The Aesthetics of Redemption in fin de siècle Literature and the Arts

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Comparative Literature
University of Toronto

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2017

Abstract

This dissertation explores a cluster of texts in fin de siècle aestheticism from a Nietzschean perspective, questioning whether their claims about art and life are, at bottom, world-affirming or world-denying. I argue that the aesthetic worldviews of Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde manifest a struggle against Christian (especially Protestant) values, a struggle that, however, periodically and sometimes fatally capitulates to the otherworldliness it seeks to overcome. Chapter 1 delineates the theoretical framework for my investigation. Drawing on the work of Nietzsche and Max Weber, I begin by examining the diverse strains of otherworldliness, some more implicit than others, that run through the aesthetic theories of Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Charles Baudelaire. In Chapter 2, I consider the evolution of Nietzsche’s own aesthetic philosophy from his youthful embrace of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk to his mature view that the Dionysian artist exemplifies the individual who has vanquished all decadent urges to be redeemed from worldly suffering, and is thus able to affirm life through his work. Chapter 3 demonstrates how Pater’s contemplative aestheticism, which originally sets out to counteract the antipathy to the ‘here and now’ associated with ascetic Protestantism, ends up reproducing the hierarchy between the
temporal world and a more desirable ‘otherworld.’ In the fourth and final chapter, I suggest that Wilde overcomes the otherworldliness of Paterian aestheticism but only by advancing a secularized version of aesthetic incarnation. This dissertation argues that aestheticism is neither an inevitable offshoot of secularization nor a particular phase of Christian theology, but rather a struggle to work through the complex moral and philosophical dilemmas that arise from the rigorous commitment to valuing life on its own terms.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people came together to make this project possible, and I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has helped and supported me in one way or another over the past five years.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support I received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Northrop Frye Centre, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and the University of Toronto.

Rebecca Comay, my dissertation advisor, has been vital to this project from its inception to its completion. Her extraordinary breadth of knowledge and expression has been both a resource and an inspiration, and I am extremely grateful to have had this opportunity to work with and learn from her. My committee members, Mark Knight and John Zilcosky, have also contributed in countless ways to this project. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Zilcosky for his sincere and incisive engagement with the ideas I explore in my work, and Professor Knight for so generously sharing his expertise in the field of religion and literature. I would also like to thank Jill Ross, Ann Komaromi and Veronika Ambros for their guidance and support during my time at the Centre for Comparative Literature. I am grateful to Aphrodite Gardner and Bao Nguyen as well for their kindness and assistance.

I would never have embarked on this project if not for the formative influence of Samir Gandesha and R. Darren Gobert. It was in Professor Gandesha’s classroom, over 10 years ago, that the theories of Nietzsche and Weber first exerted their pull over me, and I am indebted to Professor Gobert, who has been a friend and mentor, for steering me in the direction of Comparative Literature, a field in which I find myself perfectly at home.

On a personal level, I’d like to thank my family—my parents Mary Beth and David, siblings Lisa and Michael, and niece and nephew Olivia and Arion—for their constant love and support. And, although she’ll never read this, I’d also like to acknowledge the emotional support I’ve received from my oversized lapdog Grushenka, who kept me company during countless hours of reading and writing (and who forced me to venture outside at least three times a day). Finally, to my husband Laury, my ideal reader, gracias por ayudarme sacar el ‘fua’ al final de un proceso largo y sumamente difícil. Without your unwavering encouragement and confidence in me, this project would have taken many more years to complete. I dedicate this dissertation to you.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................. IV

TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................................. V

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................... VII

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1. AESTHETIC REJECTIONS OF THE WORLD AND THEIR DIRECTIONS .... 20
  RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE WORLD ...................................... 23
  NIETZSCHE’S ANTIPODES ...................................................................................................... 33
  AESTHETIC ASCETICISM: OVERCOMING THE CREATURELY ............................................ 42
  AESTHETIC MYSTICISM: CHANNELLING THE DIVINE .......................................................... 51
  THE POET LOSES HIS HALO .................................................................................................. 59

CHAPTER 2. THE APOLLONIAN MECHANISM OF REDEMPTION IN NIETZSCHE’S
PHILOSOPHY OF THE ARTIST .................................................................................................... 69
  REDEMPTION THROUGH ILLUSION: The Birth of Tragedy .................................................. 73
  “WHAT IS LEFT OF ART”: ART AFTER METAPHYSICS ....................................................... 85
  ART AS TONIC ........................................................................................................................ 89
  THE TRANSFORMATION OF APOLLO ..................................................................................... 106

CHAPTER 3. THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS: WALTER PATER’S
CONTEMPLATIVE AESTHETICISM ............................................................................................ 116
  THE SPIRIT OF THE RENAISSANCE AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY .................................. 120
  MARIUS THE IMMACULATE PERCEIVER .............................................................................. 135
  THE ASCETICISM OF STYLE .................................................................................................. 153

CHAPTER 4. THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE IN OSCAR WILDE’S AESTHETICISM ....169
  WILDE’S GARDEN OF AESTHETIC DELIGHTS ..................................................................... 172
  INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL TRANSCENDENCE IN The Soul of Man and The Picture of Dorian
  Gray ........................................................................................................................................ 181
  “THE OTHER HALF OF THE GARDEN” .................................................................................. 200

CODA ........................................................................................................................................... 220
LIST OF FIGURES

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* ..........................................................118
**INTRODUCTION**

What becomes of the form, purpose, and function of art after the “death of God”? The urge to answer this (sweeping and unsolvable) question is what gave rise to the following study. It drew me to a phenomenon that is broadly known as ‘aestheticism,’ a nebulous nineteenth-century movement (or constellation of movements) committed to the pursuit of beauty in both art and life. ‘Aestheticism,’ often employed as a synonym for *l’art pour l’art* or ‘art for art’s sake,’ is also commonly referred to as a “religion of art” (as in the title of Leon Chai’s book, *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature*) or, following Walter Benjamin, a “theology of art” (“Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 224). Despite its frequent usage, however, the term ‘religion of art’ mystifies far more than it explains: if aestheticism constitutes a religion of art, in what way (if any) does it manifest a break from received modes of religious belief and practice? Does aestheticism proceed from or refute the “death of God”? And if it does take God’s death for granted, how does (or can) it avoid reproducing the theism it supposedly supersedes?

Beginning around 1800 with the German Romantics, the ‘religion of art’ (or *Kunstreligion*, as it is called in German) is generally understood to be a consequence of secularization, an attempt to fill the spiritual, emotional, and moral vacuum putatively left by the waning of religious faith in the modern western world.¹ It has become a catchphrase for a wide range of post-Enlightenment

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¹Nicholas Shrimpton contends in “The Old Aestheticism and the New” (2005) that “the once despised Aesthetic thought of the second half of the nineteenth century” (2) has recently been resurrected in a contemporary mode of
theories that display a deep reverence for aesthetic form. The Victorian critic Matthew Arnold—despite his remoteness from more radical religion-of-art formulations such as the aestheticism of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde—is often considered the spokesperson of this phenomenon. As Arnold famously wrote in his 1880 essay “The Study of Poetry,” “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us […] and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (47). So much has Arnold come to epitomize the notion that the arts serve as a substitute for religion in a disenchanted age that Michael W. Kaufmann recently referred to this still relatively widespread view as the “Arnoldian replacement theory” (“The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies” 616). Similarly, in *The English Cult of Literature*, a study of “devoted readers” in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England that challenges the “assumption that modern literary authority rises with—and because of—religion’s decline” (4), William McKelvy dubs Arnold “his age’s most influential apostle of culture” (2).²

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² See also Joshua King’s article “The Inward Turn: The Role of Matthew Arnold” in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016), which argues that Arnold “promoted a public role for a transformed Christianity that depended on literary tact” rather than “setting up poetry and its academic study in the place of religion” (15).
Whether the religion of art should be considered primarily a religious or a secular phenomenon has become the subject of much critical debate. Although the “Arnoldian replacement theory” adheres to a secular view of modernity—art is figured as an atheistic surrogate fulfilling emotional and social needs and functions that were formerly fulfilled by religion—the phrase ‘religion of art’ acknowledges an embeddedness in and (an at least partial) perpetuation of religious beliefs and practices. That many figures associated with the idea were devout Christians (such as Novalis) or, more frequently, converts to Catholicism (such as Friedrich Schlegel, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Lionel Johnson, to name only a few) further complicates attempts to figure the religion of art as a development within a larger process of secularization.

