing of aestheticism's resistance to various Victorian social and sexual constraints and valuing its aesthetics has always been less conflicted in gay theory's interest in decadence. One sees the connection between an interest in homosexuality among aesthetes and an engagement with its aesthetics in a number of registers. Richard Dellamora outlines the most straightforward one in his important study, *Masculine Desire.* In his afterword, which starts with the issue of the subject-position of gay critique, Dellamora, through a discussion of Pater, outlines three perspectives that are also three ways of viewing art:

> Pater's "expert" registers the distance that exists between a cultural critique that is ignorant of male-male desire and one whose expertise is in part erotic. Pater's expert, then, might — like Pater himself — be a conscious subject of desire between men. Pater, however, holds open yet a third possibility, one that he encountered at Oxford during his first decade there but which, by 1893, must have seemed a receding memory, namely of an expert who though not a subject of male desire, is relaxed and aware enough to occupy that position imaginatively. It is this imaginative flexibility that is essential for reading the lineaments of desire in cultural production. (222)

The third perspective Dellamora outlines he extrapolates explicitly from Pater's definition of art criticism at the outset of his career, in the more hopeful period prior to his own loss of an academic position, probably due to Benjamin Jowett's homophobically motivated opposition (see Inman), and prior to the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1885, under which Wilde was prosecuted in 1895. At that early point, Dellamora posits a spectator imaginatively open to the possibility of same-sex desire without necessarily experiencing it as the cognate of a spectator of art who gets its value from the same sort of experiential openness. In Dellamora's argument, the occurrence of the subject of homoeroticism in aestheticist art and theory coincides with the aestheticist concentration on the form and function of art — the definition of aestheticism Psomiades draws from Bürger — but that coincidence hardly makes aestheticism complicit in the Victorian constraints around gender and sexuality, constraints many aesthetes in fact resisted.

Dellamora's argument creates a ground from which Linda Dowling, in two related books, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* and *The Vulgarization of Art,* can make the linking in aestheticism of homoeroticism and homosexuality with art partake of both the definition of liberal individualism throughout the century and the contradictory role of art as both an elite pleasure and a democractic experience, a role that stretches back to the emergence of aesthetics in England in the eighteenth century. In the first of these books, Dowling writes under the aegis of Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* rejecting the repressive hypothesis for a view by which the development of the bourgeois individual defines and marks out a space for sexuality that may be regulated by social practices with more completeness than the earlier, monarchical controls achieved. From this perspective, she can outline a late Victorian defense of homosexuality as coming out of a mid-Victorian defense of a secular state: "As regards Oxford, my argument is that (1) such leading university reformers as Benjamin Jowett were seeking to establish in Hellenism the systematic study of Greek history and literature and philosophy, a ground of transcendent value alternative to Christian theology. But (2) once they had done so, Pater and Wilde and the Uranian poets could not be denied the means of developing out of this same Hellenism a homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms" (xiii). The linkage Dowling argues is, of course, not merely that the Greeks who articulated the secular ideal Jowett wanted to establish also engaged in male same-sex love. Rather, the very ideals the liberal reformers wanted from the reading of Plato established the grounds for a defense of that love.

First, liberal reformers, and particularly Mill, turned to the Greeks because they feared that their society was stagnating and the Greek ideals could be turned into reinvigorating ethical principles that would replace the stagnation brought about by Christianity. But part of that reinvigoration was an acceptance of sensate experience. On this basis, Dowling explains, for instance, the failure of Robert Buchanan's attack on the "Fleshly School of Poetry" (Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite poetry): "By the time Buchanan mounted his attack on the Fleshly School, however, he would speak as a lonely, isolated, no longer entirely intelligible voice. For in a Victorian world utterly transformed by the invisible process so compellingly described by Foucault, the deployment of sexuality by the middle class as a means of self-affirmation, the sensuous emphasis on physical beauty and pleasure denounced by Buchanan, had come to represent a legitimate dimension to metropolitan middle-class life, part of an allowable domain of 'aesthetic' values" (25). In connection with this acceptance of sensual pleasure as a middle-class comfort rather than a radical challenge, Jowett stressed in Greek philosophy an ethical skepticism, "an ethically relativizing historicism," that would undercut what he took to be the arbitrary constraints of religious dogma. In this context, Pater and Wilde, Hellenists both, could use Platonic language to define both an aestheticism and a view of male love as wholly within the secular ideals espoused by Victorian liberal reform. Moreover, precisely because Hellenic liberalism, aestheticism, and male same-sex love were allied values, Dowling insists that one must take phrases we now read as covert articulations of homosexual desire precisely as open declarations of an ideal that could still be espoused prior to the Wilde trials:

