

Style as the Man: The Aesthetics of Self-(Re)construction in Pater, Wilde, and Yeats

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Abstract

This essay investigates some significant interconnections between Walter Pater's Epicureanism, Oscar Wilde's dandyism, and W. B. Yeats's theory of the anti-self mask. These terms represent their most important aesthetic ideals of self-cultivation or self-(re)construction. Aesthetic theories applied in this study include those developed by Baumgarten, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and early modern British moralists such as Shaftesbury and Hume.

First of all, the three writers' most typical aesthetic views emphasize, in various degrees, the sensuous, perceptive, and bodily aspects of human existence. While Pater and Wilde were inclined to treat the body as an ornament for display, Yeats, shortly after the turn of the century, extolled bodily energy displayed in heroic, physical actions. The different concepts of the "body" held by these three writers form the basis of the methods they recommend for self-remaking. For Pater, an ideal artist of life should try to perfect his own personality by cultivating a perceptive and meditative mind. Following Pater, Wilde recommends pursuing a contemplative life, and he finds a rich inner life more fulfilling. In contrast, Yeats's aesthetic paradigm looks for self-fulfillment in terms of action.

The issues raised in Part II center on the idea that the aesthetic partakes of both the rational and sensuous, a concept shared by many German and French thinkers. Pater, Wilde, and Yeats follow this aesthetic idealism and yet try to revise and even undermine this heritage. From this concept they develop three important views: the autonomy of the moral agent and the possibility of incorporating the rational and the ethical with the aesthetic or uniting truth and goodness with beauty; the need to modify external, social law to accommodate the needs and pursuit of happiness of each individual; and the importance of constructing one's own subjective, epistemological world.

Part III discusses the three writers' "aesthetic historicism," a kind of enlarged historical/critical understanding, which they regard as a prerequisite for aesthetic self-cultivation. In fact, the paradigms of aesthetic existence they recommend all demonstrate refined aesthetic taste and critical acumen achieved through the cultivation of sophisticated historical insight. The concluding section discusses the three writers' theories of artistic self-expression, which they relate not only to literary creativity but, more importantly, to modes of self-actualization. This "expressivism" forms the basis of their concept of a fuller individuation.

Keywords

Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Epicureanism, dandyism, the anti-self mask,

self-cultivation, Baumgarten, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, British moralists,
Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, the Aesthetic movement, aesthetic historicism, artistic
expressivism, Herder, Foucault

In this way, according to the well-known saying, “The style is the man,” complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things [...].

—Walter Pater, “Style,” *Appreciations*

The embryonic concept of this study originated in my attempt to find crucial interconnections between Walter Pater’s Epicureanism, Oscar Wilde’s dandyism and W. B. Yeats’s theory of the anti-self mask. These terms represent the most important aesthetic ideals pursued by each of the three writers toward the aim of perfecting the self. The artists’ narcissistic obsession is related to the cult of the self or self-culture, a long tradition that started with early human civilizations (Hellenic humanism being one of the most renowned examples). It reached a high point in the Renaissance and again in the late nineteenth century, and in new forms continues into our own day. In the Victorian Age in particular, the concept of personal “cultivation” (for example, “the special graces bestowed by ‘polite letters’”), as David DeLaura stated in an early essay, became widespread from the beginning of the century and was later intensified by the efforts of great Victorian figures such as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Mathew Arnold and partly by the strong influence of Goethean “heroic egotism” (43).¹ The innovative endeavors of the three writers of my focus here become particularly

¹ British and European Romanticism in the early decades of the nineteenth century produced many long poetic works about the formation of the self, the most eminent being *The Prelude* by Wordsworth. Other British examples of this genre include Blake’s *Milton*, Keats’s *Endymion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, and, in Victorian poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. We also see similar developments in contemporary prose: the self-revealing personal essays of Lamb and Hazlitt and the spiritual autobiographies such as Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* and Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. All of these may be regarded as refined and elaborate literary expressions of the cult of the self. The innovative contributions of Pater, Wilde, and Yeats lay in the experiential dimension they added to this long tradition, for they not only extended these autobiographical efforts but also developed their aesthetic theories about self-cultivation and consciously applied them to their personal lives with an attempt to turn life into art or at least (in the case of Pater) to contemplate or theorize such a possibility.

significant when we consider that they inherited this long-established cult and initiated new lines of development. This they did, in the case of Pater and Yeats, by formulating their unique and original aesthetic precepts, and in the case of Wilde, by making himself the very incarnation of the fin-de-siècle vogue associated with his name.

As I have commented in a previous paper (1993), Terry Eagleton uses, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* specifically, aesthetic theories to mediate and unify the idea of the human body (its physical-cognitive sensorium as well as its concern with concrete particularity) with more familiar Marxist issues of “the state, class conflict, and modes of production” (7). To achieve this goal, he underscores the “creative development” of the bodily and sensuous aspects of human existence, grounding his argument on the basis of the etymological implication of the Greek word *aisthesis*, which refers to the whole region of human perception and sensation. Eagleton argues that rational, moral, and social behaviors are inseparable from concerns of human happiness and self-fulfillment, for, as so many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic thinkers have claimed, to follow our self-delighting impulses and to pursue wealth of being are our fundamental and inalienable rights. In fact, Eagleton contends that this primary aesthetic concern instigated in the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie’s assertion of its inviolable rights to freedom and autonomy. Eagleton’s central concern is to investigate, from a Marxist perspective, the role of the prevailing aesthetic ideology in the bourgeoisie’s challenge to the ruling order. One notices, however, that many of these forces operate in the life of *the individual* as well. I will try in this study to concentrate on the endeavor on the part of the individual to refashion the self from within and to pursue rich self-fulfillment under the inspiration of human aesthetic faculties.

Eagleton’s view of the aesthetic as autonomous and autotelic is what interests me most in his book: somehow in a mysterious “divine fashion,” it “bears its ends entirely within itself, generates itself up miraculously out of its own substance” (64). Eagleton asserts that this motif of autogenesis pervades the history of modern aesthetics as it is developed and elucidated by philosophers such as Baumgarten, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Susan Buck-Morss’s comment adds some humor to this abstract speculation of male “autogenesis.” As she argues, this modern myth of autogenesis even surpasses the belief in the Virgin Birth, for modern man, *homo autotelus*, literally produces himself, engenders himself, “out of [his] own substance.” What makes this myth so attractive to modern “man,” Buck-Morss continues, “is the narcissistic illusion of total control. The fact that one can *imagine* something that *is not*, is extrapolated in

the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan.” She amusingly notes that in engendering “a living, breathing child,” we women certainly do not have this kind of control (8).

In some of my previous works (1996, 1997, 1998, 1999), I have explored the aesthetic self-remaking (which may also be considered a form of autogenesis) practiced and promulgated by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats, who played an active role in the fin-de-siècle movement of Aestheticism. One of my central arguments is that the three writers’ aesthetic views have often been described as passive and impressionistic, whereas their emphasis on active self-remaking, in their critical and fictional writings as well as in their personal lives, has not been appropriately recognized. In this essay, I will use aesthetic theories developed by European and British thinkers such as Baumgarten, Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Kant, and Hegel to analyze the rich implications of the three writers’ theories of aesthetic self-(re)construction. Billie Andrew Inman’s research shows that Pater had read many of these philosophers, whose works helped him to establish his own aesthetic viewpoint and style. Pater had already established some of these fundamental aesthetic principles before Wilde came to give them a willful and flagrant twist.

I. Corporeal Sensoria and the Etymological Implications of the Word *aisthesis*

First of all, the three writers’ most typical aesthetic views emphasize, in various degrees, the sensuous, perceptive, and bodily aspects of human existence. When the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, for example, first formulated the concept of aesthetics, its foremost reference was not to art, but, as the Greek word *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more abstract domain of conceptual thought.² Since all of our corporeal sensoria inform us of our direct perception of the external world—the pleasurable and distasteful, affection and aversion—they become, as Buck-Morss points out, the “*out front* of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically” (6). Aesthetics thus inquires into the way the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, and all that

² See Baumgarten 43. For a useful study of Baumgarten, see Gasché. For historical surveys of English and German aesthetics, see Caygill, Eagleton, and Chytry.

arises from, as Eagleton puts it, “our most banal, biological insertion into the world”(13).

