BERNARD SHAW'S STATEMENT that "'for art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence" has served as an effective deterrent to any attempts to place Shaw in the English aesthetic movement. Although few critics of Shaw would concur in James Huneker's opinion that Shaw "refuses to be an artist. He loathes art," most agree that Shaw is outside the movement of "art for art's sake." Max Beerbohm, reviewing Shaw's novel Cashel Byron's Profession, expresses precisely the predominant critical opinion of Shaw's relationship to the aesthetes: "As a passage by steam is to a voyage by sail, so is Mr. Shaw's fiction to true fiction. A steamboat is nice because it takes us quickly to some destination; a sailing-yacht is nice in itself, nice for its own sake. Mr. Shaw's main wish is to take us somewhere." Most other critics less metaphorically, but no less emphatically, separate Shaw and the aesthetes. G. K. Chesterton's comment in his biography of Shaw is typical: "No one can understand Bernard Shaw who does not give full value to this early revolt of his on behalf of ethics against the ruling school of l'art pour l'art." Literary historians also place Shaw outside the aesthetic movement. In one of the best literary histories of the 1890s, Holbrook Jackson offers what has become almost a cliché in Shaw criticism: Shaw, he says, belongs to a movement of "art for life's sake," universal, communal, and collective rather than intensive and individual.

These opinions are supported by Shaw's own consistent and
emphatic refutation of art for art’s sake. The most frequently quoted of these refutations occurs in his attack on the “bellettrist,” the “mere virtuoso in literature,” in the Epistle Dedicatory to Man and Superman (p. xxxiv), an attack echoed in Shaw’s preface to Three Plays by Brieux: “Now great art is never produced for its own sake. It is too difficult to be worth the effort” (p. xx). An even stronger attack occurs in Shaw’s speech of 1908 on “Literature and Art”: “I say that all art at the fountainhead is didactic, and that nothing can produce art except the necessity of being didactic. I say, not in the spirit of vulgar abuse, but in the solemnest Scriptural use of the terms, that the man who believes in art for art’s sake is a fool; that is to say, a man in a state of damnation.”

Shaw’s admiration of Ibsen’s drama and Wagner’s music focuses on both artists’ ability to transcend art for art’s sake. Shaw values most the socially oriented plays of Ibsen’s middle period, described in The Quintessence of Ibsenism as “realistic prose plays of modern life, abandoning all production of art for art’s sake” (Essays, p. 60); and he distinguishes Wagner from those composers “in which the music was trying to exist ornamentally for its own sake and had no real content at all.”

Throughout his long career, Shaw never abandoned this attitude toward art for art’s sake; in one of his last works, the preface to Farfetched Fables, he points to his active political life—“the Shavian idiosyncrasy” which “disgusts the Art For Art’s Sake faction” (p. 71).

In addition to Shaw’s contemptuous references to art for art’s sake, his comments about—or, to be more exact, the absence of comments about—key figures in the aesthetic movement suggest his separation from it. If literary historians had only Shaw’s work from which to reconstruct a picture of the literary scene of the 1880s and 1890s, they would know of Ruskin and Morris but would be almost unaware of Swinburne and Moore, and totally unaware of Pater, Symons, Dowson, or Johnson. They would know of Rossetti, other Pre-Raphaelites, and Whistler from Shaw’s art criticism of the 1880s. They would know of Wilde and James from Shaw’s drama criticism of the 1890s, but they would know little about the nondramatic works of these two artists. And their opinion of all the aesthetes, if based on Shaw’s usually unfavorable judgments of them (Ruskin and Morris excepted), would be low.
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But Shaw's silence about figures in the movement is certain to have been from choice, not ignorance. As John Gassner has noted, the "art-for-art's sake phenomena at the turn-of-the-century could not but be noticed and in some way or other reflected by Shaw, who was equally conscious of art and sociology."7

My attempt to define Shaw's place in the aesthetic movement is encouraged by the recent trend in Shaw criticism which emphasizes Shaw the artist over Shaw the philosopher and social critic. For example, Edmund Wilson denigrates Shaw's ideas but calls him "a considerable artist"; W. H. Auden says, "For all his theater about propaganda, his writing has an effect nearer to that of music than the work of any of the so-called pure writers"; Arthur H. Nethercot maintains that Shaw sacrificed his revolutionary views for the sake of making plays palatable to the public; and Eric Bentley stresses Shaw's artistry over his didactic or "naturalistic" tendencies, saying that "the platform satisfied only a fragment of his nature."8 But only recently have any critics begun to suggest a close relationship between Shaw and the aesthetes. J. I. M. Stewart says, "Shaw's statement that for art's sake alone he 'would not face the toil of writing a single sentence' is simply untrue, for the art of the plays is elaborated not to give us something more persuasive than the prefaces but simply something more delightful." And Harold Fromm agrees: "Although he thought he did not care for art for art's sake, he was an esthete like Matthew Arnold, like Ruskin, like Schopenhauer, like many other nineteenth-century thinkers whose main concern was with order and beauty and their application to daily life."9