> [N]ot to see that Wilde's very lack of specificity may itself constitute an aesthetic choice wholly independent of the mechanics of repression and resistance is to make the mistake of reductionism . . . such suggestive phrases of Lord Henry Wotton's as "the Hellenic ideal" or "the aim of self-development" become fully intelligible only when they are understood — not as evasions or euphemisms — but as perfectly expressive, in their unspecific amplitude of implication, of precisely that imaginative richness, that many-sidedness and "variety" so central to the sociocultural agenda of Victorian Hellenism. (125–27)

In Dowling's account, then, the aesthetic values of sensual openness and ethical skepticism argued a connection that approached positing an identity between the values of liberal reform and male same-sex desire. While this historicist argument is certainly more complicated by its Foucauldian perspective in its evaluations of aestheticism than Dellamora's direct espousal of Pater's third mode of viewing art and homosexual desire, it still remains essentially sympathetic with a project destroyed by Wilde's prosecution. Dowling's next book makes these sympathies even clearer.

In *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy,* Dowling concentrates on the element of liberal reformism in aestheticism, drawing its connections in this book with a democratic element in aesthetics dating back to Shaftesbury, thus outlining an intellectual history that may stand as a complement to her Foucauldian articulation of the discourse of Hellenism within Victorian aestheticism (assuming one thinks these two kinds of history can coexist). Although Hellenism and homosexuality play at best tertiary characters in this second narrative, the essential identity between aesthetic democracy and Hellenistic liberalism is clear enough. As in the earlier book, Dowling traces the connections between Pater's insistence on multiplicity and variety, on a searching freedom of thought and on a new openness of the senses to the influence of Mill's *On Liberty* and notes the positive reception liberals less concerned with aesthetics, such as John Morley, gave to *The Renaissance,* seeing it as a work that shared their values. The element that connects Pater's liberalism with older aesthetic theories is the belief, articulated first by Shaftesbury, that human reception to beauty and morality was basically uniform and that this uniformity of value could found a secular state in the place of monarchical or externally imposed values. Dowling calls this belief "aesthetic democracy," and she traces its manifestation in Victorian thinkers from Ruskin through Wilde. She treats this belief and the larger liberalism it inhabits with the same historicist distance with which she regards Oxford Hellenism, and she is also concerned to show a central contradiction in it with an aristocratism that will lead to its downfall, a contradiction to which I will turn in a moment. But Dowling also makes explicit here that to see the history she wants to write, one must take the claims that the aesthetes made for the power of art seriously, thus identifying herself with contemporary critical voices "that, while always insisting in the strongest terms on the historicity of the work of art, have insisted as well that taking history seriously means taking with equal seriousness the power of social redemption that writers like Ruskin and Morris were ready to attribute to the aesthetic" (x). Dowling, of course, does not demand that we assent to their beliefs about art or its redemptive power. But she articulates the logic I discussed above, whereby to take seriously or value the social power of aestheticism will entail taking seriously or valuing its sense of the aesthetic.

The basic problem with "aesthetic democracy," as Dowling reconstructs it, starts with Shaftesbury's extrapolation of an aesthetic experience he took to be universal from his own experiences: "The paradox of aesthetic democracy, as I shall attempt to trace its consequences in the following pages, originates in the moment when Lord Shaftesbury, raised as an English nobleman among paintings, music, and the Greek and Roman classics, is led by certain implications of his own argument to imagine that his own deep appreciation of these things must be, if only latently or potentially, basic to human nature itself" (xiv). The aristocratism of Shaftesbury's taste has of course been noticed before. And the problems with eighteenth-century beliefs that aesthetic taste was as humanly common as our basic apparatus for sensation and the consequent problems within the Anglo-American tradition with almost any concept of universal aesthetic tastes or values, have also been discussed before. Dowling's innovation, however, is to show how this problem develops in Ruskin and Morris and, more to the point for this article, comes to inhere in the relativism that Pater's and Wilde's versions of aesthetic democracy seem to accept.