More significantly, since the aesthetic signifies a creative approach to the sensuous and empirical, it accentuates concrete particularities and sensorially perceivable experiences. As Baumgarten states in *Aesthetica* (1750), aesthetic cognition mediates between the generalities of reason and the concrete particulars of sense (*Reflections on Poetry* 43). He asserts that the world of perception and experience cannot simply be understood through abstract reasoning, but must be approached through tangible, particular experiences. The British “moral sense” school and empiricists—the Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and David Hume, for example—believe that ethical practice or social law must first work on our senses, imprint itself on our sensibilities, before it can inspire men and women to virtuous action.³ For them the aesthetic functions as the necessary medium of senses and sentiments through which abstract ideas can work on us. The aesthetic is in this sense, as Eagleton puts it, “the relay or transmission mechanism by which theory is converted to practice” (40).

Contrary to his reputation for being an enigmatic, obscure impressionist, Pater attempted to correct the Victorian overemphasis on abstract intellectualism by repeatedly emphasizing, in his critical and fictional writings, the physical aspect of sensuous perception as opposed to abstract, metaphysical speculation. There were indeed a few critics and artists who had dealt with sensuous topics before Pater: John Ruskin developed his subjective and fervent style of art criticism in *Modern Painters*, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers represented sensuous subjects and colors on their canvases, but none elevated their focus to the level of a coherent philosophical perspective. Pater may be considered the first Victorian writer who insisted on the foundational importance of concrete, sensuous experiences and theorized persistently in his writings both his aesthetic views and his concept of an aesthetically rewarding life. As he demonstrates forcefully in the Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, an aesthetic critic needs to define beauty “not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible,” and to find not its “universal” principles but its “special manifestation” in a particular object (xvii-xviii).⁴

³ See Shaftesbury, “An Enquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit,” and Hutcheson, “An Inquiry Concerning the [Original] of our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good.” See also Eagleton 34-40; Darwall 176-206 and 207-43.

⁴ Pater published in his lifetime three editions of his collected essays on the Renaissance with slightly modified titles. In this paper, quotations from Pater’s Renaissance essays are from the third edition,

In his portraits of various Renaissance figures, Pater emphasizes repeatedly the counterbalancing power of human aesthetic faculties and the need to unite “the body, the senses, [and] the heart” with the mind (*Ren.* 40-41). For Pierre Abelard, the twelfth-century French theologian who prefigured the spirit of the Renaissance in various ways, the aesthetic sentiment reveals itself as romantic love and signifies the assertion of the human heart against the exceedingly inhibiting monastic culture. In Botticelli the aesthetic ideal appears as the celebration of humanity in all its sensuous joy, vitality, and loveliness, as well as its anxiety and vulnerability. In Michelangelo the aesthetic sensitivity becomes a mysterious source of sweetness within the remarkable strength shown in the artist’s sculpture, poetry, and most significantly, in his temperament. This true “aesthetic charm” invigorates the stiffness of his sculptures and “tranquillize[s] his vehement emotions” (*Ren.* 85-86). Pater finds Michelangelo’s sonnets particularly interesting because they record the aging artist’s peaceful affection for Vittoria Colonna and allow the reader to witness “the struggle of a strong nature to adorn and attune itself” (*Ren.* 82). Pater regards the sculptor’s impetuous, vehement emotions as in themselves incomplete and in need of a softer sentiment to harmonize and refine his temperament. As for Leonardo, the aesthetic feelings arise as a strong desire for beauty, which generates “a type of subtle and curious grace” in his art, counterbalancing the artist’s equally strong sense of curiosity, an intellectual longing to explore the new, the strange, and the unknown (*Ren.* 109).

What is more interesting, however, is the attention Pater devotes to the physical appearance and accessory adornments of his aesthetic heroes. In the chapter “*Animula Vagula*,” where Pater records Marius’s first formation of his “new Cyrenaicism,” we are reminded not only of the young hero’s remarkable intellectual distinction and his refined speech, but also of his meticulous attention to his attire and appearance: his toga is “daintily folded,” and he wears fresh flowers (*Marius* 1: 127). This foppish, sartorial self-absorption and desire for social distinction show a generic kinship with Wilde’s dandyism, which is marked by sartorial flamboyancy. Like Beau Brummell, Wilde attempts to make his refined taste, originality, and non-conformist iconoclasm externally visible. While Pater and Wilde tend to treat the body as an ornament for display, Yeats, by contrast, extols remarkable bodily energy exhibited in heroic, physical actions.

hereafter abbreviated as *Ren.*

A. The Concept of the Body and the Modes of Self-(Re)fashioning

The different concepts of the “body” held by these three writers, I argue, form the basis of the methods they recommend for self-cultivation. For Pater, who values foremost intensity and accuracy of perception, an ideal artist of life should try to perfect his own personality by, first of all, cultivating a perceptive and meditative mind. Whatever attention the Paterian hero pays to his attire and appearance, manners and demeanor, it is to reflect and highlight his inner beauty and harmony, especially his good taste and astute sensibility, while his refined writing expresses the subtle intricacies of his cultivated mind. Relegating action to a lower degree of “organism” than contemplation, Pater makes his characters observe and contemplate rather than act or converse. Often his aesthetic heroes observe things around them attentively, commemorating each fleeting moment by intensifying and prolonging in their minds the impressions it brings. Even when placed in the middle of a ritual ceremony or procession, the Paterian hero observes and captures in his mind the details of the ceremony instead of immersing himself in the ongoing activities.

Following Pater, Wilde prefers a contemplative life—“the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*” (*Artist as Critic* 384). Wilde finds a rich inner life more fulfilling because it transcends the sordid and vulgar real world, and because it is constructed and refined by human imagination. He thus prefers to observe the world with the calm eyes of the immortals rather than to advance in the imperfect real world. Affirming the artist’s subjective construction of reality, Wilde asserts in the essay “The Critic as Artist” that art and artistic life must be conscious and deliberate, and he regards action as “a blind thing” which is determined by external influences, and by “unconscious,” uncultivated impulses (*Artist as Critic* 359).

Yeats contrasts this internalized contemplation extolled by Pater and Wilde with physical, heroic action. The Irish poet analogizes attentive rendering of natural and artistic beauty to “picture-making,” which makes us sorrowful, because, as he stated in his 1904 *Samhain* essay, we feel the poet’s frustrated separation from what he describes (*Explorations* 163). Yeats argues that what impresses us most in life and in art is heroic action or bodily gesture that truly celebrates the living, concrete, and kinetic aspects of human existence. A Yeatsian hero like Cuchulain, who asserts his will in one perpetual gesture of fighting the waves, “call[s] up into our hearts [the] energy that is eternal delight” (*Explorations* 163). The lovely “guitar player,” whom Yeats describes beautifully in his important 1906 essay “Discoveries,” also exemplifies Yeats’s idea of a perfect “personality” that is defined in self-delighting and self-

fulfilling actions.⁵

B. Contemplation or Action: The Poses of Self-Representation

Each writer's preference for contemplation or action, in turn, characterizes his concept of the self and related views such as symbolic masks or consciously assumed poses. Pater projects himself into the aesthetic heroes or historical figures he creates, endowing them with the idealized sensitivity and cultivation he longs for himself, so as to live, if only vicariously, a richer and aesthetically more fulfilling life.

In the case of Wilde, who proclaimed that he had put all his genius into his life, and only his talent into his work, the desire to live his art and shape his life artistically was even more obvious. While we recognize the decadent aspect of Wilde's dandyism, we still see the deeper significance of his attempt to refashion himself through style and mannerism. In fact, the dandy's defiance of middle-class conformity and utilitarianism and his search for novelty and freshness of style make him a model for the artist's constant re-making of selfhood and renewal of style. James Joyce states in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that a work of art begins "when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself" (214). Wilde may be considered as the most conscious and deliberate among the three in artistically representing himself in his own mind and before others, for his dandiacal pose often intentionally embodies serious artistic and sociopolitical purposes.

