PART II

SHAW
AND THE FIN-DE-SIECLE AESTHETES
Chapter IV

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FIN-DE-SIECLE AESTHETICISM

The romantic concept of a nonstatic universe, a universe in the process of "becoming," and the romantic faith in the creative imagination are at the basis of subsequent art movements throughout the nineteenth century. Just as the Pre-Raphaelite rebellion against academy rules and the attempt to "adhere to nature" are manifestations of romantic individualism and artistic experimentation, so, too, later art movements—realism, naturalism, impressionism, symbolism, decadence—are often a result of the romantic search for value in a changing, imperfect, and diverse universe.

Although fin-de-siècle aestheticism did not grow directly from the Pre-Raphaelite movement, the Pre-Raphaelites at least prepared the way for it. Ruskin's and Morris's emphasis on the importance of art to life, the Pre-Raphaelite defiance of artistic convention, and Rossetti's suggestion that a moral intention is not only irrelevant but positively harmful to art foreshadow later developments in the aesthetic movement. The Pre-Raphaelites and the exponents of a moral art are peculiarly English, deriving their aesthetic from the English romantics and their artistic models from the Middle Ages; but the fin-de-siècle aesthetes formed an aesthetic heavily influenced by the French movement of l'art pour l'art.

The later nineteenth century might be seen as a period of, to use Morse Peckham's terminology, "negative romanticism"—a period in which disillusion and world-weariness led not to spiritual rebirth, to affirmation, to Carlyle's "Everlasting Yea," but to fee-
ings of guilt, despair, and alienation. Walter Pater provides an explanation of how such romantic disillusion can lead to a faith in art for art’s sake: the disillusioned man, “cut off from certain ancient natural hopes,” demands an “artificial stimulus,” having lost the medieval “all-embracing prospect of life as a whole.” With only empirical knowledge and subjective experience to guide him, he turns to art or science or experience as an exceptional thing, “almost as men turn in despair to gambling or narcotics, and in a little while the narcotic, the game of chance or skill, is valued for its own sake. The vocation of the artist, of the student of life or books, will be realised with something—say! of fanaticism, as an end in itself, unrelated, unassociated.”

Though Pater is referring specifically to a nineteenth-century French artist, his remarks apply also the English fin-de-siècle aesthetes, who, as Granville Hicks notes, believed in beauty “as artists of all ages have done, but they believed in it more intensely, for it was all they believed in.”

Influenced by what the poet laureate of England had called the “poisonous honey stol’n from France,” the fin-de-siècle aesthetes insisted on the separation of art and morality and the importance of form over content. These ideas were derived particularly from Gautier and Baudelaire, acknowledged influences on Swinburne and Moore and obvious sources of many of the ideas of Whistler, Pater, and Wilde. In his preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), Gautier had attacked critics who demand morality or utility in art; the pretense of morality in art is wearisome, he says, hypocritical, and absurd: “On ne se fait pas un bonnet de coton d’une métonymie, on ne chausse pas une comparaison en guise de pantoufle; on ne se peut servir d’une antithèse pour parapluie; malheureusement, on ne saurait se plaquer sur le ventre quelques rimes bariolées en manière de gilet. Il n’y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c’est l’expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l’homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature.—L’endroit le plus utile d’une maison, ce sont les latrines.” Baudelaire praised Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin for encouraging an “excessive love of beauty,” and he insisted that “la poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de défaillance, s’assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n’a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n’a qu’Elle-même.”

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Speaking in "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe (1857) of "l'hérésie de l'enseignement, laquelle comprend comme corollaires inévitables l'hérésies de la passion, de la vérité et de la morale," he says that the public erroneously thinks that poetry should strengthen conscience, perfect manners, or fulfill a useful purpose; poetry, he insists, has no other object than itself. Baudelaire does, however, find a kind of use for poetry in that it brings beauty to an otherwise vulgar and incomplete existence: he does not say "que son résultat final ne soit pas d'élever l'homme au-dessus du niveau des intérêts vulgaires. . Je dis que si le poète a poursuivi un but moral il a diminué sa force poétique."

In divorcing art from moral purpose, the followers of l'art pour l'art could concentrate on form and on style as the determinant and the ultimate justification of art.