Pater, in distinct contrast to the British aesthetic theorists who went before, was fully willing to relativize aesthetic experience as an opposition to religious or theoretic dogma. This for Dowling is the shift his version of aesthetic democracy inaugurates. If this democratization of aesthetic response rids it, at least at the outset, of Shaftesbury's aristocratic assumptions, Dowling suggests that it does so at the cost of the kind of universal secular values that it was trying to achieve: "It was as if Pater's revolutionary question 'What is this to *me?*' had somehow been turned against the literary liberals' own cultural project, now emboldening and expanding precisely the vulgarity it had once been meant to chasten and transform" (91). There is little evidence that Pater himself was bothered by the implications of his relativist definition of aesthetic response. And the ongoing debate over whether liberal toleration needs to be self-contradictory — Dowling quite explicitly connects the intellectual history she writes here with this problem (93) — exhibits numbers of at least proposed solutions to the problem. Still, it is undeniable that the Victorians increasingly felt a growing vulgarity in midddle-class aesthetic taste as a problem. Wilde, in particular, because of his notoriety, experienced a middle-class sensibility that he was unwilling to let stand as the democratically chosen aesthetic standard, even though he, as completely as any of his forebears, thought that social justice would be achieved by an aesthetically sensitized populace: "at this moment of ideological disarray, Wilde, urgently seeking an alternative source of moral authority for aesthetic liberalism, was moved as though by some deeper intuition to rediscover and reassert that alien principle of aristocratic spirit silently repressed by the Whig aesthetic tradition as a condition of its emergence two centuries before" (93–94). Thus, Shaftesbury's aristocratism, abandoned as a democratic standard by more thoroughgoing Victorian liberals, is reintroduced at the other end of the century as an explicit control upon the repressive elements of the actual vulgar aesthetic being put into place. And, although Dowling does not say so, Wilde's aristocratic reaction to the ugliness of the society was also a reaction to its illiberal repressiveness, a reaction to the tyranny of the majority that also dates back to Mill's *On Liberty*.

If Dowling's second book has seemed to draw us away from the illuminations and strains feminism and gay studies have cast upon Victorian aestheticism, we may return to them by considering how much this analysis of liberalism and aesthetics, ours and Victorian, illuminates the strains I have been trying to capture in the historicist distancings and ideological sympathies of those approaches. The aestheticist participation in its own commodification that Psomiades recounts, for instance, in the light of Dowling's articulation of the conflicts within a proposed aesthetic democracy that did not envision its own vulgarization, looks less like a capitulation to aestheticism's real capitalist essence and more like a consequence of its own commitment to broadly disseminated aesthetic values (a commitment held deeply at least by Morris). And the real sense of aestheticist elitism that those groups' aesthetes excluded could have felt, could nevertheless have derived from an elitism struggling against widely held, repressive bourgeois attitudes. The Wilde seen prior to Gagnier, trying to seal art off from reality in a self-enclosed realm, and the Wilde Gagnier depicts, satirizing his bourgeois audience with antithetic ironies, come to seem not conflicting interpretations of Wilde but conflicting tensions within him. Even Dellamora's three modes of reading — an expert mode based on direct experience of male-male desire, an insufficient mode with no such knowledge, and the third way that is open to the knowledge it does not share — may be matched up with categories in Dowling: the elitist mode of aestheticist criticism, the vulgar aesthetic sensibilities of Victorian culture, and the liberal view of an aesthetic democracy that creates a basis for a regenerated community on aesthetic values that are genuinely both universal and still redemptive. Indeed, the reason, I think, that current criticism cannot agree on the ideological placement of aestheticism or succeed in entirely distancing itself from aestheticist aesthetics, is that the various historicizing approaches taken toward the field still share deeply in some of its various views of art and society.