Richard Ellmann traces Wilde's possible influence on Yeats's theory of the mask, a form of a deliberately assumed pose, back to "The Decay of Lying," which Wilde read to Yeats a month before it was published in early 1889 (301). Although Yeats spoke with a detached tone through the mask of the third person in the collected poems *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), he first systematically formulated his complicated theory of the anti-self mask in "Discoveries." By that time he had moved beyond the vague, aesthetic style of his early years, and had carefully read Nietzsche, whose theories of "the will to power" and masterful self-overcoming had come to form the basis for the strengthening of his art. It was also a time when Yeats re-examined his moody and meditative tendency during the nineties: "I thought of myself as something unmoving and silent living in the middle of my own mind and body" (*E&I* 271). He realized that the overemphasis on "the intellectual essences" dehumanized the artist and turned him into an obscure "state of mind." The Paterian, sensitive, self-observing

⁵ For details, see Yeats, "Discoveries," included in *Essays and Introductions*. Quotations from this text are from this edition, hereafter abbreviated as *E&I*.

persona is confined in his own solipsism. As a corrective, Yeats asserts that the self should be produced in action and in constructive labor, and he recommends the kind of strong, vigorous personality that is vitalized by “the greatest volume of personal energy” coming out of the body as well as out of the mind (*E&I* 266).

II. Aesthetic Theories about the Formation of the Self

In the second part of this paper, I wish to examine in greater detail the aesthetic theories regarding the (re)construction of the self developed or implemented by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats. Since Pater basically adhered to the aesthetic tradition established by prominent eighteenth-century thinkers, I will start with a brief summation of the ideas of Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. Inman’s research has shown that Pater very likely started reading Kant in early 1861, and Hegel in late 1862; he also often quoted Rousseau in his writings. These three thinkers’ aesthetic views, as well as those of Schiller, Fichte and many other predecessors whom Pater read conscientiously during the 1860s, helped him to construct a solid philosophical foundation for his ideas. Central to the views of this tradition is the conviction that the aesthetic serves as a unifying agent in the human faculty, subsuming or incorporating reason, and is thus capable of uniting sentiment or sensual impulses with rationality.

In addition to these European thinkers, Pater also read many influential early modern British moralists, including, to name only the most representative, Hobbes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume. These writers of the British Moralism School examined questions about how to live a human life and about the requirements or demands that bind all rational beings. More significantly, these thinkers studied, as Stephen Darwall puts it, the “internalism” of a person, or the sense of ethical obligation *internal* to the moral agent (11). As Darwall points out, one of the most important developments of this period was the emergence of the concept of autonomy accompanying philosophical speculation about moral obligation. As part of the influence from these thinkers, Pater learned to integrate the human rational and moral faculties into his understanding of the aesthetic. Accordingly, we will examine in this section three related issues: the autonomy of the moral agent and the goal to incorporate the rational and the ethical with the aesthetic or unite truth and goodness with beauty; the need to modify external, social law to accommodate the needs and

pursuit of happiness of each individual; and the importance of constructing one's own subjective, epistemological world.

A. The Aesthetic as a Unifying Agent

The next few issues that I raise in the following pages center on the idea that the aesthetic partakes of both the rational and sensuous, a concept shared by many thinkers such as Baumgarten, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, who were all strongly influenced by Enlightenment thought. From this concept they develop two important views: first, the free, legitimate use of our reason is essential to our autonomy or the construction of ourselves as free identities; second, external, social, or moral law must be formulated according to what we are as rational, moral, and emotional beings: in other words, social or ethical law must accommodate our needs and inclinations and our pursuit of happiness.

To begin with, Baumgarten argues that our aesthetic capacity serves as a unifying agent and necessary complement to reason. In his view, our aesthetic sense, as mentioned, mediates between the generalities of reason and the particulars of sense. As he states in *Aesthetica* (1750), our aesthetic faculty incorporates within it the function of reason: it reorganizes and clarifies the raw stuff received from our sense perceptions into clear and distinct representations to the mind. In fact, Baumgarten suggests that our aesthetic sentiment may be considered the “sister” of logic, a kind of feminine analogue of reason working at the more fundamental level of sensuous life (*Reflections on Poetry* 38).⁶

Both Kant and Hegel basically accept Baumgarten's view of the aesthetic as subsuming and incorporating reason, but they also develop their own theories of marked distinction. Kant does not derive ethical imperatives from aesthetic or sensual impulses, but rather grounds them in rationality, thus creating an “objective,” as opposed to sentimental, motivation for our ethical actions. Hegel, for his part, rejects Kant's exclusion of sensuality from the determination of moral imperatives, embracing all of the cognitive, the practical, the emotional, and the sensuous in his concept of Reason. Hegelian Reason both drives our emotions and propensities to aspire to the Good, and simultaneously constrains them to abide by universal rational principles. In

⁶ Because of the lack of an all-inclusive and commonly accepted noun to describe the human aesthetic “faculty,” I use these terms (“aesthetic capacity,” “aesthetic capability,” “aesthetic sense,” “aesthetic faculty,” and “aesthetic sentiment”) mostly as synonyms for the sake of variety. Eagleton avoids this problem by referring to it simply as “the aesthetic,” but I find this insufficient, and it can be awkward when used persistently throughout a long essay or book.

sharp contrast to Kant, he argues in *The Philosophy of Right* that both rational and moral behavior are intrinsically inseparable from our inherent motivation to pursue happiness and self-fulfillment. Thus Hegel has in some sense “aestheticized” reason by uniting it with our sentiment, affection, and desire. In other words, Hegel brings the aesthetic down from the lofty Kantian concept of Duty and turns it into an active, transfigurative force in our daily life. Consequently, rationality, moral behavior, and affirmative self-fulfillment are all joined together in the complex interior unity of Hegelian Reason.⁷

B. Traditional Aesthetic Idealism and the Formation of Subjectivity

Therefore, like many traditional aesthetic idealists, Hegel extols the unification of ethics or social law with sensuous affections. Such a desired unification is grounded on the assumption that we can appropriate the benign external moral law as part of our constitution. As we shall see, Pater follows this tradition in accepting such a possibility, and his aesthetic view embraces or conforms to some fundamental ethical principles and basically assumes that to consent to the law is to consent to our own inward being. In Pater, moral value is aestheticized and relativized through the assumption that virtue consists essentially in being ourselves. Human nature, writes Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, “will not submit to unlimited coercion,” and the law must be accordingly modified to accommodate the interests and desires of the people (*The Political Works* 93).

Yet it is Rousseau who formulates an important modern concept of the self based on a renewed moral understanding that he himself initiated. He contends that not only must external law be framed to adapt to our needs and desires, but our true sentiments *define* what is good and appropriate. This modified moral understanding based on autonomy or subjectivity underpins the aesthetic self-fashioning that Pater, Wilde, and Yeats promote. More significantly, Rousseau equates not only goodness, but beauty as well, with freedom: he identifies the aesthetic with our freedom to follow out our own motivations and predispositions. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau speaks of the most important form of law as one “which is not graven on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens” (48). We as human beings discover the law in the depths of

⁷ For further discussion of this subject, consult Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*. For useful critical studies of their views, see Benhabib 80-84; Simpson 197-246; and Eagleton 13-30, 70-101, and 120-52.

our own free identities, rather than in some oppressive external power. “The heart,” writes Rousseau in *Émile*, “only receives laws from itself” (388). Here the French thinker speaks in defense of the primordial, unblemished impulse of human nature: “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil” (5). He asserts that we can look for the guidance of our behavior from within us, from the impulses of our ingenuous inward being, and that our ultimate happiness is to live in conformity with this inner moral conscience.⁸

Kant is strongly convinced that freedom and morality are inseparably united, for as he argues, a person cannot be held responsible if he is not able or free to fulfill his duty or respond to the moral command. We have, he contends, an autonomous will, and we are intellectually compelled to such freedom. To act morally, for Kant, is to act according to what we truly are as moral and rational agents. This requires us, however, to identify our rational will with a rule which we can propose to ourselves as a universal law. What Kant emphasizes is that the law of morality should not be imposed from outside, but must be directed by the very nature of reason itself.⁹

The early modern British moralists, Hobbes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume mainly, also believe that our unfailing intuition of aesthetic taste discloses the moral order to us within our immediate experiences and feelings. Such is the “moral sense” promoted by this school of thinkers—a sense that allows us to tell right from wrong with our swift and firsthand sense perception. Our sense of morality, the Earl of Shaftesbury argues, consists in “a real antipathy or aversion to injustice or wrong, and in a real affection or love towards equity and right, for its own sake, and on account of its natural beauty and worth” (Selby-Bigge, ed., *British Moralists* 15).¹⁰ Like Hegel, Shaftesbury maintains that the moral sense must be guided and disciplined by reason. He also rejects the hedonist doctrine that the good is simply what pleases us. Thus beauty, truth, and goodness are ultimately united for Shaftesbury. In his view, a virtuous, “beautiful, proportion’d, and becoming action” has its special aesthetic appeal (Selby-Bigge, ed., *British Moralists* 37), and thus deserves to be encouraged

⁸ As Rousseau states in *Émile*, “I long for the time when [...] I shall be myself, at one with myself, no longer torn in two, when I myself shall suffice for my own happiness” (257). Thus Rousseau relocated the source of unity and organic wholeness within the self.