Over the past two decades, a number of studies devoted to re-evaluating the notion that the arts have ‘replaced’ religion since the Enlightenment have appeared; while some scholars (such as Auerochs and Ellis) argue that the religion of art should in fact be viewed as a “Variante [variation]” (Auerochs 363) of or an “incitement” (Ellis 19) to religion, others (such as Cheeke, Lyons, and Schlaffer) stress the movement’s secular thrust without overlooking its indebtedness to Christian theology.

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3 See, for instance, volumes 1 and 2 of *Kunstreligion: Ein ästhetisches Konzept der Moderne in seiner historischen Entfaltung* (2011, 2012), comprised of essays that revisit the concept of *Ersatzreligion* in the context of German Romanticism and the fin de siècle/modernist period; the chapter “Messias im Pluralis. Kunstreligion um 1800” in Bernd Auerochs’s *Die Entstehung der Kunstreligion* (2006); Stephen Cheeke’s *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Literature Before Aestheticism* (2016); Hildegard Feindegen’s *Dekadenz und Katholozismus* (2002); Ellis Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997); Sara Lyons’s *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt and Secularisation* (2015); and Heinz Schlaffer’s *Die kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (2002), which argues that the most highly regarded periods of German literary history are those that deeply engaged with “die intellektuelle Energie religiöser Herkunft [the intellectual energy of religious origin]” (20). These studies stand in opposition to others—such as Karl Beckson’s *The Religion of Art: A Modernist Theme in British Literature 1885-1925* (2006), Leon Chai’s *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (1990), and Theodore Ziolkowski’s *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief* (2007)—that continue to rely uncritically on the Arnoldian narrative that the arts stepped in in the post-Enlightenment period to fulfill needs and desires that were formerly fulfilled by religion.
One of the reasons why the relationship between religion and the arts has received so much critical attention as of late is because of the cross-disciplinary reassessment of the ‘secularization thesis’ currently underway, as sociologists, historians, anthropologists and philosophers explore alternatives to the theory (largely attributed to Max Weber) that the forces of modernity inevitably lead to the demise of religion. That the Enlightenment’s project of demystification has not resulted in the eradication of religious movements (let alone extremism) has led a number of scholars to propose revisions to our previously linear and one-directional conception of the secular trajectory of modernity. This move in recent scholarship echoes Adorno and Horkheimer’s exposition of the mythical roots of Enlightenment and instrumental reason’s tendency to regress into irrationality—“myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (Dialectic of Enlightenment xvi)—which itself recalls Nietzsche’s claim that science (Wissenschaft) is “not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather the latest and noblest form of it” (Genealogy of Morals, “Third Essay,” section 23, 147). In Victorian studies, the ongoing reappraisal of the secularization thesis has brought the historical-literary category of ‘crisis of faith’ under new scrutiny; in contrast to previous characterizations of the nineteenth century as a time when the majority of people abandoned the Christian faith, the focus in much recent criticism has been on calling attention to the plurality of ways in which religion continued to form a vital part of everyday life in the Victorian period.  

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4 Charles Taylor’s monumental study A Secular Age (2007) has done much to open up cross-disciplinary discussion about conventional views on secularization. For a helpful overview of recent challenges to the Weberian narrative in the field of sociology, see Rob Warner’s Secularization and its Discontents (2010).

The complexity of religion as a conceptual category has often been obscured or marginalized in academic—that is, supposedly secular—discourse, and this dissertation aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship which refutes reductive or unexamined definitions of religion and secularity. Nevertheless—and without wishing to contradict studies that attest to the pivotal role played by religion in nineteenth-century culture and society—I agree with Sara Lyons’s assertion that we should not be induced on account of these new insights to “repress the view from Dover beach” (16). Like Vincent Pecora’s recent book *Secularization Without End* (2015), which traces how novels by Beckett, Mann, and Coetzee attest to the “complicating swerve that distorts the grand narrative of secularization and allows, at times, for a certain recuperation of the religious” (26), my dissertation operates under the belief that we should nuance, rather than entirely discard, secularization as a historical and conceptual category pertaining to our understanding of modern literature. While the notion that the arts stepped in to fill a void left by the disintegration of religious certainty in the wake of the Enlightenment does indeed merit reconsideration, I do not think that we can fully understand the religion of art, particularly in its late nineteenth-century guise, as a continuation or variation of the Christian faith. Rather, one of the central arguments of this dissertation will be that several prominent proponents of ‘aestheticism,’ which I define somewhat narrowly as the attempt to revalue human life in accordance with aesthetic principles, wielded the arts as conceptual weapons against Christianity—more specifically, against the transcendent tenets of Christian doctrine that were

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6 My project is therefore in conversation—although not entirely in agreement—with current “postsecular” debates within the field of literary criticism. The term “postsecular” came into use in the late-1990s as a corollary of the so-called “religious turn” that has taken place in the social sciences and humanities. In her contribution to the recently published *Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016), Lori Branch writes that a “postsecular mode of inquiry would advance critical awareness of the history and ideology of the secular/religious binary […] and highlight the terms of conflict between secular ideologies and what they constitute and subject as religious” (“Postsecular Studies” 94).
becoming increasingly unpalatable to materially minded thinkers in the nineteenth century. As a careful consideration of the aesthetic worldviews formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde will show, such theorists configured the relationship between art and religion neither in terms of continuation nor inevitable and progressive replacement; rather, they positioned the pleasing, self-sufficient materiality of art (following the school of ‘art for art’s sake’) in direct and deliberate opposition to the Christian (particularly Protestant) tradition’s tendency to degrade temporal pleasure. The arts, in other words, were deployed as a means of revalorizing and revitalizing our experience of the mundane world.

Aestheticism posed a challenge not only to religious doctrine but also to the logic of capitalism—which serves, according to Max Weber’s influential theory, as a means of perpetuating Protestantism’s ascetic attitude towards being and acting in the world under the guise of secularity. Although aestheticism and capitalism can both be considered materialist worldviews—they both remain, to use Charles Taylor’s term, within the “immanent frame”7—the aestheticist vision of this-worldly fulfillment starkly opposes the capitalist conceptualization of worldly success in terms of one’s ability to accumulate material wealth. The compulsion to make and save money that Weber linked to Protestantism’s rationalization of worldly conduct could hardly be farther from aestheticism’s encouragement to take (guilt-free) delight in the beauty of the here and now. Against the temporality of postponement that underlies both worldly and otherworldly forms of asceticism, then, aestheticism affirmed the value of each

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7 Taylor uses this term to refer to a secular conception of existence in which time, the self, and the natural world are understood as being part of an entirely immanent order that excludes the “supernatural” or the “transcendent” (A Secular Age 542).
moment, each experience, for its own sake; it transformed idolatry (loving something in and for its material form) into a positive, even ethical, mode of approaching creaturely things.⁸

At the same time that Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde sought to counteract Protestant asceticism and its residues through advancing a this-worldly and pagan-inspired⁹ aestheticism, however, they also (with varying degrees of intentionality) replicated a number of Christian motifs in their writing—such as redemption, the contemplative life, compassion and, perhaps most problematically, an aesthetic version of ‘otherworldliness.’ As such, a second major objective of this dissertation is to expose the limits of aestheticism as a means of overturning transcendent systems of values. It is here that my study departs from Sara Lyons’s recent and otherwise like-minded book, which argues that Swinburne and Pater “cast secularism in new and seductive terms” (⁹) by aligning the autotelic notion of art as an end in itself (art for art’s sake) with the secular belief that life is an end in itself (⁹). While I locate within aestheticism, as does Lyons, a desire to counteract Christianity’s transcendent promise of fulfillment, I also discern a contrary desire to ‘rest’ in the aesthetic that parallels certain religious modes of world negation. In other words, I identify an internal tension in what we might call (following Nietzsche) aesthetic

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⁸ While the idolatry of aestheticism certainly runs counter to the ascetic impulse of capitalism, it can (and indeed did) overlap in a variety of ways with the commodity fetishism of nineteenth-century consumer culture. On aestheticism’s vexed relationship with bourgeois consumerism, see Gene H. Bell-Villada’s *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990* (1996), Jonathan Freedman’s *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990), and Regenia Gagnier’s *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (1986).