Perhaps the headiest mix of postmodern gay theory applied to aestheticism and a sympathy with it that amounts to identification occurs in Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and*

Catholicism. There are numbers of usually important scholarly reasons for faulting this book, not least of which is its own very uncertain sense of exactly what its thesis is. But I cannot imagine anyone who has felt the force of Pater's prose or the elegance of Wilde's ironies not admiring this book for the force of its interpretations or an elegance of writing that puts academic style to shame. The only consistent thesis in the book entails noticing the number of aesthetes and decadents who were also gay and Catholic or Catholic converts. Merely noting this concurrence is hardly new; from a historical perspective, the question is to determine what its significance, if any, might be. The connection obviously cannot be necessary since numbers of aesthetes and decadents were not gay, not Catholic or not either (Hanson notices some lesbian Catholic aesthetes and decadents but barely addresses them; so the book is further limited to gay, male, Catholic decadents). Indeed, two of the authors he interprets in detail, Pater and Wilde, either did not convert or did so only technically. Neither of them ever expresses anything like faith in the divinity of Christ, and Pater clearly believed neither in a god nor in immortality. And this gets us to the deeper problem with the connection Hanson does draw. Hanson essentially argues that gay aesthetes see in the Church a work of art and "a theater for the articulation of homosexual desire and identity through faith and ritual" (25). From here, he wants to outline a similar consistency of structure and position between postmodernist multivalency, a love of art, homosexuality, and Catholicism. With regard to the decadents, the basic ground of this connection has been made before (though Hanson's readings establish it with real depth and breadth). But the cases of both Pater and Wilde may show as much that the theatricality of Catholicism and its ritual can be insufficient as a ground for considering oneself a Catholic. As a matter of personal testimony, Hanson's conclusion leaves no basis for dissent: "I see nothing essential to being postmodern or being gay that should preclude a devotion to great art — or, for that matter, a devotion to God" (374). Regardless of one's own beliefs, it would clearly be homophobic to argue that being gay precludes believing in god. The relation between gays and Catholics (and believing in a god is not identical with being Catholic) must of course be left to gays and Catholics. And it has been part of my argument that various postmodern approaches to aestheticism necessitate at least the recognition of art as a meaningful concept. One might wonder whether postmodern skepticism about transcendental unities might not preclude a belief in a single god, but postmodernism is notoriously various. Finally, one assents to Hanson's statement only as a matter of possibility, not in any sense as an explanation of a connection. So as an historical or theoretical thesis, the book's claims are often uncertain.

But it is as testimony to a connection felt upon the pulses, of which, as Pater insists, we have only a counted number, expressed through readings of decadents and what they are to Hanson that this book matters. Its extended readings of Pater and Wilde in particular are necessary and fascinating textual encounters for anyone studying British aestheticism, largely because they *are* encounters, less driven by a thesis, than by the sense of constellations of issues and concerns that Hanson brings together in ways one might not have thought of before but will not want to lose sight of afterwards. In the case of Pater, for instance, Hanson connects Pater's persistent concentration on the imminence of death with his sense of artistic creation as coming from the "ruins and fragments of its predecessor." This creation is the ground for a connection between "two recurrent and related themes in his writing — namely homoerotic friendship and virgin motherhood" (170). In a certain sense, only the concentration on virgin motherhood has gone largely unnoticed, but that theme does genuinely hold all the others together in a new way. Whether this view of "Pater Dolorosa," as Hanson wittily entitles this chapter, makes the case, even "with numerous qualifications," for "Pater as a decadent, a homosexual and an Anglo-Catholic" is another matter. But how much will that case matter for the view of art, homoeroticism, homosexuality, and religion as thematically intertwined that his reading does establish?

In a conclusion that daringly paraphrases the first and last paragraphs of Pater's "Conclusion," in his own first and last paragraphs, Hanson's view of the connection between the odd elements of his themes comes out. He starts, "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes and fashions has more and more become the tendency of postmodern thought" and then places our view of god under this rubric: "And if we continue to dwell in language on the nature of God, we find not a transcendent signifier but an uncertain one, flickering, inconsistent, that burns and is extinguished with its articulation" (365). This view of god certainly does look like Pater's at his most skeptical, and it is certainly tenable to see such a view as the tendency of postmodern thought. One would have thought that this view would not be identifiable with a religious faith in god, but Hanson ends, "For religion, no less than art and sexuality, comes to us proposing, in its own peculiar language, to give nothing but the highest quality to our moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (374–75). I don't think it can be said that religion, like art, promises *only* to give the highest quality to our moments as they pass, but if this is Hanson's view of it and of Catholicism, then in that regard, he can be said to have established an argument in favor of a religious and homoerotic aesthetics. At the very least, he has, through queer theory, presented us with a new way of seeing into the belief of aesthetes in art for art's sake, a way of seeing it as valuable rather than merely as an historical occurrence to be placed.