⁹ In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts repeatedly that the moral law is what develops within us, and can no longer be defined by any external order, or anything outside the human rational will. But it is not directed by our impulse either, but by the procedures of our practical reasoning, which demand that we act according to universal principles. See also Taylor 363-67.

¹⁰ For the British moralists in general, see Selby-Bigge, Raphael, Grean, Jensen, Kivy, and Darwall.

and emulated.

It is interesting to examine how Pater, Wilde, and Yeats follow this aesthetic idealism and then try to revise and even undermine this heritage. Pater read many of the early modern thinkers carefully and for the most part accepted their idealistic aesthetic views. His Epicureanism postulates the idea of perfecting the self or enriching the inner soul through conscientious fashioning or cultivation of one's character, temperament, and sensibility. His aesthetic heroes embody this desired unification of virtue and beauty: Marius exemplifies a young Paterian hero whose intellectual, moral, physical, and sensuous refinements may be observed in the natural and pleasurable aesthetic appeal that Shaftesbury speaks of. More importantly, Pater cautiously delimits the hedonistic implications of his Epicureanism by highlighting its moral tone: "Not pleasure is its aim," as he clarifies, "but fullness of life, and 'insight' as conducting to that fullness" (*Marius* 1: 152).

C. Radical Re-Interpretation of Aesthetic Idealism and the Assertion of Autonomy

Thus the wish to combine the delight of the senses and the authority and reliability of moral order characterizes traditional aesthetic idealism in its trustful adaptation of the benign, external law as guidelines for personal behavior. However, a radical re-interpretation of this traditional view would be, as we can conclude from the ideas of Rousseau, Shaftesbury, and Hegel, to insist that external, social law must accommodate individual interests and needs.¹¹ Such a radical concept of freedom and autonomy asserts that human existence requires no justification beyond its own self-delight. To live "aesthetically" for Shaftesbury is to flourish in the well-balanced development of one's powers, conforming to the law of one's free identity in the casual, agreeable style of the traditional aristocrat.¹² In like manner, Pater, Wilde, and Yeats share a fundamental belief that an aesthetically committed life aims to follow out one's self-delighting impulses and to pursue the rich, all-round development of one's various capacities. More significantly, their most influential aesthetic precepts promulgate the ideal of living an artistically-fulfilling life—not only to fashion one's life into the grace, harmony, and artistic perfection of an artwork, but also to attain (as a piece of artwork

¹¹ For example, Rousseau's definition of conscience as an inner sentiment, as Taylor asserts, can be interpreted in a much stronger sense: not just that we have moral sentiments which conform to what we see to be the universal good, but that the inner voice of our true sentiments *defines* what is the good (362).

¹² See Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Recent studies of Shaftesbury include Grean, Klein, Eagleton 34-40, and Darwall 176-206.

is truly defined by the discourse of aesthetics) its autonomy and its autotelic and self-determining sovereignty.

Again, we find support of this view in Rousseau, who identifies the distinction of virtue and vice, of good and depraved will, with the distinction between dependence on the self and dependence on others. Goodness is defined as freedom, as finding the motives for one's actions within oneself.¹³ This radical re-definition of freedom, which rebels against the traditional view of nature as what is merely given, has been, as Charles Taylor observes, a powerful, even revolutionary, force in modern civilization (361-62). For it asserts our absolute autonomy as individuals: our action is determined not by the merely given, the facts of nature (including inner nature), but ultimately by our own agency as formulators of the law we live by.

In an important essay, "What Is Enlightenment," Kant maintains that the freedom to make "public" use of one's reason is the most important attitude inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, which he defines as humankind's release from its self-imposed tutelage or immaturity. Tutelage is seen as an inability to make use of one's reason or understanding without direction from others. He recommends "*Sapere aude!*" (Have courage to use your own reason!) as the motto of the Enlightenment (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* 83-89). Adopting Kant's view, Foucault asserts that the free and legitimate use of our reason is essential to the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects. His "ethics of the self," which is in essence an aesthetics of existence, accentuates the need to keep creating ourselves perpetually in our autonomy. Thus Foucault maintains that the discourse of aesthetics centers on autonomy or a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-referential.¹⁴

Even though Pater essentially accepts the external, moral law as benign and sympathetic, in his portraits of various Renaissance figures he presents the aesthetic sentiment mainly as a revitalizing or revolutionary force that emancipates the heart, expands the mind, awakens the senses, and liberates the reason from the austere restrictions imposed on the individuals by religion, politics, and social norms through the centuries. Wilde, by contrast, is immensely more skeptical about the externally

¹³ Rousseau not only identifies goodness with freedom, but also associates this autonomous freedom with our inborn conscience. As he writes,

Conscience! Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal voice from heaven; sure guide for a creature ignorant and finite indeed, yet intelligent and free; infallible judge of good and evil, making man like to God! In thee consists the excellence of man's nature and the morality of his actions. (*Émile* 254)

¹⁴ For details, see Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?"

imposed regulations and prohibitions partly because of his marginal status as Irish and homosexual. He chooses to assert his *difference* and turns his aesthetic stance into a powerful, double-edged weapon both as a protest against the confining bourgeois ideology of his age and as a strategy for brilliant self-display. In his comedies, *The Importance of Being Earnest* being the most eminent example, he determinedly overthrows the accepted values and hierarchy represented by traditional family, marriage, and moral views and mockingly reverses conventional gender roles and heterosexual norms. His relentless rebellion is motivated by his desire to win greater freedom to reassert his much marginalized self and his parodic but rectifying counter-discourse. In the case of Yeats, we notice that though he follows mainly the humanistic aesthetic tradition, he demonstrates, in the seven poems about “Crazy Jane” (*Collected Poems* 255-60), the seditious power involved in our feelings and innate impulses by demystifying and demolishing traditional aesthetic idealism with his version of Freudian critique. Even though there is no evidence to show that he had read Freud, Yeats attempts to demonstrate that our ennobling, idealistic vision arises from our lowly, or to use the Freudian term, “libidinal” desires or from our bodily needs.

D. Style and Manners as the Ideal Unity of Ethics and Aesthetics

Before we move on to the next issue, it is important to point out that the paradigms of aesthetic existence recommended by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats all include the display of finely-cultivated style and manners. For an eighteenth-century thinker like Shaftesbury, manners might best embody the ideal unity of ethics and aesthetics, virtue and beauty. As Eagleton points out, manners for the eighteenth century symbolize the “meticulous disciplining of the body which converts morality to style, deconstructing the opposition between the proper and the pleasurable” (41). For these accepted forms of civilized conduct become widespread, aestheticized social practices; that is, moral obligations no longer impose themselves with the oppressive Kantian sense of duty, but permeate the very textures of lived experience as intuitive good sense or accepted decorum (41). While Eagleton is mainly interested in investigating how hegemony functions in society and how ethical ideology loses its coercive force and reappears as a principle of spontaneous consensus within social life, I wish to show that Pater attempts to individualize these “social” manners and turn them into emblems of refined self-culture or personal grace. Wilde and Yeats also try to distinguish themselves from the Philistine bourgeois public by assuming cultivated manners, style, and taste to defy the mean-spirited materialism and mediocrity of the rising middle class. Wilde,

particularly, assumes the stance of a nonconformist to challenge and undermine the dominant habits of mind of his contemporaries.