The movement of l'art pour l'art came to public notice in England with the publication of Swinburne's Poems and Ballads (1866) and his subsequent essay, "Notes on Poems and Reviews," in which, answering his outraged critics, he denied that questions of morality are relevant to art. He had earlier expressed the necessity of separating artistic and moral realms in his essay of 1861 defending Baudelaire, where he attacked critics for forgetting "that a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society." In "Notes on Poems and Reviews" he defends his own poetry, including "Dolores," which had been singled out as "especially horrible." This poem, he says, was written "with no moral or immoral design; but the upshot seems to me moral rather than immoral, if it must needs be one or the other, and if (which I cannot be sure of) I construe aright those somewhat misty and changeable terms" (16: 373). In William Blake (1868) Swinburne maintains that the artist's concern should be for form alone. In a passage reminiscent of Rossetti's "Hand and Soul," Swinburne says, "Save the shape, and art will take care of the soul for you"; the artist's creed should be, "Art for art's sake first of all, and afterwards we may suppose all the rest shall be added to her." Like Baudelaire, he does not say that art never produces a moral effect, but he does say that a moral intention will probably spoil a work of art and that any moral effect is accidental and "beside the question" (16: 134-40).
Like Swinburne, the painter James McNeill Whistler emphasized the divorce of morality from art, because art "is selfishly occupied with her own perfection only—having no desire to teach." He believes that "the masterpiece should appear as the flower to the painter with no reason to explain its presence—no mission to fulfill." He also believes that art is solely an effect of color and form, not of subject or detail. For example, in a letter to The World of 1878 he criticized the English inability to separate picture and story, explaining that in his "Harmony in Grey and Gold" he cared nothing "for the past, present, or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot. The subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour. Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like."

Not only does Whistler oppose Ruskin's linking of ethics and art and his linking of a noble subject and a great style, he also insists in the "Ten O'Clock" lecture that "there never was an artistic period," for the artist seeks and finds beauty "in all conditions and in all times." Therefore, Whistler argues, art is not a product of progress or decay but "is limited to the infinite." Opposing the idea that art is for the people, he begins the "Ten O'Clock" with an attack on popular aestheticism: "The people have been harassed with Art in every guise. Their homes have been invaded, their walls covered with paper, their very dress taken to task." Art is not, he insists, for the middle classes or for the majority of people, who have only vulgarity in common: "Art seeks the Artist alone."

In short, Whistler's comments on art as divorced from didactic or moral purpose; as arrangement, line, color, form alone; as universal, requiring not a right time but only an artist; as exclusive, i.e., not democratic; as the result of hard work and skillful execution, not "natural" inspiration, all point up clearly the direction the aesthetic movement had taken: away from that of Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Morris.

That direction was profoundly influenced by Walter Pater, who, according to Richard Le Gallienne, "was virtually the founder of the Aesthetic Movement." Pater's art theory rests on that
curean philosophy expressed in the conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873) and in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), a belief in perpetual change and in the reality of subjective consciousness. All experience, Pater explains, is "a group of impressions," limited by human consciousness and by time, each impression being but "a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is" (*Works*, 1:235). Because fixed knowledge is impossible, success in life depends on keeping the senses alert to aesthetic moments, relying on one's own impression, and, above all, keeping a "constantly renewed mobility of character" (2:139). One must attempt to "be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy," or, in somewhat less obscure terms, to get "as many pulsations as possible into the given time." Because art gives "the highest quality to your moments as they pass," the good life is, then, the aesthetic life (1:236–39). Pater is careful to explain that his Epicureanism is not mere hedonism. Not only did he suppress the conclusion to *The Renaissance* in the 1877 edition because he "conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall" (1:233); but in *Marius the Epicurean* he explains that, although this philosophy could result in "a languid, enervating, consumptive nihilism," for Marius (as for Pater) it resulted instead in a desire to beautify the soul and body, in a desire to attain "not pleasure, but a general completeness of life" (2:137, 143).

This Epicurean ideal draws on Matthew Arnold's philosophy of art. Arnold's culture, like Pater's aesthetic education, implies a spiritual perfection—antimaterialistic, harmonious, flexible, not dependent on wealth or health or morality. When Arnold says that "nothing is more common than for people to confound the inward peace and satisfaction which follows the subduing of the obvious faults of our animality with what I may call absolute inward peace and satisfaction,—the peace and satisfaction which are reached as we draw near to complete spiritual perfection," he is separating conventional morality ("the subduing of the obvious faults of our animality") and culture, which implies, he says, absolute spiritual perfection. Art has for Arnold, as it has for Pater, the highest place in man's spiritual progress; it has as its ideal "an inward
spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy.”