The last two books I will discuss are both broader in scope than aestheticism, one addressing Victorian lyric poetry, the other the significance of art as a cultural concept in nineteenth-century literature. Both books address various aestheticist authors (Michael Field, Algernon Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde) in important readings, but both want to offer histories of literary or aesthetic concepts in the nineteenth century. Because of their historical concerns, both are noticeable in pointedly distinguishing themselves from theories that mean to identify the aesthetic with its ideological entrapments or effects. The first of these, Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho,* might seem from its subject matter — translations of Sappho's poetry and the appearance of Sappho and poetry that identifies itself as Sapphic in the Victorian age — as well as from the authors treated — Michael Fields, Algernon Swinburne, and a number of early Victorian women poets — to be a study of influence on mostly less than central Victorian poets. In fact, it means to be and persuades that it is both a deconstructive literary history and a theory of Victorian lyric poetry. Sappho, Prins argues, became the exemplary lyric poet for the Victorians, representing for them both a voice and a certain image of poetry. But Sappho is also a figure of fragments in numbers of ways: all we have of "her" poetry is a set of lyrics attributed to a name, Sappho; the name comes with some narratives that may or may not be true, may or may not be connected to the poems; the lyrics themselves are frequently fragments; and of course to become part of a widely influential Victorian figure, they had to be translated, thus reconstructed. The result of making such fragmentariness an exemplary figure is that Sappho "became exemplary of lyric in its irreducibly textual embodiment, and exemplary of lyric reading as well, in its desire to hypothesize a living whole from dead letters" (4).

If this sounds like a formulation of lyric drawn from Paul de Man, Prins means her deconstructive critique to be "coupled with feminist criticism" (20) since she argues that Sappho stands for a persona reconstructed out of fragments because of a "projected fantasy of a female body and a feminine voice" (4).

The argument in *Victorian Sappho* moves chronologically backwards as it moves logically forward towards greater generality. It starts with an 1898 collection of translated poems, working through close readings of a number of translations of a single poem about a loss of speech. From the decomposition of Sappho's speech to the compositions and decompositions of the poem through translations, Prins finally argues that the Sapphic collection "reflects the emergence of a decadent style, as defined by Paul Bourget and reformulated in English by Havelock Ellis in 1889: 'A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page . . . '" (68). From here, the book moves to the Sapphic collection of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, writing under their pen name, Michael Field. At the time they wrote, Sappho was increasingly becoming figured as a lesbian, in a historical moment at which lesbianism, as well as male homosexuality, was becoming defined and reified. As part of that moment and in response to it, "Bradley and Cooper therefore turn to Sappho as a highly overdetermined trope. To read Michael Field's Sappho as the self-reflexive performance of this trope is not to privilege performative free play independent of social context, but to situate *Long Ago* [Field's collection] within a social context that produces such performativity" (95). If the first two chapters recount kinds of artificial embodying of Sapphic fragments, the final two chapters, moving back through Swinburne to Victorian female poets from Mary Robinson to Christina Rossetti, show equally artificed dismemberments and disembodiments. Through a reading of metrics in Swinburne, Prins shows how Swinburne creates a Sapphic sublime by "undoing the Sapphic body" (120) and concludes with a reception history of Swinburne that claims that he as well "becomes a body *for* abuse" (121). Finally, in reading a series of Victorian women poets and their handling of Sappho's ostensibly suicidal leap into the sea, Prins argues a constant trope in the women's poetry for predicting their own fall into obscurity, a trope passed on as it were from one poet to the next, thus making each one's fall part of a successful tradition.