E. The Construction of One's Subjective, Epistemological World

Finally, these three writers believe that as self-determining and autogenetic beings, we must construct our subjective, epistemological world through our direct aesthetic convictions. As much as they value concrete and sensuously perceivable experiences, they differ from the skeptical empiricists in one significant respect, for they believe that our mind plays an active role in composing and (re)constructing our perception of external reality. Like Kant, they believe that our subjective mind holds sovereign sway over the external, objective world, and we relativize that terrain to our own needs and desires. Subjectivity thus becomes, in their view, the measure of all things, and the non-subjective world can be verified only through the medium of the subject's sensuous experience. What this suggests of our mental freedom, especially in the field of artistic creativity, is greatly significant: we human beings become the ultimate artists, producers of reality. Our artistic expression arises from an inner source in an attempt to define and construct our own perception of truth rather than to imitate or conform to an external, given reality.

This emphasis on the establishment of one's subjective epistemological world forms the groundwork of Pater's aesthetic view. In his Preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater contends that in aesthetic criticism the first thing one needs to do is not to formulate a metaphysical, universal principle of beauty, but to know one's own impression of a specific object as it is presented to oneself (xviii). Significantly, Pater's determined redirection of our mind from its attention to the reality of the external world to our personal, subjective impression of that reality is parallel to Kant's Copernican revolution, which proposes that the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the operations of our mind or the constitution of our intuition.

While Pater emphasizes the mind's active construction of the manifold experiences it perceives, Wilde goes a step further by asserting our right to create reality out of our imagination. He insists that nature or external reality is very much the production or reconstruction of our mind. Wilde repudiates nineteenth-century naive representationalism in criticism, and suggests jokingly that poets should devote themselves more to the art of lying, "the telling of beautiful untrue things" (*Artist as Critic* 320). He drastically revises the millennium-old tradition of *mimesis* by asserting that we should replace the imitative with a creative/critical spirit, for only the latter can

give charm, delight, beauty, and ingenuity to art and life.

Just as Pater emphasizes the importance of personal temperament in artistic production and interpretation, Wilde values, above everything else, “individuality,” as he asserts in “The Critic as Artist”: form in art must always be understood in relation to the individual who produces or perceives that form. With this conviction, he formulates a subjectivist theory of criticism: “It is only by intensifying his own personality,” he argues, “that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others” (*Artist as Critic* 373). More significantly, Wilde asserts that the great anonymous collective epics or lyrics of ancient times were not produced out of the imagination of races but from the genius of individual poets, for only an individual can give “style” and “unity” to a work of art (356). In addition, because Wilde lays great emphasis on subjectivity, he insists that art is not “true” by any external standard. Though Yeats rarely theorizes in his critical writings on the importance of subjectivity in relation to autonomy and self-construction, as a poet, he composes his subjective vision of the world in his poems. His poetic plays reject the realistic mode of presentation prevalent in his day and adopt instead the subjective, non-realistic mode. His ritual, “intimate” theater carries on the spirit of the Aesthetic movement in an attempt to intensify the viewers’ imagination and perception by means of music, dance, and stylistic acting. Such ritualistic enactment, while demarcating the play from the real world, presents in sensuously tangible forms the delicate concepts and images in the poet’s mind and enables us the audience “to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation” (*E&I* 225).¹⁵

III. Ontogeny Recapitulating Phylogeny: Staging the Self in History

Pater, Wilde, and Yeats also consider it essential to cultivate one’s mind through an enlarged historical understanding. In this respect, their historical views are quite

¹⁵ One of Yeats’s strongest defense for subjectivity may be found in his short poetic play *Calvary*, in which Christ is presented as a figure presiding over part of history, not the absolute, Almighty Lord. He just steps into the new objective, bimillennial cycle, and seems not sure of his power yet. Yeats’s point is to question whether any power can be unadulteratedly good for the world. The heron, fascinating in its desolate beauty, represents self-sufficient subjectivity. In the play’s choral songs, Yeats uses his bird-symbolism to “increase the objective loneliness of Christ by contrasting it with a loneliness opposite in kind, that unlike His can be, whether joyous or sorrowful, sufficient to itself” (*Four Plays for Dancers* 135-36).

close to what Erich Auerbach calls “aesthetic historicism.” In dealing with this complicated subject, I wish to limit my focus by examining mainly why the three writers regard this enlarged historical/critical understanding as a prerequisite for aesthetic self-cultivation. In fact, the paradigms of aesthetic existence they recommend all demonstrate refined aesthetic acumen and taste obtained through the cultivation of sophisticated historical insight.

Erich Auerbach does not give a clear definition of “aesthetic historicism,” but we can infer from his discussion of Vico that it is an enlarged aesthetic horizon as a result of a historical perspective. It is based on the anthropological understanding that every civilization and every period has its own possibilities of aesthetic perfection. Accordingly, the works of art of different races and periods, as well as their general forms of life, must be understood as products or manifestations of variable individual conditions, and have to be judged each by its own development and intrinsic values, and not by absolute rules of beauty (183-84).

Auerbach points out that the romanticists introduced the conception of natural and organic evolution into the study of history. Their organic conservatism arose from their prevailing interest in the individual roots and developments of folk genius, cultural or national traditions, and national identity in general (187). They regard every historical stage as an integral component of the whole, and study its influence or its Geist that pervades all human activities of a given period of time (197). This particular historical perspective lends further support to our study of the ideas of self-fashioning promoted by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats because they recommend that we incorporate in our mind, even if selectively, the achievements of humankind throughout history, and more importantly, embody these enlarged aesthetic and historical perspectives in our personal lives and in our perception of the world.

Fredric Jameson’s interpretation of Auerbach’s theory highlights one important aspect of this particular historical view, one which I find most helpful in our discussion of Pater, Wilde, and Yeats. In his Marxist interpretation of history, Jameson refers to Auerbach’s aesthetic historicism as “existential historicism” on the basis that it is through “experience” that our present mind makes contact with a “given synchronic cultural complex from the past” (157),¹⁶ and it is through this “lived” experience that

¹⁶ Jameson lists “existential historicism” as one of the four traditional “solutions” to the dilemma of historicism, the other three being antiquarianism, structural typology, and Nietzschean antihistoricism (152). Jameson names Wilhelm Dilthey as one of the original proponents of existential historicism, but clarifies that the fundamental practitioners of existential historicism are the cultural historians, linguists, and iconologists of the great and now virtually extinct tradition of German philology (156).

history and cultural heritage become a living part of our lives. More significantly, Jameson points out that the quality of engrossed attention that existential historicism brings to the objects of its study is primarily that of “aesthetic appreciation and recreation, and the diversity of cultures and historical moments becomes thereby for it a source of immense aesthetic excitement and gratification” (157). In the decades between 1890 and 1910, the most renowned proponent for this “existential” historicism was Wilhelm Dilthey, and it was later developed by philosophers of history such as Croce, Collingwood, Ortega y Gasset, and Gadamer. Rather than seeing history as a cumbersome burden on the present, these thinkers emphasize that history is a living part of the present. In fact, they underscore the individual’s own part in the making of history, which they regard as a product of one’s own consciousness.

Although Jameson, a renowned Marxist in the United States, does not particularly espouse existential or aesthetic historicism, he defines some crucial features of this specific historical view. It originated from German *Lebensphilosophie*, in which, as Jameson maintains, “the infinite multiplicity of human symbolic acts is the expression of the infinite potentialities of a nonalienated human nature. The experience of historicity then restores something of this richness to a present in which few enough of those potentialities are practically available to any of us” (157). Jameson’s description helps to illustrate the historical self-construction advocated by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats, for they believe that each individual should try to attain these “infinite potentialities” through cultivation of this experience of historicity. They aspire to synthesize in themselves, in their lived experiences, the present and the past. The method through which they obtain this enlarged and historically enriched consciousness is the “historical and cultural aestheticism” adopted by many existential historians.