⁹ The Hellenic bent of nineteenth-century aestheticism has been the subject of numerous studies (see, for instance, David DeLaura’s *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England*, Linda Dowling’s *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Stefano Evangelista’s *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece*, and Henry Hatfield’s *Aesthetic Paganism in German Literature*), yet the secularizing impetus that often underlies these appeals to paganism has yet to be sufficiently emphasized. As Max Weber himself noted in “Science as a Vocation,” the relativity of values that accompanies secularization is strikingly similar to polytheism: “[S]o long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another [‘das Leben, so lange es in sich selbst beruht und aus sich selbst verstanden wird, [kennt] nur den ewigen Kampf jener Göter miteinander’ (Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre 592)]” (From Max Weber 152).
‘revaluations of values’: although they sometimes pit themselves against the transcendent principles of Christianity, they are in constant peril of capitulating to their own (aesthetic) ideals of transcendence. This temptation to renounce the temporal sphere and retreat into the aesthetic—which I explore most extensively in the first and third chapters of this dissertation—is intrinsic, I argue, to aestheticism’s endeavour to extend the concerns of art to the totality of experience. For though the arts engage in complex and multifarious ways with what we might crudely call the ‘real’ world, they are arguably conditioned by their status as ‘other’; whether as re-production, re-presentation, or re-purposing (as in Duchamp’s Readymades), as idealization, satire, or contrastive vision, a work of art stands in (at least partial) tension with that which exceeds its frame. Art, as Theodor Adorno has theorized, is a manner of “resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings” (“Commitment” 80). The more the aesthetic sphere presents its ‘otherness’ as an ideal or superior alternative to the world as it is, the more it mirrors the hierarchizing of otherworldly principles (eternity, immortality, absolute goodness) that Nietzsche discerns and denounces as “world-slander” (weltverleumderisch) in Christian discourse. In seeking to subject all aspects of life to aesthetic criteria, then, aestheticism risks reproducing, albeit in different terms, the very split between the world as it is and a more desirable ‘otherworld’ that it contests in theological distinctions between mortal life and the afterlife or the postlapsarian world and the Kingdom of God. My argument, in sum, is that the promise of fulfillment inherent in certain utopian or transcendent forms of art has the capacity to undermine one’s commitment to being and acting in the world.

While I acknowledge aestheticism’s potential to slip into transcendent and even explicitly Christian modes of valuation, I nevertheless maintain that the movement, as a whole, is best
understood as a departure from rather than an evolution of the Christian religion. Although the theories I examine here may, at times, reiterate religious motifs and reproduce extramundane ideals, I view their underlying (or, in the very least, their initial) attitude towards Christianity to be one of resistance rather than acceptance. The conviction that the Christian worldview has harmed our ability to cherish and enjoy temporal experience animates the aesthetic philosophies of Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde on the most fundamental level; for these thinkers, Christianity is predominantly a force that should be overcome, rather than amended. That aestheticism periodically capitulates to a religiously amenable notion of transcendence is more a symptom, I would argue, of what Vincent Pecora has called the continual process of “refinement-as-convalescing-distortion” by which secularization unfolds (*Secularization and Cultural Criticism* 22). Pecora’s suggestion that secularization follows a “circuitous, partial, and uneven path, one filled with digressions that periodically call its basic (Weberian) premises into question” (22) helps us to understand the presence of both Christian and anti-Christian currents within aestheticism. Neither a return to nor the end of religion, aestheticism manifests a never-fully-successful struggle against religiously inherited values and thought patterns.

I resist labeling the aestheticism(s) I interrogate here ‘secular,’ since to do so would suppress the many ways in which transcendence and immanence cut across any boundary we might erect between religion and secularity. For example, as we will see in the case of Wilde, it is precisely by incorporating the immanent (incarnational) dimension of Christianity into his aesthetic philosophy that Wilde overcomes the latent otherworldliness he inherited from Pater. What is more, the attack on transcendent principles observable in the aestheticism of Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde is in keeping with the theological shift towards immanence that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, as church leaders and Christian thinkers began to stress
“the immediate, social implications of the gospel” while downplaying the question of the fate of the soul in the afterlife (Knight and Mason 164). Additionally, on a methodological level, to purport to unveil the inner religiosity of an outwardly secular aesthetic would be to assume, problematically, that there is some kind of essential difference between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular.’ As anthropologist Talal Asad has written in *Formations of the Secular*, since “there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines ‘sacred language’ or ‘sacred experience,’” the secular can only be considered a meaningful category within particular historical, geographical, and cultural formations of the religious-secular opposition (25). Rather than hazarding to characterize aestheticism as a homogeneously ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ development, then, my primary aim is to trace the ways it both challenges and replicates the antipathy towards worldly things that a number of nineteenth-century theorists, rightly or wrongly, attributed to the legacy of Christianity. The “aesthetics of redemption” I invoke in the title of this dissertation thus denotes a double movement, both the endeavour to redeem the creaturely world from its theological devaluation via the aesthetic and the desire to redeem oneself from worldly suffering by retreating into the Elysian ‘otherworld’ of art. In my view, the redemptive function assigned to the aesthetic within aestheticism operates in two directions, as a means of revaluing (rehabilitating) the phenomenal world as well as withdrawing from its hardships (and banalities). In exploring the aesthetics of redemption within fin de siècle “literature and the arts,” I take into account the ways in which this phenomenon transcends any singular medium of creation; from Nietzsche’s interest in Greek tragedy to Pater’s and Wilde’s engagement with visual art to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, aestheticism defies all formal divisions between artistic media.10

10 For recent studies that look at the religion of art beyond the context of literature, see volume 2 of *Kunstreligion*
Clarifying my use of the term ‘aestheticism’ will shed light on why I am grouping together such disparate figures as Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde as proponents of a comparable (though conflicting) creed. As a movement or tendency within the broader religion-of-art phenomenon, aestheticism can refer to two overlapping yet distinct propositions: in one sense, it is an artistic principle, the assertion that art should concern itself with beauty alone and serve no external ends (whether moral, political, religious or otherwise). This is the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art* popularized by Théophile Gautier and championed by many others (including Algernon Swinburne and James Abbott McNeill Whistler in England and Stefan George in Germany). Emerging in part as a response to the prevailing ugliness and instrumentalism of the modern industrial world, it derives, arguably, from a misinterpretation of Kant’s assertion in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that the beautiful is that which fills us with disinterested (*interesselos*) pleasure by virtue of its purposeful purposelessness. In another sense, however, aestheticism designates a philosophy, a way of life, in which the values of art (such as beauty, form, creation and contemplation) determine one’s mode of being and acting in the world. For the high modernist T.S. Eliot, the “right practice” of aestheticism was limited to the first sense: “The theory (if it can be called a theory) of ‘art for art’s sake’ is still valid in so far as it can be taken as an exhortation to the artist to stick to his job; it never was and never can be valid for the

(which includes essays on composers, visual artists and theatre practitioners such as Wagner, Schönberg, Ernst Barlach, Wassily Kandinsky and Max Reinhardt), Kevin Karnes’s *A Kingdom Not of This World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (2013), as well as Stephen Cheeke’s *Transfiguration* (2016) and Forest Pyle’s *Art’s Undoing In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism* (2014), both of which pay particular attention to the cross-pollination between the visual arts and literature in nineteenth-century England.
s spectator, reader, or auditor" ("Arnold and Pater" 442). While Eliot admired writers such as Flaubert and Henry James for the "devotion" they showed to their work (443), he was deeply critical of those who wished to transform this principle into what he called a "theory of life" ("Baudelaire" 420) or a "theory of ethics" ("Arnold and Pater" 439). His censure stems from the fact that the philosophy of 'art for art's sake,' once it transgresses the frame of the artwork, begins to resemble and rival religion as a totalizing system of values—an occurrence that Eliot, a late convert to Anglicanism, outspokenly abhorred. The aestheticism that interests me here is precisely the second, ‘invalid’ (in Eliot’s opinion) kind, since it is in articulations of this all-encompassing variety that we most clearly observe both the challenge and the capitulation to transcendent principles enacted by aesthetic revaluations of values.