Just as Arnold’s philosophy is an English antecedent of Pater’s Epicureanism, so Pater’s art theory provides a background for the form and style-consciousness of the fin-de-siècle aesthetes. Like Whistler, Pater often stated that good art is determined primarily by its form, not by its matter. For example, in *The Renaissance* he defines poetry as “all literary production which attains the power of giving pleasure by its form, as distinct from its matter.” However, in his essays on “The School of Giorgione” and on “Style,” he assigned a relatively important place to matter; “All art,” he said, “constantly aspires towards the condition of music”; i.e., the form “should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter,” should reduce to a minimum the distinction between matter and form (1:135–37, 250). Finally, in “Style” he distinguishes between “good art,” determined by the perfect fusion of form and matter, and “great art,” which depends on the nobility of its matter. Expressing a sentiment which could also have come from one of the advocates of “art for morality’s sake,” Pater says that, if good art is “devoted further to the increase of man’s happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennable and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God, it will be also great art.” However, Pater’s concept of morality in art is intimately dependent on aesthetic sensibility. His essay on Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* will serve as illustration: the play conveys, Pater says, “the very intricacy and subtlety of the moral world itself, the difficulty of seizing the true relations of so complex material, the difficulty of just judgment,” and it expresses the need for a “finer justice, a justice based on a more delicate appreciation of the true conditions of men and things, a true respect of persons in our estimate of actions.” But because art develops “those fine appreciations” which can lead to a “finer justice,” Pater’s idea of the morality represented by art is that which demands aesthetic sensibility. This concept of morality in art and Pater’s comments elsewhere on the relationship of form to matter necessarily modify the distinction between “good art” and
“great art” in “Style.” In fact, in the midst of his discussion of the morality of Measure for Measure, Pater speaks of “that artistic law which demands the predominance of form everywhere over the mere matter of subject handled.”

Although Pater’s position seems at times to diverge considerably from Whistler’s, in actuality the two are close. Both Pater and Whistler consider artistic effect of primary importance. Both insist on the artist’s vision as the sole determiner of the kind of reality his art will express. And both say that artistic productivity does not depend on social health; like Whistler, Pater says that art has been produced in all ages. He praises the Renaissance, but he considers it not as an age but as an attitude, which he finds not only in fifteenth-century Italy but also in medieval France and eighteenth-century Germany; to Pater the Renaissance is “a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt” (1:2). For Pater as for Whistler the artist’s temperament, not his age, is the sole source of artistic inspiration.

The aestheticism of Swinburne, Pater, and Whistler was dramatized and advertized by Oscar Wilde, who absorbed almost every tendency in the aesthetic movement and is thus considered by many to be the symbol of the aesthetic movement. At first he was thought to be a follower of the Pre-Raphaelites; Hamilton, who defines the aesthetic movement as the “Renaissance of Medieval Art and Culture,” devotes a chapter of The Aesthetic Movement in England to Wilde. Later, Wilde was identified with the French-influenced aesthetes and particularly with the decadents. Satires of Wilde depict him as both pure and intense and as wicked and corrupt: in Patience (1881) he is the innocent, melancholic Grosvenor, “an Idyllic Poet,” “the Apostle of Simplicity”—or “Archibald the All-Right”; but in Robert Hichen’s The Green Carnation (1894) he is Esmé Amarinth, a corruptor of youth, and an insincere epigrammist, admitting a love for “what are called warped minds, and deformed natures, just as I love the long necks of Burne-Jones’s women, and the faded rose-leaf beauty of Walter Pater’s unnatural prose.” The influences on Wilde were as various as the influences on the aesthetic movement itself: he was devoted to Ruskin’s teach-
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ing at Oxford; his view of criticism as creating "the intellectual atmosphere of the age" is heavily indebted to Arnold; his costume and pose of the 1880s identified him with popular aestheticism; his artistic creed was so heavily indebted to Whistler that Whistler said that "Oscar dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces"; his poetry is sometimes impressionistic; his pose of the 1890s linked him with decadence; and his works *The Soul of Man under Socialism* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* reflect a social consciousness which places him in the moral tradition of Ruskin and Morris and link him with the wider social reform impulse of the period. However, though Wilde's life reflected both the moral and amoral streams of the aesthetic movement, his art theory primarily repeated and emphasized the aesthetic theory of Swinburne, Pater, and Whistler. His critical essays develop an already familiar theory of art, including the ideas that the object of art is beauty, not truth; that art is not useful; that style, not subject, determines art; and that art is not produced "naturally" but consciously and deliberately.16