To begin with, Paterian aesthetic heroes display remarkably broad and profound historical understanding and attempt to enrich their minds by contemplating, with appropriate sentiment, great cultural achievements of humankind through history. The Paterian “diaphanous” heroes of each age, for example, advance the collective Ideal on its way to perfect realization: “they give utterance to that great consensus, though they also partly lead it.”¹⁷ Pater reassures us that this collective Ideal can only be understood in terms of the individual self, and he cautiously depicts fictional or historical figures with such unique accomplishments in his various “imaginary

¹⁷ Quoted in Ward 66. See also Monsman, “Pater, Hopkins, and the Self.”

portraits” and critical studies.

One way to achieve this highly cultivated historical knowledge and insight is, as Pater recommends, to be an accomplished art or literary critic. Since a master work of art—a distinguished painting, sculpture, or poem—represents “the summing up of an entire world of complex associations under some single form” (*Marius* 2: 128), the critic must try to penetrate “through the given literary or artistic product, into the mental and inner constitution of the producer” (*Guardian* 29). By playing one’s role as critic, one discerns, as Gerald Monsman points out, not only the work of art but also the consciousness behind the work (the consciousness both of the artist and of the “great consensus” or the collective Ideal that he embodies) and thus effectively expands the circle of the self (“Pater, Hopkins, and the Self” 4). For this reason, Pater recommends that we try to realize and emulate the living personality behind a superb picture or a philosophic view: “all true knowledge,” Pater maintains, “will be like the knowledge of a person, of living persons,” for “human persons and their acts” are visible representations “of the eternal qualities of ‘the eternal’” (*Plato and Platonism* 146, 268).

Pater also suggests another possibility to acquire this collective cultural achievement of humankind in terms of production and self-expression. Like Dilthey, Pater also conceives of the ideal artist as someone who embraces the essential continuity of culture within his/her own consciousness. In other words, the ideal artist embodies or dramatizes, as Monsman puts it, “the continuity of mind within the empirical reality of history by re-creating in language or other artistic media an inner vision expressive of ‘a common mental atmosphere’” of a given historical period (*Walter Pater* 74). What is even more desirable is to be an artist of life, someone who is able to realize truly this intensified historical consciousness in one’s life, and to turn erudite learning into refined aesthetic sentiment and taste. Many of the aesthetic heroes in Pater’s fictional or critical writings are characterized by this fine incorporation of cultivated aesthetic and historical awareness into their own lives.

Most significantly, Pater presents a conception of human life as historicized to consolidate fleeting manifestations of the self. The role of his aesthetic heroes, as Monsman observes, is to reveal by their diaphanous nature the continuity of the personal self with the historicized self (*Walter Pater* 107). Pater treats both as agents of cultural renewal. In *The Renaissance*, Pater creates a personal myth which embraces individual mythical figures noted for their powers of cultural renewal. In the more frankly autobiographical *Marius*, he creates a single alter ego through whom he

consummates this desire to enlarge and historicize the personal self.

In addition to their “aesthetic appreciation and recreation” of diverse cultural and historical heritages, Pater, Wilde, and Yeats were also interested in myth-making, which they considered as a way in which one may historicize or enlarge one’s own personal lives. If Pater “lives his mythologies” by projecting himself into the fictional and historical figures that he portrays, Wilde creates a mythology of himself by producing a public persona. Yeats admires this ability of Wilde’s to create a legend or legendary enigma of himself.¹⁸ Wilde assumes the pose of the dandy and proclaims that the ultimate goal of individualism is to promote an ideal self-culture that allows a strong individual like himself to stand “in symbolic relations” to his age and to impersonate his epoch.

Yet there is a much more serious and scholarly aspect of historical thinking involved in Wilde’s dandyism. As a result of his classical and Hegelian training, he strongly believed that one must first develop a mature, perceptive, and discriminating mind before one can become an independent, autonomous individual. Wilde accepted Herbert Spencer’s theory of evolutionary change and his explanation of the necessary development of individual and social organisms from simple to complex and highly differentiated (338). Advancing Pater’s idea a step further, Wilde defines the ideal critic/artist as someone who culminates in him-/herself the evolutionary development in the realm of thought, and experiences mentally, as it were, all the achievements that have already taken place in the history of human civilization. In Wilde’s view, an accomplished critic must be able to appreciate and recreate in his/her own mind a wide range of human experiences and to enjoy the aesthetic excitement that such contemplation offers.

Most importantly, Wilde wrote early in his career that this historical inquiry is closely related to the development of the critical and skeptical spirit in human civilization.¹⁹ He argues that this historical/critical spirit, which arose at an early stage of human history, has been operating essentially as an antithetical and revolutionary force against established authority, custom of thought, and other social norms and expectations. As I have demonstrated in an article on Wilde’s aesthetic paradigm

¹⁸ In an early encounter with Wilde, Yeats said in half compliment, “I envy those men who become mythological while still living.” Wilde replied, “I think a man should invent his own myth.” As Ellmann asserts, Yeats remembered this injunction all his life (*Oscar Wilde* 301).

¹⁹ Please refer to “The Rise of Historical Criticism,” included in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

(1999), his two essays on criticism can be read in the context of Kant's well-known article "What Is Enlightenment?" and Foucault's important interpretation of Kant's view. For they finely illustrate the essence of Wilde's dandyism, which absorbs and transforms erudite historical learning into a cultivated taste and sentiment that may enhance and adorn one's personal life, or at a more serious level, into a discerning critical acumen with which to inspect one's relation to the present. Through a refined aesthetic taste and historical/critical spirit, the Wildean aesthetic paradigm—the critic, artist, and dandy all in one—examines consistently the "contemporaneity" of his/her own enterprise and the historical era in which he/she lives. Wilde himself turned his aesthetic convictions into a powerful critique of the stagnation and the proclivity to conformity that he saw in late Victorian society.

Like Pater and Wilde, Yeats was highly interested in theorizing how enlarged historical perspectives may enrich personal lives. *A Vision* describes his personal interpretation of the intricate interconnection between historical moments and the lives of individuals. As Jan B. Gordon points out, the book accentuates a concept of history as a "metaphor," which suggests "a certain infinite substitutability—a reincarnation for the individual and an internal mirroring of eras" (35). More significantly, Yeats was conscientious in his effort to place himself on the stage of history. Like Wilde, Yeats deliberately remade his personality, converting himself to a public figure through theater business as well as other cultural activities. Thus he implemented and actualized Pater's myth of cultural renewal by promoting the ancient and contemporary culture of his native land. In doing this, he enacted the legends or myths of those historical or fictional figures in Pater's various tales of cultural renaissance. First of all, Yeats attempted to unite his personal identity with that of the race. Early in his career, he was personally involved in the Irish National Movement. His effort contributed directly to the foundation of the Irish Literary Theater in 1899, and the Irish National Theater in 1902. Starting with *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), he wrote nearly thirty plays throughout his literary career, most of them dealing with Irish subjects or Irish folklore as well as his system of personal symbols. He strove, through theater and playwriting mostly, to do for modern Ireland what Homer had done for ancient Greece. On a more personal level, Yeats mythologized his long, frustrated love for Maud Gonne by associating her with Helen of Troy. In 1917, Yeats acquired the Norman tower at Ballylee, which he regarded as "a permanent symbol of [his] work plainly visible to the passerby." As Yeats himself declared, his theory of art depends upon just such "rooting of mythology in the earth" (*W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore* 114). Many

of Yeats's most personal poems are thus historically conditioned.