It is also only when aestheticism is conceived of as a “theory of life” or “theory of ethics” that the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche comes within its purview. Nietzsche, as is well known, was no advocate of the doctrine of l’art pour l’art. As he wrote in Twilight of the Idols:

> When the purpose of moral preaching and of improving man has been excluded from art, it still does not follow by any means that art is altogether purposeless, aimless, senseless—in short, l’art pour l’art, a worm chewing its own tail. […] Does [the artist’s] basic instinct aim at art, or rather at the sense of art, at life? at a desirability of life? Art is the great stimulus to life: how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as l’art pour l’art? ("Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," Section 24, 529)\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) "Wenn man den Zweck des Moralpredigens und Menschen-Verbesserns von der Kunst ausgeschlossen hat, so folgt daraus noch lange nicht, dass die Kunst überhaupt zwecklos, zielloser, sinnloser, kurz l’art pour l’art — ein Wurm, der sich in den Schwanz beisst — ist. […] Geht dessen unterster Instinkt auf die Kunst oder nicht vielmehr auf den Sinn der Kunst, das Le b e n ? auf eine W ü n s c h b a r k e i t v o n L e b e n ? — Die Kunst ist das grosse Stimulans zum Leben: wie könnte man sie als zwecklos, als zielloser, als l’art pour l’art verstehen?"
Nietzsche objected to the professed hermeticism of art for art’s sake, drawing attention to what Adorno has called the “indissoluble connection to reality” that constitutes the “polemical a priori” of autonomous art (“Commitment” 77). If art were entirely divorced from life, Nietzsche asks, what interest would it hold for us? In contradistinction to the illogicality that art exists for its own sake, Nietzsche suggests that art exists for life’s sake, that art somehow enhances our experience of life, making life fuller, more intense, more pleasurable. Nietzsche’s famous assertion in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified [‘denn nur als aesthetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt’]” (section 5, 52) is perhaps the most concise expression of aestheticism as a “theory of life.” While it may appear unorthodox to count Nietzsche among the defenders of aestheticism, Alexander Nehamas’s *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985) has done much to spur this line of interpretation in Nietzsche scholarship. Putting Nietzsche’s philosophy in dialogue with the theories of notorious aesthetes such Pater and Wilde as I do here, however, has proven to be a far less common endeavour.

Nietzsche performs a dual function in this dissertation: he is not only the originator of a compelling aesthetic worldview (which I explore in detail in Chapter 2), he is also the critical lens through which I examine the tension between world-affirming and world-denying attitudes within theories of aestheticism. Nietzsche’s emphatic hostility towards Christianity stems from

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12 See also Allan Megill’s 1981 article “Nietzsche as Aesthetist” (published prior to Nehamas’s book). For an overview of recent debates surrounding Nietzsche and aestheticism, see Matthew Meyer’s “Nietzsche’s Naturalized Aestheticism” (2015).

13 Notable exceptions to this resistance to ‘lower’ Nietzsche to the level of Pater and Wilde include Patrick Bridgewater’s *Anglo-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s* (1999), Kate Hext’s “Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche” ‘Rebels in the name of beauty’ (2011), and Julia Prewitt Brown’s *Cosmopolitan Criticism. Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art* (1997).
his conviction that millennia of Christian dominion over the minds and customs of western humanity have left us incapable of valuing (and enjoying) life on its own terms; the exaltation of principles that transcend and even contradict the physical world has instituted, Nietzsche argued, a “mode of being which [impoverishes] all things, making them thin and consumptive” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” section 9, 519). While Nietzsche is particularly vehement in his condemnation of Christianity—particularly Protestantism, the “most unclean kind of Christianity that there is, the most incurable, the most irrefutable” (*Antichrist*, section 61, 655)—as the main progenitor and disseminator of this “world-slandering” perspective, his broader critique of *décadence*14 exposes other forms of thought and activity that likewise traffic in “all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond [*die ganze Falschmünzerei der Transzendenz und des Jenseits’*]” (*The Case of Wagner* “Postscript” 183). Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner, whom I discuss in chapter one as theorists of a like-minded aesthetic worldview and who figure as prominent, positive influences in Nietzsche’s early work, are later diagnosed by Nietzsche as archetypal “decadents” who “suffer from the *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy calm, stillness, smooth seas, or, on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion, and anesthesia” (*Nietzsche Contra Wagner* “We Antipodes” 669). “Décadents” are said to be afflicted by an overwhelming impulse to surrender to “entrancing visions [entzückenden Visionen]” in order to withstand life (*Will to Power*, section 850, 450); they view suffering, which Nietzsche affirms as a primary principle of life, as an intolerable offense necessitating some kind of cosmic redemption or solution. A number of

14 In Chapter 1 (“Nietzsche’s Decadence Philosophy”) of *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (2002), Charles Bernheimer investigates the many (and sometimes contradictory) ways in which *décadence* serves, in Nietzsche’s philosophy, as “an intellectual *agent provocateur,*” a “stimulating force” to which the philosopher responds with “unique vigor” (8).
aesthetic theories—including those formulated by Schopenhauer and Wagner as well as those expressed by Huysmans, Baudelaire, and (ultimately) Pater—are driven by a parallel desire to find consolation or redemption in the “entrancing visions” offered by art. Nietzsche’s method of identifying where an appeal to transcendent sources of solace continues to animate what might otherwise appear to be immanent alternatives to faith in the beyond can help us to parse the logic according to which aestheticism unfolds. In undertaking a Nietzschean critique of aestheticism, it is not my intention to imply that there is something inherently ‘wrong’ with aesthetic theories that invoke transcendent principles; my aim, rather, is to expose the conceptual perils intrinsic in the endeavour to counteract otherworldly systems of value with the values of art. Articulations of aestheticism that are at least partially motivated by an effort to employ art as a secularizing agent—as a means of reaffirming the worthiness of life in this-worldly terms—are inevitably confronted by the ambivalent otherness of art, its potential to become a repository of “world-slandering” sentiments. How aesthetic philosophies of life navigate this ambivalence determines whether or not they stand, ultimately, as contestations or recapitulations of transcendentally oriented worldviews.

The Nietzschean framework of my project, which resists and exposes dependence on otherworldly ideals, relegates a number of well-known figures and themes in aestheticism to the margins. Stefan George and his “circle” (Kreis) of devoted disciples, for instance, with their ritualism and worship of “Maximin” (Maximilian Kronberger, the beautiful young boy beloved by George who died at 15), so clearly represent a regression in Nietzschean terms that I have opted to leave them out entirely. French symbolism and decadence also, to a large extent, remain committed to the numinous inheritance of art, and I therefore limit my discussion of French texts to Huysmans and Baudelaire—who illustrate, albeit in different ways, the world-
rejecting sentiment that runs through a host of fin de siècle works. The political import of Baudelaire’s poetry—its protest against the rise of bourgeois consumer culture—likewise remains on the fringes of my analysis, as does the (Benjaminian) question about the relationship between *l’art pour l’art* and fascism. Nietzsche’s resolute suspicion of all forms of otherworldliness is, at bottom, incompatible with Benjamin’s line of critique, since for Benjamin it is precisely the messianic flashes of “*profane illumination*” in avant-garde art that awaken revolutionary consciousness (“Surrealism” 179). Whereas Benjamin seeks to reconfigure the opposition between transcendence and immanence to maximize its revolutionary potential, Nietzsche seeks to expose—and preferably vanquish—all appeals to transcendence in human thought and action. Nietzsche’s protest against the physical and mental harm caused by Christian values is also ultimately incompatible with the British Arts and Crafts Movement of John Ruskin and William Morris, since this movement, although immanently oriented, is largely in agreement with the Anglican Church’s focus on the social implications of Jesus’s teachings in the second half of the nineteenth century. Of all the figures associated with aestheticism, Pater and Wilde (and, of course, Nietzsche himself) stand out as the ones who most conspicuously combat Christian otherworldliness in their claims about the arts; it is these three writers, consequently, who serve as my primary subjects of analysis.

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In Chapter 1, “Aesthetic Rejections of the World and their Directions,” I set out the theoretical framework for my investigation of aestheticism as a theory of life. Drawing on the work of Nietzsche, Max Weber, Charles Taylor, and Martha Nussbaum, I outline how aestheticism has the capacity to foster both world-affirming and world-negating approaches to life before turning to look at the world-fleeing trajectory of several influential nineteenth-century aesthetic theories.
Weber’s essay “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions” serves as the model for my discussion of what I call the “aesthetic rejections of the world” discernable in the writings of Schopenhauer, Wagner, Huysmans, and Baudelaire. The chapter ends with a reflection on Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannthal’s prose piece “Ein Brief,” which presents an intriguing contrast to the world-rejecting aesthetic theories considered here in that it portrays a poet who abandons poetry precisely because it has ceased to function as a vehicle of transcendence in an increasingly disenchanted world.