To call a statement by Shaw "simply untrue," as Stewart does, is risky. A safer procedure is to assume that Shaw always means what he says, and then to try to determine exactly what he has said. But in order to decide what was said, one needs a working definition of aesthete and aesthetic movement. A particularly helpful starting point for such definitions is provided by Helmut E. Gerber, who says that the period from 1880 to 1920 ("or, more flexibly, between 1870 and 1930") is the interweaving of "decadence, aestheticism, naturalism, impressionism, symbolism, neoromanticism, late Victorianism, modernism, and a host of other isms."10 Whether one defines aestheticism narrowly as a cult of art...
or broadly as a concern (overshadowing all others) for creating or comprehending beauty, the aesthetic movement can be seen as encompassing a number of the "isms" of the late nineteenth century. Aestheticism may be compatible with decadence, with impressionism, or even with naturalism, as the career of George Moore suggests. Whistler, who is undeniably a part of English art for art's sake, is also an impressionist; he has also been called an aesthete, a Pre-Raphaelite, and a decadent, though he refused to consider himself a part of any movement. Likewise, Pater can be seen as an aesthete, a decadent, or an impressionist, as can Oscar Wilde.

The picture which the term *aesthete* calls up for most of us—if it calls up anything at all—is the aesthete of late nineteenth century satire, a composite image combining the characteristics of Arnold, Swinburne, Pater, the Pre-Raphaelites, Whistler, and Wilde. For example, in W. H. Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), Pater, satirized as Mr. Rose, is introduced as a "pre-Raphaelite" who speaks on "self-indulgence in art." Mr. Rose is first seen gravely discourse on the "infinite and passionate beauties" of a flower; he believes that the aim of life "is life," i.e., "the consciousness of exquisite living," and he delivers long speeches on the aim of culture ("to make the soul a musical instrument"), on the vulgarity of the city, and on "modern aestheticism," which "holds nothing common or unclean" (pp. 11, 15, 21, 123, 165-69, 171).

In the most famous satire on the aesthetes, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881), the aesthete Bunthorne is "a Fleshly Poet" who affects medievalism, belongs to the "Inner Brotherhood," writes Swinburnean verse, describes himself as "an apostle in the high aesthetic band," wears his hair long, and attitudinizes. He is a combination of Pre-Raphaelite, Swinburne, Arnold, and possibly Pater; but he was immediately associated with Wilde. Bunthorne's rival, Archibald Grosvenor, is a parody of young Oscar Wilde—"an Idyllic Poet," "a trustee for Beauty," "the Apostle of Simplicity," a "broken-hearted troubadour, / Whose mind's aesthetic and whose tastes are pure!" Whereas Bunthorne and Grosvenor affect innocence, purity, and an indifference to worldly affairs, Esmé Amarinth in *The Green Carnation* (1894) is the epitome of
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worldly sophistication, condemning innocence, naturalness, and sincerity as "bourgeois." Amarinth, satirizing Wilde's decadent phase, represents perversion and abnormality, a perversion originating with the pose of the lily-carrying, transcendental young man depicted in Patience, for Mr. Amarinth says that he once was "an aesthete. I have lain upon hearth-rugs and eaten passion-flowers. I have clothed myself in breeches of white samite, and offered my friends yellow jonquils instead of afternoon tea." But, he explains, after aestheticism became popular, he traded the aesthetic "passion-flowers" for the green carnation. An aesthete who combines the innocence of Grosvenor with the worldliness of Amarinth is the hero of G. S. Street's The Autobiography of a Boy (1894)—an absurd but harmless aspirant to wicked words and deeds whose worldly pose, attempts to shock, and condescending advice to his elders are borne with amused tolerance by most of his associates.