IV. Artistic Expressivism and Modes of Self-Actualization

In the concluding section of this essay, I wish to discuss the three writers' theories of artistic self-expression, which they relate not only to literary creativity but, more importantly, to modes of self-actualization. As mentioned, Rousseau initiated an important transformation in modern culture toward a deeper inwardness and a radical concept of self-autonomy. This idea of "inwardness" is especially important in our discussion of Pater, who shows evident reminiscence of the Romantic poet's discovering in nature the sacred light of his own inwardness (Monsman, *Walter Pater* 75). Charles Taylor develops, in *Sources of the Self*, his expressivist view out of Rousseau's concept of nature as a voice within us, as our conscience or our inner guide. "If our access to nature is through an inner voice or impulse," Taylor argues, "then we can only fully know this nature through articulating what we find within us." This concept of expressivism is especially relevant to our topic of self-fashioning in that, as Taylor explains, "to express something is to make it manifest in a given medium," and that to articulate or to express/produce something verbally is not only to make it "manifest" but also to make or bring something to be (374). Taylor associates the idea of nature as an intrinsic source with an expressive view of human life: fulfilling our nature means, in his view, espousing the inner *élan*, the inner voice or impulse. This makes what was hidden manifest for both ourselves and others (374). In other words, in realizing our nature, we have to define it in the sense of giving it some formulation: we are *realizing* this formulation and thus giving our lives a definitive shape. Through articulation, a human life is seen "as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation." Moreover, this creativity of self-expression should not just copy an external model (375), but must help us define ourselves in a way that may "bring what is as yet imperfectly determined to full definition" (376-77).

Since this concept of expressivism forms, to quote from Taylor again, "the basis for a new and fuller individuation," it is highly pertinent to our discussion of the aesthetic self-cultivation advocated by Pater, Wilde, and Yeats. This is the idea developed out of the eighteenth-century belief that each individual is unique and original, and this originality determines how one ought to live one's life. More

importantly, it entails that each individual has the obligation to live up to his or her originality (375). As the eighteenth-century German thinker Herder argues, “Each human being has his own measure, as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other” (*Ideen*, 7: 1; qtd. in Taylor 375). It was also Herder who formulated most effectively the account of human mental development in this period. He interwove Aristotle’s idea of biological growth, which actualizes the potential of a being, with the modern notion of expression as an articulation which both manifests and defines. Whereas Aristotle speaks of the nature of a thing tending toward its complete form, Herder sees growth as the manifestation of an inner power (“*Kräfte*”) striving to realize itself externally (Taylor 375).

Accordingly, in my discussion of the three writers’ aesthetic views of self-fashioning, I wish to emphasize that artistic self-expression not only brings an inner concept or image into being, but also actualizes and fulfills the artist in the process of expression. Arturo B. Fallico’s application of existential philosophy to his study of the arts and other aesthetic experiences helps us to understand what it means when one turns oneself or one’s life into a work of art. As he explains in *Art and Existentialism*, “The work of art implies that all reality is something that is *made*, or that the possibility of its free and unrestricted making and unmaking stands prior to any and all of its actual formations so that none can have ultimacy of being and meaning for the existent” (60). The self-expressive art of Pater, Wilde, and Yeats both intensifies their desire and delight in artistic self-(re)making and provides a space wherein the transfiguration of the self is realized.

Significantly, they are all renowned for the stylistic perfection of their literary art, and may be considered as among the few English writers who are keenly aware of the concept of artistic “expressivism.” In his short essay on Luca Della Robbia, Pater defines *expression* as “the seal” on one’s work of what is “most inward and peculiar in [one’s] moods and manner of apprehension,” and Pater maintains that one’s originality comes from fine development of this uniqueness (*Ren.* 71-72). In other words, Pater believes that artistic expression discloses and completes one’s inward nature and potentialities. What is of greater significance is that Pater considers “style,” literary as well as personal, as the expression and “manifestation” of the artist’s entire personality. Pater states in *Marius* specifically that “fashion,” which he regards as synonymous with “style,” is “distinctly symptomatic” of the “deeper yearning of human nature towards ideal perfection” (1: 98). Pater’s expressivist theory may be considered the essence of his Epicurean view of self-representation and self-fashioning, for he

believes that the artist's cultivation of an exquisite style symbolizes his/her conscientious pursuit of a perfect personality.

In examining Wilde's characteristic mode of self-expression, I wish to underscore the parodic counter-discourse he presents in his comedies as a challenging critique of the established norms and ideology of the late Victorian age. His ultimate goal is to win greater freedom and space for the formulation and expression of the self. This subversive and self-assertive mode characterizes not only Wilde's epigrammatic style of writing but also his dandiacal view of life, which accentuates preeminently the art of self-representation. First, Wilde maintains that art provides the best medium for self-development and self-realization. As he asserts in *De Profundis*, "expression" is the only approach through which an artist realizes his/her own ideal, for "the inevitable law of self-perfection" commands "the poet to sing, the sculptor to think in bronze, and the painter to make the world a mirror for his moods" (170).

Second, Wilde considers style as the ultimate assertion and expression of the artist's individuality. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and many other important critical essays, Wilde promotes individualism against various oppressive social conventions. He asserts that every mode of life and organism aims at "Individualism" as it allows "the full development of Life to its highest mode of perfection" (*Artist as Critic* 257). Wilde then names some prominent individuals such as Darwin, Keats, Flaubert, who are able to develop what is distinguished, fascinating, and delightful in themselves (283).

Yet it was when Wilde found his particular mode of expression in personal experience that we see the greater significance of his theory of artistic expressivism as the highest mode of self-realization. He asserts in *De Profundis* that an artist must pursue self-fulfillment by enacting and thus truly embodying an artistic or mythical ideal in his/her life. In this long letter written in prison, Wilde re-interprets his embittering and humiliating experience as spiritually enacting the religious and artistic myth of Jesus Christ. It is this empirical association, "realization," and implementation that substantiate and strengthen his theory of aesthetic self-fashioning through identification with a desired model or an assumed pose. Here Wilde reveals himself as a true believer, theorist, and practitioner of aesthetic poses.

Nevertheless, Wilde was too ardently devoted to aesthetic contemplation to admit openly the values of action and active identification with the idolized image, and it took Yeats to theorize the significance of such active embodiment. Yeats's view of self-expression is incorporated in his theory of the anti-self mask, which may be used

as an effective literary strategy to distance the author from inordinate attachment. In his critical essays or plays, Yeats often associates the heroic or anti-self mask with conscientious self-discipline or self-reconstruction. He suggests that the artist find ultimate self-expression and self-fulfillment in actively identifying with an image (a classical model, for instance) or in implementing an artistic or spiritual ideal in his/her own life.

Yeats spoke of the “heroic discipline of the looking-glass” in “Discoveries.” He would later find this passive imitation insufficient, and would recommend instead active emulation. As he says in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, “St. Francis and Caesar Borgia made themselves overmastering, creative persons by turning from the mirror to meditation upon a mask” (*Mythologies* 334). The turning from the mirror to the mask signifies for Yeats the turning from passive, narcissistic self-observation to active and creative self-remaking. Obsessive self-absorption, “the infinite pain” of self-consciousness, as Yeats calls it, somehow absorbs and weakens one’s will to act and one’s creative energy. Yeats regards this personal enactment of an ideal or assertion of an intended pose as a supreme form of self-expression because in this active implementation one works, as saints and heroes do, in one’s own “flesh and blood and not in paper or parchment” for the desired perfection (*Mythologies* 333).

* * *

To compare, as a way of conclusion, the aesthetic ideals of self-remaking or self-representation developed and practiced by Pater, Wilde, Yeats, we notice that they share some fundamental convictions and yet each has its own distinctive features. As a group, Pater, Wilde, and Yeats represented three highly creative personalities in a period of transition, one that saw the transformation from traditional, Victorian values to more complex and diverse modern sensibilities.

Pater embraced the Hellenic or traditional aesthetic ideal of embodying truth and beauty, and morality and aesthetics, in the art of self-cultivation. As Pater states in his “Wordsworth” essay: “The true moral significance of art and poetry” is that they present us a possibility of the perfected life (*Appreciations* 62). Pater defines this higher ethics in terms of the autotelic nature of art and an artistically enriched life. He turns Epicureanism into a connoisseur’s approach to life: as he recommends in *Marius* that one should enjoy a “fullness of life”—a fullness of “energy, variety, and choice of experience [...] whatever form of human life, in short, might be heroic, impassioned,

ideal” (1: 152). Here Pater suggests that we may derive this “fullness of *energy*,” or intellectual and imaginative “stimulations” from contemplating, mostly in literature and art, the *representations* of such actions, experiences, emotions with appropriate emotions of our own.