The following chapter (“The Apollonian Mechanism of Redemption in Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art”) considers the evolution of Nietzsche’s own aesthetic worldview from his youthful proclamation that Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk satisfies our religious need for “metaphysical comfort” to his mature stance that tragic art functions as an invigorating “tonic” which enables us to affirm all aspects of life and thereby overcome the life-negating allure of décadence. Despite his eventual view that the need for redemption is the most pernicious of all religiously inherited sentiments, Nietzsche’s aestheticism, I argue, is itself formulated along redemptive lines—albeit in a non-metaphysical, non-moral, and non-eschatological sense. The chapter focuses on Nietzsche’s shifting attitude towards Schopenhauer and Wagner as a means of tracing the development of his aesthetic worldview, since the two thinkers function first as models for and then as ‘antipodes’ of Nietzsche’s philosophy of art. In Nietzsche’s later creative or artist-focused approach to aesthetics, the Dionysian artist comes to exemplify the individual who has overcome all decadent urges to be redeemed from worldly suffering and who continually celebrates and affirms life through his work. In sculpting, shaping, and constructing ourselves and the world around us, Nietzsche suggests, we enact and consequentially achieve deliverance from our previous and debilitating dependence on a supernatural power.
Chapter 3, “The Garden of Earthly Delights: Walter Pater’s Contemplative Aestheticism,” examines Walter Pater’s attempt to re-conceptualize temporal experience in terms of its immediate rather than future (whether worldly or otherworldly) import. His call to “treat life in the spirit of art” is an exhortation to appreciate each moment for its own sake, modeled on the “beholding for the joy of beholding” that characterizes aesthetic contemplation (“Wordsworth” 61-2). Pater’s effort to free immediate experience from its bondage to external (both instrumental and religious) forms of fulfillment by encouraging an attitude of “impassioned contemplation,” however, ends up revealing how aesthetic worldviews risk capitulating to the otherworldly values they originally seek to overcome. Although his exaltation of the arts is initially intended to valorize the sensuous and temporal dimensions of human experience that (he believes) Christian asceticism has denigrated, Pater’s philosophy culminates in a rejection of the “actual world” for the idyllic, “cloistral refuge” of art (“Style” 18). That Pater ends up reconstructing the very division between the world as it is and a more desirable otherworld which he decries in the Christian tradition attests to the danger inherent in combating transcendent sources of value via the aesthetic.

In the fourth and final chapter, entitled “The Human and the Divine in Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism,” I trace Wilde’s indebtedness to and eventual independence from Pater’s aesthetic worldview. Against the critical tendency to treat Wilde’s theoretical insights with the same flippancy with which he conveys them, I read Wilde’s writings on art seriously, viewing his exaggerated apology for Paterian aestheticism as a crucial step in the development of an original and this-worldly mode of valuing life in aesthetic terms. Turning once again to Martha Nussbaum’s distinction between human and extrahuman forms of transcendence (which I outline in chapter one), I argue that Wilde oscillates between expressing an external or
extrahuman notion of aesthetic transcendence and an internal or fully human understanding of the value of art. Through a close reading of *De Profundis*, Wilde’s prison letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, I show how Wilde eventually overcomes the otherworldliness of Pater’s aesthetic theory by creatively appropriating an aesthetic of incarnation, according to which Jesus becomes the living embodiment of his own imaginative ideal.

Finally, in a brief coda, I reflect on how we might reconcile Wilde’s this-worldly yet Christian-inspired aestheticism with Nietzsche’s vehemently anti-Christian philosophy of the artist, as well as gesture towards some of the broader and ultimately irresolvable questions that my re-examination of the religion of art at the fin de siècle engages with. As a whole, this dissertation endeavours to present a reading of aestheticism as neither an inevitable offshoot of secularization (art as a ‘natural’ replacement for religion) nor a particular phase in the development of Christian theology, but rather a concerted and indeed serious effort to work through the complex moral and philosophical dilemmas that arise from the commitment to valuing life on its own terms. Without denying or ignoring the transcendent current within aestheticism, my aim, ultimately, is to emphasize the valorization of immanence that serves in my view as a driving force behind the turn to art at the fin de siècle. As experiments—however radical, outlandish, or flawed—in restoring the self to the material world, these aesthetic philosophies of life are worthy of our consideration.
CHAPTER 1
AESTHETIC REJECTIONS OF THE WORLD AND THEIR DIRECTIONS

W. B. Yeats claimed, in 1898, that the arts are “about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things” (“The Autumn of the Body” 303). This sentiment is exemplary of the spirit of competition or rivalry (Konkurrenz) that characterizes the relationship between art and religion at the fin de siècle. The arts, Yeats proposes, are ready, willing, and able to step in and fulfill the spiritually nourishing role that religion is no longer equipped to perform. The suggestion that art can or should replace religion, which Yeats implies here and which is discernible in the work of many other late nineteenth-century writers and artists—above all, those associated with the decadent and symbolist movements—hinges on the long-established premise that art possesses a transcendent dimension, that it maintains a mysterious connection to the immaterial truth(s), essence(s) or

15 In his contribution to the first volume of Kunstreligion: Ein ästhetisches Konzept der Moderne in seiner historischen Entfaltung, Heinrich Detering suggests that the religion of art—which must both intersect with and diverge from prior definitions of ‘religion’ if it is to signify something distinct from its constituent parts—underwent a substantial change in the second half of the nineteenth century: the aspiration to bring about a “Konvergenz [convergence]” of art and religion that had characterized Kunstreligion since Schleiermacher’s Reden über die Religion (1799) transformed into a relationship of “Konkurrenz [competition or rivalry]” (“Was ist Kunstreligion?” 14-15). Detering cites the mature operas and theoretical writings of Richard Wagner as examples of the competitive orientation of late nineteenth-century Kunstreligion, in that they present autonomous art as a superior, more effective means of accessing the numinous than conventional (outmoded and deficient) religion (15).

16 As Vincent Sherry has shown, the putative distinction between symbolism and decadence is largely a construct of later critics. See Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence.
being(s) which lie beyond the phenomenal world. It is this (essentially Neoplatonic) vein of fin de siècle aestheticism that serves as the primary focus of this chapter.

There is, however, a more radical way in which art begins to compete with religion in the second half of the nineteenth century. For some artists and theorists, the desacralization or disenchantment of art in the Protestant tradition yielded a positive result, in that the aesthetic sphere could now become an immanent, human oriented alternative to religious modes of thought and action. Rather than lament or resist the emptying out of divinity from the material world instigated by the Reformation (and expedited by the Enlightenment), some viewed the newfound freedom that this development bestowed upon art as a cause for celebration, for it rendered art a terrain of fully human action, as opposed to a nebulous space in which God and humanity meet. If, as Joseph Koerner suggests (following Hegel’s argument in Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik), “art became pure fiction” once Luther had “purified” Christianity of its propensity to fetishize “‘things’” (Reformation of the Image 33-34), then art also became, from an opposing (atheist) vantage point, ‘purified’ of religion and the ‘fiction’ of transcendence that it had previously been made to serve. It is precisely because certain strains of Christianity regarded art as too contaminated by the creaturely to represent (ultimate) truth that Friedrich Nietzsche, as we will see in Chapter 2, was able to reclaim the aesthetic as a this-worldly and anti-Christian source of values. Walter Pater’s praise of the “strange idolatry, [the] strange rival religion” (The Renaissance 16) that he detects even in pre-Reformation literature and art rests on a similar admiration for the immanent dimension of the aesthetic, as does Wilde’s (however facetious) defense of “lying” as art’s proper aim. Human creativity and the delight inherent in sensuous contemplation, rather than transcendent truth, stand at the centre of Nietzsche’s, Pater’s and Wilde’s aesthetic revaluations of values.
While the competition I trace between art and religion in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 emphasizes the way in which aesthetic philosophies of life present a challenge to the very notion of transcendent sources of value, here I examine a different configuration of Konkurrenz (the one noted by Detering), which is in fact far more in line with religious repudiations of the world than it is with aesthetic affirmations of it. Drawing on Max Weber’s study of mystical and ascetic rejections of the world and Martha Nussbaum’s distinction between internal and external forms of transcendence, I survey several acute examples of (what I would like to call) the ‘aesthetic rejections of the world’ associated with aestheticism and decadence.¹⁷ A number of writers linked with these interweaving and at times indistinguishable l’art pour l’art movements—often brought together under the term fin de siècle¹⁸—expressed radical aspirations to flee or renounce the world via art that conspicuously resemble, I argue, the ascetic and mystical Weltablehnungen identified by Weber. Viewing the social and/or natural world (for various reasons) as flawed, deficient, and even repugnant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Charles Baudelaire proposed that art could ‘save’ us by transporting us to a wholly other sphere or state, one that contains all that the world does not (such as endless perfection, harmony, serenity, and pleasure). What ties these figures together irrespective of their cultural, formal, political and linguistic disparities is the radicality of their aesthetic vision, 

¹⁷ Since this chapter aims to highlight the world-rejecting strain that runs through the work of a number of different fin de siècle writers, it refrains from making larger claims about the overall attitude towards the world expressed in any particular writer’s oeuvre. The three subsequent chapters, by contrast, provide more detailed ‘case studies’ of individual writers—namely Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde—whose oeuvres exhibit a complex struggle against world-negating doctrines.