The conviction found in Wilde, Swinburne, Whistler, and Pater that the artist's first and only obligation is to produce art is central to the English art for art's sake movement. Though the origins of this fin-de-siècle movement are numerous and complex, one does not misrepresent them in seeing it as an outgrowth of romanticism, its way prepared by Ruskin, Arnold, and the Pre-Raphaelites and its course influenced by the French movement of *l'art pour l'art*. The English leaders of art for art's sake were Swinburne, Whistler, and Pater, who by the 1880s had formulated a theory of art which, as Wilde popularized it, became the basis of fin-de-siècle aestheticism. This theory, if condensed into maxims about art like those in Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, would take the following form:

Art need not serve a moral or useful purpose. It is the joyous expression of beauty alone.
Art may be experimental and should be free from academic rules and popular demands.
Art is not democratic. It is anti-bourgeois.
In art, form is all-important. Art is not produced "naturally." Treat-
ment of subject and style are more important than choice of subject matter.

Art is subjective. It may thus be "realistic," impressionistic, "naturalistic," or symbolical.

Art is not limited to a particular time or place.

The theories of other aesthetes such as Symons, Moore, or Beardsley are merely variations and refinements of this community of beliefs.

By the 1890s the slogan "art for art's sake" had become a cliche, so that one finds a writer for *The Yellow Book* referring to "that honourable property-piece, the maxim of Art for Art's sake." Nevertheless, the concept of art for art's sake in Swinburne, Whistler, Pater, and Wilde emphasizes the main point of difference between the followers of Ruskin and the followers of Pater. It has been argued that, in advocating a moral art, Ruskin does not mean that art deals with issues of right and wrong, but that he means "that the perception of beauty is not isolated from the rest of human life that it is not an affair of the intellect or purely of the senses, but of the emotions," and that Pater is "essentially of the same party as Ruskin" in his relation of art to all experience. But there is a real difference in emphasis between Ruskin's view of an art which should be produced only by an ethical man and which reflects the ethics of that man and his age, or Morris's view of an art which ultimately performs the social service of restoring the dignity of the laboring class and uniting society in a brotherhood of artisans, and Pater's view of an art which, depending in no way on an ethical artist or a moral age, can provide a "higher morality" in that beauty contributes to "completeness of life." At least one disciple of Pater, Arthur Symons, believed that Pater "did much to rescue us from the dangerous moralities, the uncritical enthusiasms and prejudices, of Mr. Ruskin."

In the final analysis, most of the aesthetes who adopted art for art's sake as an article of faith did not only mean that art's purpose is to create a beautiful object; they also recognized that art serves a higher purpose in its contribution to culture. They never denied that art can elevate the manners or sensibilities of those who come in contact with it. Their major concern in insisting on art for art's sake was not so much to deny to art a moral function—if morality
is more broadly defined than usual to include anything, whether or not it clashes with convention, which works for the betterment of mankind—as it was to divorce art from “the heresy of didacticism,” to use Poe’s term, and to free it from the aims of immediate social improvement. Thus Hubert Crackanthorpe, echoing the sentiments of Arnold, Pater, and Wilde and speaking for many of the avant-garde artists of the 1890s, writes in the second volume of The Yellow Book that “the business of art is to create for us fine interests, to make of our human nature a more complete thing; and thus, all great art is moral in the wider and truer sense of the word.” But, he continues, “theoretically, Art is non-moral. She is not interested in any ethical code.” This latter statement uses moral not “in the wider and truer sense” but in the narrower and more common one of “acceptable to society’s concept of right.” Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the art for art’s sake movement was to protest against what Arthur Symons calls “bourgeois solemnity.”

“Art for art’s sake” in England, then, could mean a number of things—none of them contradictory to the other. It meant, first of all, what the slogan seems to say: the sole purpose of art is the creation of a beautiful object, i.e., art. But it also sometimes carried the implication that such art, by enriching the culture, incidentally serves a moral purpose—in its widest sense. And, as a rallying cry for many of the avant-garde of the 1880s and 1890s, it served as a reminder to Victorian society that art is something other than a reflection of bourgeois values, that by its nature it cannot be “respectable.” As we shall see, the art theory of Bernard Shaw owes more to the aesthetic movement in England than his comments on art for art’s sake would lead one to believe.