The aesthete portrayed by Punch in the 1870s and 1880s is one of several hypersensitive types. Jellaby Postlethwaite, introduced as "the great Poet, you know, who sat for Maudle's 'Dead Narcissus,'" prefers to contemplate a lily instead of eating lunch, supplies adjectives such as "supremely consummate" to the fashionable world, and confesses, "I never bathe. I always see myself so dreadfully foreshortened in the water, you know." He has affinities with Wilde, but he is sometimes drawn to look like Whistler. His artist friend is Maudle, primarily modeled on Swinburne and Wilde; Maudle writes Swinburnean verse in "a Maudle-In Ballad. To His Lily," but he resembles Wilde in "Maudle on the Choice of a Profession," where he asks why a "consummately lovely" boy should "be anything? Why not let him remain for ever content to Exist Beautifully?" Swinburne, Pater, and Burne-Jones are satirized as the successful champions in "Clowning and Classicism Being the Opening Scene of a New and Original Great-god-Pan-tomime, entitled, Harlequin King Cultchaw; Or, The Three Champions of Paganism and the Sleeping Beast" (Punch, 7 Jan. 1882). Instructed by King Cultchaw, "a Modern Evil Genius," the three go to awake "the Sleeping Beast" by calling up Wilde and "the Spirit of the Hair"; they are all reviled
by "the Good Fairy Ruskin" for perverting his doctrine, but at the end they enter "the Realms of Professional Beauty."

Though Punch attacked Arnold, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Swinburne, Whistler, and Wilde in personal satire, the magazine concentrated on the amateur aesthete. "Affiliating an Aesthete" (19 June 1880) shows Postlethwaite, Maudle, and Mrs. Cimabue Brown, Punch's type of the "aesthetic" lady, encouraging "a promising young Pharmaceutical Chemist" named Pilcox to become a sculptor; this chemist-sculptor becomes so sure of himself that in a few months he is expressing scorn for Michelangelo ("A Reaction in Aesthetics," 9 Oct. 1880). According to Punch, the aesthetic movement included all social classes; it reached up to the Duke of Bedford (shown in "Punch's Fancy Portraits—No. 30," 7 May 1881) and down to John Smaulker Junior, a servant at "Peacocke Pleasaunce," a "new Igh Art Willa," who describes to his friend Mary ("among the Philistians") a proposed "society for bringing Beauty ome to the Pantry."15 By 1882, however, the popular phase of the aesthetic movement was dying; "The Academy Soirée" in an 1882 issue of Punch says that "we scarce turn to stare / At the specimen Aesthetes, now happily rare."

In Punch and other satires of the period, then, aesthete refers to a number of artistic types—to the dreamy, languid, soft-voiced Mr. Rose; to "the Fleshly Poet," Rossetti or Swinburne or an indeterminate Pre-Raphaelite; to the apostle of high-art or culture; to the Kyrle Man determined to bring a dado, "a simple-sweet toon," or "a sniff of this Lily" to the lower classes; or to the "aesthetic" lady, with her flowing gown, languorous pose, and "intense" expression. What these types have in common is affectation and unnaturalness—the pose of the aesthete, who may be either innocent and absurd or evil and dangerous.

Nonsatiric definitions of the aesthete also stress his affectation. For example, a review of Wilde's Poems (1881) defines an aesthete as one "who pretends to derive the same moral satisfaction from a certain pattern or color in china that other people do from the contemplation of an heroic or virtuous action; who declines to have his hair cut by a barber because it is 'part of himself'; with whom an ill-assorted marriage does not mean incompatibility of temper, but of complexion; and who orders a restaurant waiter to bring him,
not roast beef and potatoes, but an all-satisfying lily.”¹⁶ The editorial statement “in earnest” in Punch (7 Jan. 1882), presumably by F. C. Burnand, who was editor at the time, reads:

The word “Aestheticism” has been perverted from its original meaning; i.e. the perception of all that is good, pure, and beautiful in Nature and in Art, and, as now vulgarly applied, it has come in a slang sort of way to stand for an effeminate, invertebrate, sensuous sentimentally-Christian, but thoroughly Pagan taste in literature and art, which delights in the idea of the resuscitation of the Great God Pan, in Swinburnean songs at their highest fever-pitch, in the mystic ravings of a Blake, the affectation of a Rossetti, the Charmides and revoltingly pan-theistic Rosa Mystica of Oscar Wilde, the Songs of Passion and Pain and other similar mock-hysterical imitations of the “Mighty Masters.” Victor Hugo, Ouida, Swinburne, Burne-Jones, have much to answer for.