¹⁸ Max Nordau, who in Degeneration (1892) famously diagnosed a wide range of artists and thinkers from this period as “degenerates” and “hysterics,” defined the term ‘fin de siècle’ thus: “It means the end of an established order, which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty” (5). Nordau repudiated the “new aesthetic schools” of the fin de siècle—such as Wagnerism, Symbolism, Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, and Decadence—on both moral and empirical grounds, claiming that they, like religion, arise from an erroneous interweaving of “ideas suggested by words only” with ideas “derived from direct perception” (68).
the exceptional emphasis they place on art’s ability to deliver us from earthbound hardship. While at times their articulations of aesthetic redemption correspond fully with religious ones—that is, they purport to put us in contact with a ‘beyond’ apprehended in supernatural terms—at other times they champion what Weber calls the “diabolical nature of art,” offering alternative and pointedly artificial (humanly devised) surrogates for religious ideals or notions of paradise. Delineating here the world-fleeing trajectory of the aesthetic theories expressed by Schopenhauer, Wagner, Huysmans and Baudelaire will aid our ability to detect, in subsequent chapters, the “world-slandering” sentiment that periodically resurfaces in more immanently oriented forms of aestheticism.

**Religious and Aesthetic Attitudes towards the World**

In his essay “Zwischenbetrachtung: Theorie der Stufen und Richtungen religiöser Weltablehnung” (literally “Intermediate Reflections: A Theory of the Stages and Directions of Religious Rejections of the World” but retitled in English as “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions”), Max Weber outlines the motivation and orientation of the most prevalent “religious ethics of world abnegation [‘religiöse Ethiken der Weltverneinung’]” (*From Max Weber* 323). He compares, as two ideal types of world-rejecting religiosity, asceticism and mysticism. The ascetic views himself as a “tool” (*Werkzeug*) of his god and “seeks to tame what is creatural and wicked through work in a worldly ‘vocation’ [‘Beruf’]”; the mystic, on the other hand, strives to become god’s “vessel” (*Gefäß*) and views worldly activity as an impediment to

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19 “Intermediate Reflections” refers to the essay’s position in Weber’s *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (3 vols.) between his writings on the religions of China and the religions of India.
the “absolutely irrational and other-worldly religious state” that enables communion with the divine (325). Although asceticism is less hostile to acting in the world in the sense that it requires one to rationally pattern one’s life in accordance with god’s will (whereas mysticism aspires to inactivity, culminating in the “contemplative flight from the world ['weltflüchtige Kontemplation']”), the distinction between the two collapses whenever the ascetic focuses predominantly on “overcoming creatural wickedness in [his] own nature” and therefore spurns participation in “the orders of the world” (326). Conversely, a great deal of discipline and self-denial is required for the mystic to achieve the state necessary for him to obtain unity with god, since “the creature must be silent so that God may speak” (326).

Weber identifies an underlying tension between these religious rejections of the world and the “esthetic sphere,” since art, like sexual love, is a “‘this-worldly’” and “essentially non-rational” activity (341). Historically, art and religion have enjoyed a congenial relationship as long as ‘magic’ has been central to both spheres: as long as religion retained its “magical” orientation (its belief in miracles, divine possession, ritual or sacramental means of salvation), artistic creations (idols, icons, temples) and activities (dance, song) were viewed as “carrier[s] of magical effects” (341). However, with the rise of intellectualization and rationalization and the disappearance of magic from the world (Entzauberung), religion (above all ascetic Protestantism) becomes increasingly hostile toward art:

20 In The Sociology of Religion (comprised of the chapter Religionssoziologie from Weber’s never completed Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft), Weber clarifies that there are two fundamental modes of asceticism: “‘world-rejecting asceticism’ ['weltablehrende Askese'],” which demands a “formal withdrawal [...] from all creaturely interests” in order to achieve salvation, and “‘inner-worldly asceticism’ ['inner-weltliche Askese'],” which demands that the believer “transform the world in accordance with his ascetic ideals” in order to be saved (166). Despite this distinction, both forms of asceticism entail an at least partial renunciation of the world, since even in inner-worldly asceticism it is by abstaining from indulgence in worldly pleasures that one methodically patterns one’s behaviour “according to the will of an absolutely transcendent god” (182).
For under these conditions, art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a *salvation* from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism. With this claim to a redemptory function, art begins to compete directly with salvation religion. (342)²¹

As a species of “inner-worldly, irrational salvation” (342), art begins to rival religion as a source of redemption in a disenchanted world. From a religious perspective, the undeniable similarity between religious and aesthetic experience is regarded as “a symptom of the diabolical nature of art,” and art is denounced as “‘idolatry,’ a competing power, and a deceptive bedazzlement” (342-3). Ascetic (ethical and rational) religiosity dismisses redemption through art as “irresponsible indulgence and secret lovelessness,” while mystical (irrational) religiosity disdains its formal (sensual or creaturely) element, which is incompatible with the mystic’s aim to “be absorbed into the ‘All-oneness’ [‘All-Eine’]” that transcends all forms (342).

From what Charles Taylor would call a “closed world” perspective, however, art now appears to offer a means of *counteracting* religious rejections of the world: it contradicts both asceticism’s rejection of sensuous indulgence and mysticism’s rejection of worldly activity. Although Weber does not name Nietzsche as an influence here, he is almost certainly drawing on Nietzsche’s comment in the *Genealogy of Morals* that art, unlike science, philosophy, or even atheism, is

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“fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal” because in art “the lie is sanctified [‘sich heiligt’] and the will to deception has a good conscience” (“Third Essay,” section 25, 153-4). According to Nietzsche, art refuses to serve the ascetic ideal22 and instead creates new systems of value within the world that oppose the transcendent or otherworldly principle of “truth.” Weber, in the above quotation, extends Nietzsche’s observation to propose that art can actually redeem the world (or, more precisely, its human inhabitants) from religious abnegations by dismissing religious notions of a rational, meaningful cosmos and establishing its own aesthetic Kosmos of “independent values.” Weber’s formulation raises the possibility that the religious promise of redemption might be adapted, via art, to a secular, this-worldly context. It is this possibility of a nonreligious, world-affirming aesthetics of redemption that I consider in subsequent chapters.

In pitting art against asceticism and mysticism, the two primary types of religious world abnegations, Weber implies that art inherently and uniformly affirms the world; his characterization of art as both “irrational” and “inner-worldly” suggests that art (whether creation or contemplation he does not specify) is a form of worldly activity that does not suppress or reject the irrational aspects of life (moods, emotions, desires and drives). We might query the universal validity of this claim, however, and ask whether art is entirely and invariably “irrational” and “inner-worldly.” Does art always constitute an unbridled release of impulses, instincts, and emotions, a pure expression of the irrational side of our nature? Or can it not also consist of a conscious and methodical (and perhaps even ascetic) ordering, selecting, and

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22 Nietzsche’s term “ascetic ideals [‘asketische Ideale’]” would encompass the two types of religious world abnegation discussed by Weber (that is, both asceticism and mysticism), since both involve the pursuit of a goal or value that requires one to renounce earthly desires.
controlling of the raw (irrational) material of life? And further: is artistic activity (creation and contemplation) univocally ‘worldly’ in its orientation? Is it not always already, in a certain sense, directed towards an otherworld—that is, towards the ‘aesthetic realm,’ which defines itself in opposition to the ‘actual world’? Given the overlap and fluidity between religious and aesthetic categories (which Weber readily acknowledges), might we not identify world-rejecting or world-fleeing trajectories within art as well as within religion? For Schopenhauer, as we will see, it is precisely this shared affinity for transcendence that ties aesthetic, ascetic and mystical contemplation together.

Nietzsche clearly recognizes the potential for art to be put to otherworldly uses: he decries the decision to place oneself “in the service of the ascetic ideal,” to become an “advocate of the ‘beyond,’” as “the most distinctive corruption of an artist that is at all possible” (Genealogy “Third Essay,” section 25, 154). Nietzsche almost certainly has the arch-decadent Richard Wagner in mind here, whom he accuses of becoming a “mouthpiece of the ‘in itself’ of things, a telephone for the beyond,” and an utterer of “ascetic ideals” under Schopenhauer’s influence (Genealogy “Third Essay,” section 6, 103). For Nietzsche, whenever art colludes with religion or its residues, it is betraying (what he considers to be) its inherently impious nature: artistic creation should be a celebration of human autonomy, of the relativity of the world, rather than an act of submission to divine sovereignty. This conviction that art is by nature secular and

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23 This focus on order and restraint is typical of the Parnassian view of art espoused by Théophile Gautier and other nineteenth-century French poets who opposed the Romantic emphasis on intuition and emotion.