By contrast, Wilde is more subversive, and he asserts that we must constantly evaluate the historical era we live in so as to win greater freedom for our thought and action. His dandyism celebrates individualism and accentuates the need to cultivate and constantly refashion one’s selfhood. Thus his ostensibly foppish cult of the self carries in it serious socio-political implications. Moreover, he assumes the stance of a nonconformist in order to challenge and subvert the dominant habits of mind and social norms of his contemporaries. Yeats sees the mask as the anti-self, something antithetical to one’s natural self but important to the integrity of one’s personality. He finds it important to embrace this antithetical self because it helps to strengthen one’s art.

The three writers’ aesthetic views also reflect certain trends in modern literature and culture. Pater speaks of the modern multiple consciousness in his famous Conclusion to the collected essays on the Renaissance, while Yeats recommends active and creative self-remaking as different from Pater’s self-absorptive contemplation or solipsism. Whereas Pater interprets morality artistically, Wilde regards the ethics of the self as aesthetic self-fulfillment. As for the “aesthetic historicism” that the three writers recommend—the attempt to cumulate in their minds, as it were, all the great achievements in human civilization—is close to Arnold’s idea of the accomplished critic who strives to “know the best that is known and thought in the world” (“The Function of Criticism” 18). One fundamental element that Pater, Wilde, and Yeats added to this long tradition of erudite historical learning was indeed the “aesthetic appreciation” or “gratification,” to use Jameson’s words again, they brought to the objects of their study. More importantly, the three writers’ historical views display a sense of modernity in their critique of the contemporary society. Wilde’s critical-creative historicism directly affected the aesthetically iconoclastic stance with which he defied and subverted Victorian social norms and political and philosophical beliefs.

Finally, the three writers’ different views of artistic self-expression reflect in part the patterns of narratology in the early days of Modernism. Pater conceives “style,” literary as well as personal, as the expression of the literary artist’s entire personality. As mentioned, he describes “fashion” as “distinctly symptomatic, of that deeper yearning of human nature towards ideal perfection” (*Marius* 1: 98). Pater intends to

approach and express the perfection of personality through the cultivation of a perfect literary style. He postulates in *Marius* the close affinity he sees as between the care for external adornment and the cultivation of literary style: “[T]he artist’s ardour of soul may be satisfied by the perfecting of the theory of a sentence, or the adjustment of two colours, so his own life also might have been fulfilled by an enthusiastic quest after perfection;—say, in the flowering and folding of a toga” (1: 197).

The “flowering and folding of a toga” here betrays the vulnerability of Pater’s conscientiously refined style, for the passage is, after a century and more, fairly comic or even preposterous. It reveals the rub, and in a sense, the flaw in Pater’s project. The sense of beauty that Pater perceives can only be appreciated by a culture, Yeats’s ritualism for example, that values such subtly refined sensibility. This and other similar passages in Pater are unconsciously and unintentionally comic, whereas Wilde, who appropriated a lot of such talk from Pater quite freely, displays some redeeming sense of the comic and ironic possibilities in the witty epigrams in his plays. That does not mean that Wilde is more “original” than Pater, who really is the “originator” of some of these key concepts and even phrases, but simply that Pater’s work is more “vulnerable” in our contemporary world. For *we* have to *supply* the comic overtones and possibilities for his writing, which Pater, immersed in his aesthetic contemplation, did not recognize. We modern readers tend to perceive absurdity in his work, given the perspective of a century and the loss of admiration in the modern world of the sort of refined taste which his views represented.

If Pater’s mode of self-expression is “lyrical,” to use Joyce’s renowned analysis of the tripartite division of the forms of art again, and—mirror-like—reflective, Wilde’s is predominantly dramatic and anti-mimetic.²⁰ Wilde asserts that “the basis of life is simply the desire for expression” (*Artist as Critic* 311), and he believes that art provides the best medium for “self-development” and “self-realization.” Wilde’s dandiacal assertion of style and individuality makes artistic creation a conscious and deliberate manipulation. Claiming that the man-made world of art is “more marvelous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon” (*Artist as*

²⁰ Toward the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*, James Joyce, in the persona of Stephen Dedalus, tries to conclude his aesthetic thoughts with a self-defined system. He names three forms of art: the “lyrical,” the “epical,” and the “dramatic” (213-14). While Joyce develops his own specific definitions of these three terms, we can still describe Pater’s intensive, self-searching style as “lyrical,” Wilde’s twofold modes of mocking and entertaining as “dramatic,” as conscious of his own performance as he is. As a lyric poet and prolific playwright, Yeats includes these three different modes respectively in his lyric poems and some of his quasi-epic plays of Irish heroic or mythological legends.

Critic 364), Wilde emphasizes the stylization, artificiality, and bizarre and grotesque elements in his writings. His *Salomé*, for example, expresses a number of eccentric sensations. The literary artist no longer collects impressions of the external world in his mirror-like mind and “transmutes” them “into golden words” (*Marius* 1: 180-81); rather, he manipulates images to produce the grotesque and artificial effects desired.

The mask of a dandy can also be used as a convenient literary strategy. Unlike Pater, who uses one narrative voice to trace the protagonist’s intricate mind, Wilde employs various masks to express his different points of view on the same subject, dramatizing the dialectic between conflicting views. Such dramatization vivifies the narration. Instead of giving straightforward statements, Wilde intensifies irony, playfulness, and paradox to an astounding effect. His literary dandyism, masking a serious message under playful and paradoxical epigrams, becomes a valuable means to entertain the audience: while attacking the follies of his time, he amuses and flatters his readers by elevating them above the “common people.”

Yeats too uses masks as dramatic personae by introducing different voices in his narration. In addition, Yeats realizes the advantage of masks in intensifying the irony and audacity of the tone. To implement this theory in his writing, Yeats often introduces a detached, antithetical voice to contradict, counterbalance, and sometimes deflate his earlier heroic vision. In the choral songs of his *Noh* plays, *At the Hawk’s Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *Calvary*, for example, the apathetic, enigmatic voice of the musicians adds to the tragic vision the “opposition” Yeats looks for—an opposition that makes his songs “deliberately” complex and beautiful. This intentional masking may also explain the puzzling opacity and mystification in the works of Modernist poets like Eliot, Pound, and Joyce.

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Wilde continues in substantiating the role of the artist in stating that, "no artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything." Being a pseudo-mirror image of Wilde, several critics regard Basil Hallward as the central character in the novel (Kohl 250). The artist Basil Hallward is referred to as "the painter" (Wilde 5) throughout the novel, which emphasizes his solidarity with art which influences his attitudes towards art and beauty. Hallward sees the young man as an embodiment of "an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style." (Wilde 12). It becomes apparent that Basil has violated his former understanding of aestheticism and has betrayed Wilde's ideas when he states, "I see things differently, I think of them differently. Wilde's approach is that Wainwright's criminal activities reveal the soul of a true artist. The artist must have a "concentration of vision and intensity of purpose" that exclude moral or ethical judgment. The best criticism must cast off ordinary guidelines, especially those of Realism, and accept the aesthetics of Impressionism "what a reader feels when reading a work of literature rather than what a reader thinks, or reasons, while reading. The critic must transcend literal events and consider the "imaginative passions of the mind." The critic should not seek to explain a work of art but should seek to deepen its mystery. Wilde also raises the question of self-contradiction. In art, he says, there is no such thing as an absolute truth: "A Truth is that whose contradictory is also true." Oscar Wilde was highly influenced by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Walter Pater and Benjamin Constant's famous declaration: "l'art pour l'art" (Baldwin 2001: 68), art for art's sake, which means that art stands for itself and does not contribute to anything else than displaying its own aesthetic attributes, hence it is "quite useless" (Wilde 1891: 4). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* his aesthetic approach in literature becomes evident in various ways. His popular preface is considered a manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement. Dorian is Wilde dandy mostly. He is the man that both Basil and Lord Henry would like to be. It is worth noting that Wilde wrote about the characters in his one and only novel: "Basil Hallward is what I consider: Lord Henry, what the world thinks of me: Dorian, who I would like to be - perhaps in other epochs". Dorian personifies the conflict between the elements of Dionysius and Apollo, especially the exciting one of its creator. He has a passion for "color, beauty, the joy of life", but he avoids being carried away with any experience for fear of causing him possible pain. The charm of Basil