In the book's conclusion, Prins notes that the chapters could have been reversed to create a literary history, of sorts, of Victorian poetry from before the middle of the century to the decadence through the lens of Sappho's influence and exemplarity. But it would still be a de Manian literary history: "The moment when a 'history of reception' becomes visible can itself be historicized as a recursive structure, and it requires more complex reading than straightforwardly sequential analysis: there is no *a priori* Sappho and no linear progression in the long history of reading Sappho . . . The study of Sappho's reception must proceed by analyzing our own moment of reading as another displacement" (246). Albeit in the somewhat austere language of deconstructive criticism, this is a noticeably aestheticist conclusion — aestheticist just as Hanson's book is in that it enacts aestheticism. Prins brings together feminism, gay studies, and deconstruction into a formalism that means to be historically and ideologically aware. That attempt to make a formalist awareness of art cope with historical reality and ideological position might be taken as exemplary of both aestheticism and of one mode of its current criticism.

We see the mirror image of that mode in Jonah Siegel's *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art,* which means to trace the development and history of art as a cultural concept while being formally aware of the force of art within culture. Siegel analyzes the influence of what he calls "the culture of art," a concept of the value of art developed by the rise of museums and their collection and arrangement of the art of the past, on nineteenth-century beliefs about the identity of the artist and the role of art. He makes clear that, while he sees ideas about art as historical constructs, he does not see them as masks for some more real political ground: "the tendency to start from a desire to unmask the politics ostensibly hidden within institutional structures or from a wish to describe an interest in the arts as having its source in the desire to divert attention away from politics has meant that there has been little recognition of the culture of art as itself an object of interest" (280). In contrast, Siegel recounts the response to the discovery and display in museums of the art of the past from the end of the eighteenth century through the decadence. *Desire and Excess* is not a survey or a history but the tracing of a concern with fine art in various literary figures. The book starts with the way in which, in the neo-classical period, the actual artworks of the past discovered by archaeology did not fit the concepts the neo-classics held about past art. They responded to this challenge with "idealized versions of the *artist* of the past" (11). Moving from writers about fine arts to literary biographers in the nineteenth century, Siegel shows how concepts of the artist drawn from fine arts shape the creation of lives of artists in the Romantic period. In the concluding section of the book, which is of most concern here, having, as he recognizes, skipped over the mid-Victorian period, Siegel analyzes how responses to what they felt to be the excessive presence of the art of the past shaped the work of Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde.

Ruskin responded to the work of the past by worrying that its excess obstructed one's ability to engage with art as immediately meaningful: "The evolution of *Modern Painters,* that is to say, the controlled explosion of that work, is determined by the repeated shock of Ruskin's encounters with a world of art all too accessible" (198). Ruskin's task then becomes first to find a process for ordering this excess and then, more importantly, to imagine an artistic process by which one can make from the fragments of the past a new, living use. To Ruskin, the museum culture was a threat because it enacted a separation for a love of an art object from any belief in what that object signified. The response to that threat was to design a museum and a culture that would enforce authentic responses to those works. Pater and Wilde accept the situation that threatened Ruskin as defining their cultural role. Artists became critics as understanding art's history became the only role left to modernity. Although Siegel does not say this, the notion of art for art's sake, in the context of his argument, becomes an acceptance of art as a detached fragment. From a much more densely historical perspective and a very different route, then, Siegel has arrived at a view of the art and literature of the decadence that bears a striking similarity to Prins's much more formal focus on lyric and the concept of a Sapphic voice. For both of them, nineteenth-century aesthetics often amounted to an attempt to animate the art of the past and aestheticism meant to make an art out of the acceptance of fragmentariness.

In an odd way, though the critical approaches of Siegel and Prins share little of the explicit political interests of gay and feminist studies that start by wanting to see the complicities of aestheticism and end with an interest in the resistances inherent in its aesthetics, their studies much more successfully place aestheticist art within a nineteenth-century concern for an artistic past that aesthetes accepted rather than trying to escape.

Although Siegel and Prins accept art as a coherent concept, they thereby manage to give a history to the concept that more easily comprehends aestheticist concerns. Between these two kinds of approaches, the contradictions within the fin-de-siècle decadence manifest themselves again in our fin-de-siècle theory and criticism. By embracing pastness and purposeless art, the decadence nevertheless functioned as one of the most effective early challenges to Victorian social sureties. The theories that mean to resist art's social complicities, either intentionally or not, recuperate certain aspects of aesthetics as a means of resistance. The theories that accept the aesthetic as a concept nevertheless manage more thoroughly to capture that category within a history that shapes it. In the light of this recreation of aestheticist subject matter, the interest of our fin-de-siècle in the one a century past makes obvious sense.

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