24 Consider, for instance, this defense of the autonomy of art from A. C. Bradley’s 1901 lecture on poetry at Oxford: “For its [poetry’s] nature is to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for the time the beliefs, aims, and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality” (qtd. in Donoghue 279).
world affirming conspicuously underlies Weber’s understanding of the antagonistic relationship
between art and religious world abnegations. However, as we shall see in this chapter, Nietzsche
and Weber’s belief in the intrinsic mundanity of art is contested by a host of assertions to the
contrary.

Because of the ambiguity of its transcendent dimension, its ambivalent otherness in relation to
that which exceeds its frame, art is exceedingly difficult to classify as a wholly ‘secular’
phenomenon. In his exhaustive study on the modern phenomenon of secularization, *A Secular
Age* (2007), Charles Taylor proposes that we avail ourselves to “the distinction
transcendent/immanent” in order to distinguish between religion and secularity (15). He
considers where adherents of these competing worldviews locate or encounter a sense of
“fullness,” the place where “life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable,
more what it should be” (5): for religious believers, this place lies “outside of or ‘beyond’
human life”; unbelievers, by contrast, locate fullness somewhere “‘within’ human life.” Taylor
identifies three dimensions of the ‘beyond’ in the religious worldview: 1) the belief that there is
something higher than “human flourishing”; 2) the belief in a transcendent divinity; 3) the belief
in an afterlife (20). Faith in these three forms of transcendence requires believers to renounce
the pursuit of purely earthly fulfillment, to forego aspects of their own and of their society’s
flourishing, so that they can participate in the cosmic “restoration of a fuller flourishing by God”
(17). Unbelievers, by contrast, do not recognize any ultimate goal higher than that of the
flourishing of the world (human and/or ecological); the secular worldview therefore remains
within what Taylor calls “the immanent frame”—the backdrop against which the post-
Enlightenment West formulates its beliefs, which often “slough[s] off the transcendent”
(although it “doesn’t necessarily do so”) (542-3).
Taylor acknowledges the slipperiness of postromantic art in regards to this transcendent/immanent distinction, since the “modern languages of art” manifest a “suspension of ontic commitment” (404). Romanticism opened up the possibility for the “experience of beauty” to become “unhooked from the ordered cosmos and/or the divine” (400), thereby enabling the notion of art for its own sake to be born. Art is now free (or, in fact, obliged) to choose between three orientations: it can either establish its allegiance to the transcendent (God), ground itself “in some purely immanent outlook” (400), or remain indeterminate in terms of its religious/secular character (404). We can find examples corresponding to all three of these categories in the literature of aestheticism and decadence. The point I would like to make, however, is that even the seemingly “immanent” category of postromantic art, which makes no claim “about our relation to a transcendent object” (404), does not necessarily locate “fullness” within the world; the aesthetic ideal, if sufficiently otherworldly, utopian, or paradisal in form (even if irreligiously so), can function analogously to the ascetic ideal, compelling its devotees to renounce all other modes of being and acting in the world in order to bask in its glory.\(^{25}\) Taylor would presumably identify this kind of world-rejecting aesthetic transcendence as a ‘false’ transcendence, an exaltation of the ego or a form of self-deification, yet the fact remains that it corresponds to religious rather than secular notions of fullness in the sense that it is located outside of or ‘beyond’ the realm of the natural world.

A more nuanced understanding of aesthetic transcendence is necessary, then, if we are to distinguish between the contradictory attitudes towards being and acting in the world that

\(^{25}\) Taylor, for instance, names Walter Pater as someone who grounded his views on art in a “purely immanent outlook.” In Chapter 3 I argue, quite to the contrary, that Pater’s aestheticism (despite its professed intentions) is rooted in a quasi-religious devotion to an unearthly ideal of beauty.
comprise aestheticism. In order to more clearly differentiate between these counter currents, I would like to introduce a set of terms used by Martha Nussbaum in her essay “Transcending Humanity” (published in Love’s Knowledge). Prompted by Charles Taylor’s questioning of what she “really think[s] about the human aspiration to transcend humanity” (368), Nussbaum articulates what kind of transcendent aspirations she endorses and what kind she thinks might be not only unsuitable for but also ultimately detrimental to human flourishing. Her inquiry leads her to distinguish between two forms of transcendence: “extrahuman” or “external” transcendence, defined as the endeavour to entirely vanquish our human limitations and assume “the life of another sort of being, as if it were a higher and better life for us” (379), and “internal” or “human” transcendence, which strives to cultivate a deeper and more refined sense of our humanity. Nussbaum illustrates the difference between these two types by recalling Odysseus’s encounter with Calypso in Homer’s Odyssey. When the goddess Calypso offers to make him immortal, Odysseus refuses because his desire to return home to Ithaca and his wife Penelope outweighs his desire to become a god. In choosing Penelope over Calypso, Odysseus chooses a life constrained by imperfection, ageing and mortality over a life of immortality and eternal youth. For Nussbaum, Odysseus’s choice exemplifies the fact that the things we value most—such as love, compassion, courage, or strength—presuppose human limitations and would be meaningless without them. There is thus an “incoherence lurking somewhere in the wish [to transcend humanity]” (368) because “many of the activities we now prize and consider fine will not figure in a divine life, consistently imagined” (372). Nussbaum therefore urges us to dismiss the desire for extrahuman or godlike transcendence of the conditions of human existence (conditions that include suffering, ageing, and death), and to instead turn our attention and energy to endeavours that cultivate “a specifically human good” (389).
Nussbaum’s notion of internal or human transcendence is capped at the “immanent frame”; it is what Taylor calls a “closed world structure” in the sense that it refuses to acknowledge the existence of anything (any goal or value) beyond that of worldly flourishing. Significantly, Nussbaum bases her notion of internal transcendence on artistic pursuits; Henry James and Marcel Proust serve as her models for this kind of aspiration, since both writers have not the “slightest interest in religious or otherworldly or even contemplative transcendence,” yet “both aim at transcendence nonetheless, and exemplify it in their writing” (379). Unlike other, more science-driven “closed world systems,” which are rooted (as Taylor shows) in an often unreflective faith in the value (and existence) of disengaged reason, Nussbaum’s internal transcendence, epitomized in artistic creation (specifically novels), is rooted in the valorization of specifically human truths—the truths of emotional, embodied experience, of “the messy impure world of human particularity” (386). We might identify this understanding of (internal or human) aesthetic transcendence with Nietzsche’s claim that art, in its celebration of human ability and perspectivism, is the greatest opponent to otherworldly ideals. (And indeed, in “Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love,” Nussbaum describes Nietzsche’s views on art in terms analogous to her own: “Nietzsche clearly believed […] that art, including music and dance and including as well the art of the philosopher-poet, had a central positive role to play in restoring man to himself and to the earth” [Love’s Knowledge 307]).

I would like to emphasize, however, a point that Nussbaum does not raise in her essay: the fact that aesthetic transcendence can also, and often does, align itself with “external” or “extrahuman” forms of transcendence, with aspirations to entirely vanquish the contingent and transient conditions of life on earth. Even the writers she names as exemplars of internal transcendence, James and Proust, might be accused of withdrawing from life into their work, of
pursuing artistic perfection or redemption at the expense of lived experience. (I am thinking particularly of Walter Benjamin’s assertion in “The Image of Proust” that Proust retreated from the finitude of experience to the infinitude of remembrance, choosing ultimately to turn “his days into nights, devoting all his time to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination” [202].) Elsewhere, Nussbaum acknowledges the possibility that writing and reading can become hostile to life:

We must ask [...] exactly what writing itself is in human life; how it is related to the ambition to control and order, therefore, perhaps to a certain discontent with or even a hatred of human life as it is lived; how it might displace both writer and reader from a loving acceptance of the world. We have so far spoken as if writing could express all the human forms of feeling in its own many forms. But writing is itself a choice, an act, and not a neutral act either. It is opposed to other forms of action or passions: to listening, to waiting, to keeping silent. (“Narrative Emotions” 311)

Nussbaum recognizes that aesthetic experience (both creation and contemplation) has the potential to harbour world-slander ing sentiments. Although she does not mention this possibility in her discussion of internal and external forms of transcendence, she would not take issue, I think, with my locating these conflicting poles within art as well.