Another definition hostile to the aesthete is that of Frederic Harrison: “What is it to be an Aesthete? Is it not to air one’s zeal for Art, not out of genuine love of beauty, but out of fashion and love of display, in order to be like our neighbours or to be unlike our neighbours, in the wantonness of a noisy life and a full pocket?”¹⁷ To these may be added James McNeill Whistler’s attack on the aesthetic movement in his “Ten O’Clock” lecture of 1885. Using aesthete in Punch’s sense of “dilettante” or “amateur,” Whistler warns, “The Dilettante stalks abroad. The amateur is loosed. The voice of the aesthete is heard in the land, and the catastrophe is upon us.” Whistler, who was himself frequently satirized as an aesthete, on another occasion used aesthete to designate a kind of agreeable loafer; he called a former houseguest “the prince of parasites! . . . A genius, a musician, the first of the ‘Aesthetes,’ before the silly name was invented. He hadn’t anything to do—he didn’t do anything for me—but decorate the dinner-table, arrange the flowers, and then play the piano, and talk, and make himself amiable.”¹⁸

Though attacked and parodied, the aesthetes were in the early 1880s receiving some critical acclaim. Pater used aesthetic to refer to the detached, sensitive, flexible education required by the New Cyrenaicism.¹⁹ Swinburne criticized Whistler’s comments in the “Ten O’Clock” lecture, noting that Whistler himself can be called
an aesthete, for “not merely the only accurate meaning, but the only possible meaning, of that word is nothing more, but nothing less, than this—an intelligent, appreciative, quick-witted person; in a word, as the lexicon has it, ‘one who perceives.’” Appreciative allusions to the aesthetes were appearing in reviews of around 1880, one expressing gratitude to Ruskin, Morris, and the Pre-Raphaelites, who taught us “that it is only by following Nature that we can ultimately conquer her,” that “the Aesthetic Revolution is an accomplished fact,” for it has aroused the public to the need for beauty, “and the era of culture has at last set in.”

A review of Burnand’s The Colonel, which attacked aesthetic fanaticism, complains that “the satire is rather ill-directed”:

It is impossible to feel very indignant with an honest fellow’s wife because she is subdued to admiration of a particular school in art. It is impossible to feel that the adventurer himself has committed any deadly sin, or is deserving of condign punishment, because he is the author of “Lady Mine” or of “Sir Tristram”—because the women of his choice are limp and melancholy—because he dines, somewhat slyly, at an excellent restaurant, when he is professing that he “seldom eats,” and that a heavy-headed flower is “all he wants.”

Similarly, a review of Patience shows appreciation for the aesthetes, “who have had the beauty,” though “the Philistines . . . have had the wit” and “must consider themselves fortunate in having both Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Burnand upon their side.”

A book-length study of the aesthetes, Walter Hamilton’s The Aesthetic Movement in England (1882), appeared during the aesthetic movement; like other critics sympathetic to the aesthetes, Hamilton believes that “too many people know of the aesthetes only through Patience or The Colonel.” He admits that some “over-enthusiastic apostles” of aestheticism make themselves absurd, but the true aesthetes “are they who pride themselves upon having found out what is really beautiful in nature and art.” According to Hamilton, the movement originated with Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (P.R.B.); its poets include Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Woolner, William Morris, Algernon Swinburne, Arthur O’Shaughnessy, and Oscar Wilde. Hamilton dislikes the term “Aesthetic Movement,”
and uses it, interestingly enough, only “because it is generally ac­cepted and understood”; he prefers to call the movement “a Re­naissance of Mediaeval Art and Culture.” Drawing on his knowl­edge of the aims of the P.R.B., the works exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery from 1878 to 1881, and the contemporary debates on art, Hamilton lists the following characteristics of the aesthetic move­ment: (1) a rejection of conventional approaches to art and a de­sire to work faithfully from nature; (2) a hatred of vulgarity; (3) a “union of the arts of poetry and painting”; (4) influences from both medieval and Japanese art; (5) subdued and melancholy tones; and (6) a tendency to sensuous subjects (pp. vi–viii, iii, 23–30).

By 1882 the aesthetes had achieved a kind of respectability in the eyes of their critics. Even Robert Buchanan, who in 1871 had writ­ten an extremely abusive review of Rossetti and “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” declared in 1882 that the fleshly school had grown “saner, purer, and more truly impassioned in the cause of human­ity.” As examples, he offers Swinburne, who left “the pastoral region shepherded by the impeccable Gautier” and rose “to heights of clear and beautiful purpose”; Morris, who “needs no apology”; and Rossetti, who “never was a fleshly poet at all; never, at any rate, fed upon the poisonous honey of French art.”

The objects of abuse in the 1890s were no longer called “aes­thetes” but “decadents.” In Punch the worshippers of the peacock feather and the lily were replaced by “The Decadent Guys,” who contemplated not passion flowers but rotting “cabbage-stalks that lay dreaming themselves daintily to death in the gutter at their feet.” Generally it was assumed that in England the decadence was an outgrowth of aestheticism, so that the term aesthetic, when it appeared, was often associated with abnormality and perversion. More than one critic, especially after the trial of Wilde, pointed to the “aesthetic craze” as the source of the “morbid, uncleanly, and unnatural” in art. Thus Frank Harris refers to “epicene aesthetes” in his biography of Wilde, and G. K. Chesterton accuses the aesthetes of having a “diseased pride,” praising social decay “as the decay of a corpse is praised by worms.”

If one looks for the element these disparate definitions of aesthete have in common, he finds the idea of a person devoted to
beauty above all else, one to whom art takes precedence over religious faith or social and political concerns. It can be argued that all artists fit this definition, but what distinguishes the aesthete from other artists is the degree of his devotion to art. The "religion of art" is a cliché, but a useful one. For example, Arnold can be called an aesthete; Browning can not. Although in *The Ring and the Book* Browning says that "art remains the one way possible / Of speaking truth," by telling it "obliquely" and thus representing truly, as nothing else can, the ambiguity of human experience; and although he assigns to the artist the exalted role of shaping the book (the fact of experience) into the ring (art), Browning's final faith is not in art, but in love, also symbolized by the ring. On the other hand, in *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold not only assigns to art the place of providing form to otherwise chaotic experience but he also says that art and intellect—not religious faith or human love—are the sources of sweetness and light. In finally placing art above other human concerns, Arnold, Ruskin, Rossetti, Morris, Whistler, Pater, Wilde, Moore, James, and a host of artists of the 1890s, including Beardsley, Symons, and Yeats, are aesthetes; and the major Romantic poets (with the possible exception of Keats)—Carlyle, Tennyson, and Browning—are not; nor is Bernard Shaw.

With this tentative definition of aesthete in mind, one must, I think, then divide the aesthetes into two groups: one which sees the purpose of art as essentially a moral one; the other that divorces the purpose of art from morality. The first derives almost directly from the English Romantic movement and looks to the Middle Ages as the last great flowering of art; it includes Ruskin, Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Morris. The latter group also can be seen as a part of English Romanticism, but it is French influenced and eclectic, absorbing elements from impressionism, symbolism, and decadence. Swinburne, Whistler, and Pater are the major English influences of this branch of the aesthetic movement, which also includes Moore, Wilde, Beardsley, Symons, and various other "decadent" contributors to *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. The aesthetic movement was made up of both groups of artists who, in spite of widely varying techniques and allegiances to other artistic movements, had one belief in common: that, in a world where religious, social, and moral values had collapsed, art was, if
not an absolute, at least a tentative answer to the need for a faith. The essential doctrinal point separating the two groups is whether or not art has a moral function. Though neither group believes that art should be overtly didactic, those whom I will call the moral aesthetes see the purpose of art to be ultimately a moral one, i.e., of social value, capable of producing reforms in society. Those whom I will call the fin-de-siècle aesthetes insist on a separation of art and morality. They believe that art is of no social use: it will not promote brotherly love or social awareness, or make mean lives lovelier, or produce happier workers, or create more beautiful cities. It may incidentally serve a moral function in that it refines the senses, ennobles, or, as Baudelaire says, gives man an idea of the perfection forever lost to him; but this function is not a part of the poet’s intention.

An examination of Shaw’s relationship to both branches of this movement constitutes the remainder of my study. I do not mean to imply that Shaw was an aesthete, because his faith was never in art alone; he sought not artistic but political or religious answers to social and metaphysical problems. Nor do I wish to join the trend of praising Shaw’s artistry at the expense of his ideas: I would not like to be a part of the compact by which great works of art are revered “in consideration of abrogating their meaning; so that the reverend rector can agree with the prophet Micah as to his inspired style without being committed to any complicity in Micah’s furiously Radical opinions” (Epistle Dedicatory, M&S, p. xxxiii). But it is my belief that those opinions are better understood if one comprehends the milieu out of which they arose.

A Beardsley poster, drawn in 1894 as an advertisement for Shaw’s Arms and the Man at the Avenue Theatre, suggests that the lives of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes and Shaw touched; and on at least one occasion Shaw directly linked himself with the Yellow Book era: he called himself “a relic of a bygone phase of affectation marked by Yellow Books, Keynote novels, Beardsley, John Lane and other dusty relics of the day before yesterday.”