Aesthetic philosophies of life—which attempt to extend the concerns of art to the totality of experience—effectively magnify the contradictory impulses that characterize art. Since art has the capacity to function as a vehicle for both internal and external aspirations to transcendence,
both of these forms are discernable in aesthetic attitudes towards the world. Before turning to examine some of the most explicitly extrahuman or world-rejecting notions of aesthetic transcendence associated with \textit{l'art pour l'art}, I would like to look first at the two figures whom Nietzsche viewed to be the most ‘corrupted’ purveyors of otherworldly ideals in the name of art of his time: Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. Not only is Nietzsche’s own life-affirming theory of art (which I discuss in detail in chapter two) formulated as a direct renunciation of the fundamental tenets of their work, but many fin de siècle aesthetes who subsequently espoused world-negating forms of aestheticism were profoundly influenced by their views on art—even, in the case of the ‘Wagnerites,’ to the point of fanatical devotion.

\textbf{Nietzsche’s Antipodes}

Much of the world-fleeing religiosity of aestheticism and decadence can be traced back, via Wagner, to Schopenhauer’s valorization of aesthetic experience as an analogue of ascetic and mystical contemplation. Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view of the world as a place of interminable conflict and suffering led him to the conclusion that we can only achieve salvation through the absolute denial of the will to live. In \textit{The World as Will and Representation (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)}, the phenomenal world is explained as an obscured objectification (subject to the laws of time, space, and causality) of the will—an irrational, purposeless force underlying everything that exists. The human body, as

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Surely a similar argument can be made for religious attitudes towards the world (that is, that religion contains both world-affirming and world-rejecting currents). My concern here, however, is with aesthetics, not theology.
\item[27] Schopenhauer uses the terms \textit{Erlösung} and \textit{Heil} interchangeably; they are translated inconsistently into English as either “deliverance” or “salvation.”
\end{footnotes}
phenomenon, becomes merely another objectified manifestation of this will, as are all other living things. Every time we give in to our bodily urges and desires, whatever they may be, we are feeding this life force and consequently furthering our suffering, since the will is incapable of achieving ultimate satisfaction and “[e]very attained end is at the same time the beginning of a new course, \textit{ad infinitum}” (I: 174). In order to stave off suffering indefinitely, then, the only option available to man is to nullify the will by practicing the most rigorous form of asceticism. Schopenhauer defines asceticism in absolute terms as the “\textit{deliberate} breaking of the will by refusing the agreeable and looking for the disagreeable, the voluntary chosen way of life of penance and self-chastisement, for the constant mortification of the will” (I: 392). One cannot be set on this path to redemption at the urging of abstract knowledge (that is, through pursuing philosophical inquiry or heeding religious dogma); the path, rather, must be discovered intuitively through the realization that the \textit{principium individuationis} is a guise that conceals the primary unity of all that exists. Once we recognize that the suffering of others is also our suffering, we turn away from the world in disgust and “attai[n] to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-lessness” (I: 379). Schopenhauer finds religious saints, monks and mystics exemplary of this ascetic renunciation of the will to live—although he is careful to distinguish between religious dogma and (what he sees as) the universal validity of self-denial as a form of salvation. He argues that Christianity\textsuperscript{28} and eastern religions derived from the ancient Sanskrit texts, despite their very different rituals and doctrines, exhibit the same fundamental formula of redemption through resignation (I: 389-90).

\textsuperscript{28} Or at least those aspects of Christianity derived from the New Testament, which contains in the writings of the Apostles “the first stages of asceticism or of real denial of the will” (I: 386). He views “Jewish dogmatism” as being essentially incompatible with the New-Testament ethic of renunciation, and blames the current decline of Christianity (“that excellent and salutary religion”) on this internal conflict (I: 388).
What his own philosophy accomplishes is the rational explication of the “inner nature of holiness,” which has until now been obscured by myth, dogma and superstition (I: 383).

While absolute asceticism may be the only lasting means of freeing oneself from suffering, Schopenhauer contends that aesthetic contemplation can offer a momentary glimpse of the blissful, will-less state achieved by the ascetic. Art transcends phenomenal appearances (obscured objectifications of the will) and presents us with the Platonic Ideas, which are the direct (non-spatio-temporal) objectivity (Objektivität) of the will (I: 184-85). In this way, art exceeds the cognitive capabilities of science: all rational or scientific methods remain on the superficial (or horizontal) level of “the phenomenon, its laws, connexion, and the relations resulting from these” (I: 184), whereas art operates vertically, cutting through these distorting aspects of the phenomenal world to reveal “the real world as representation” (I: 180). Although only the artistic genius can easily perceive the Ideas within visible things and therefore readily become a “pure, will-less subject of knowing,” all men have the power to recognize the Ideas in phenomena when they see them represented in art (195). In the aesthetic state, object and subject are fused into one (“subject and object reciprocally fill and penetrate each other completely” [I: 180]): with the rupture of the illusion of the principium individuationis, the

29 This is true for all art forms except music, which is not mimetic; music bypasses the phenomenal world altogether and presents us with a direct copy of the will (I: 257).

30 And becomes, in a way, the equal of philosophy as a means of accessing truth. Schopenhauer writes that philosophy is related to art as “wine is to grapes” (II: 407), suggesting that they contain the same substance (truth), but that art presents this substance in a cruder form while philosophy distills it. Here the fundamental difference between Schopenhauer’s theory of art and Plato’s becomes clear: whereas Plato disdained art as a mere copy of individual things (which were themselves copies of the eternal Ideas), Schopenhauer sees art as piercing through phenomenal appearances to represent the Ideas themselves.

31 And, presumably, in nature—just not as readily as the genius. Schopenhauer makes no great distinction between aesthetic pleasure derived from the contemplation of nature or the work of art, except to say that the artwork represents the Idea more clearly, as it has already been refined through the lens of the genius (I: 195).
individual momentarily rises above his habitual status as a “subject of willing” and experiences the absence of the will—the blissful freedom from “the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears” (I: 196). According to Schopenhauer, the pleasure we experience in the contemplation of beauty—beauty being “the adequate and suitable manifestation of the will in general, through its merely spatial phenomenon” (I: 224)—is precisely the effect of this sudden and temporary deliverance from the will. Aesthetic pleasure is thus defined in opposition to sexual pleasure; any purported works of art that “excite lustful feeling in the beholder” through depicting “the charming [‘das Reizende’]” are therefore fundamentally unaesthetic (I: 208). Rather than stirring sexual desire, which belongs to the domain of the will (Schopenhauer identifies the genitals as the “focal point” of willing), art is said to activate the brain, the focal point of the “serene subject of pure knowing” (I: 203). The aesthetic state, then, becomes analogous to the ascetic state—with the obvious distinction that the first exposes one only momentarily to the enduring peace attained in the second. The silencing of the will achieved through aesthetic contemplation allows us to envisage the blessed existence of the ascetic who has succeeded in completely annihilating his will “except for the last glimmering spark that maintains the body and is extinguished with it” (I: 390). Aesthetic contemplation, in other words, functions as a temporary means of redemption for those of us incapable of fully and enduringly mastering our will.

Schopenhauer’s understanding of the otherworldly or extrahumanly transcendent function of art (specifically of music, which is non-representational and circumvents the phenomenal world entirely) would have a formative impact on Richard Wagner’s theoretical and artistic work; even before he had been introduced to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, however, Wagner expressed belief in the religious import of the arts. In The Artwork of the Future (1849), Wagner developed
a theory of nature as incessant movement propelled by a “generative and formative force” that he called “Necessity [‘Nothwendigkeit’]” (69). Similar to Schopenhauer’s will—with the great exception that it is considered “un-capricious and un-arbitrary” (69) and is therefore not ‘evil,’ not something that we must struggle against—Wagner’s Necessity is declared to be the sole principle of truth underlying life. Wagner argues that, in the modern world, civilization has developed against the basic principles of Necessity, and that we are therefore living in a time dictated by fashion, artificiality, and decadence rather than “the laws of Nature” or “actual Life” (71). The task of art is to once again tap into this vital oneness at the centre of all things, thereby uniting men in their common Necessity and redeeming society from artificial class division and general decay: “[F]or in this Art-work [of the future] we shall all be one,—heralds and supporters of Necessity, knowers of the unconscious, willers of the unwilful, betokeners of Nature,—blissful men” (76). Art will rescue the people (das Volk), defined as “all those men who feel a common and collective Want [‘gemeinschaftliche Noth’]” (75), from their unnatural subjection in a society driven by decadent cravings for luxury. The artwork of the future, Wagner declares, will essentially heal all that industrialization and modernization have harmed or skewed in human nature and society, transforming the current “hell of Luxury” into a realm of “blissful men” (76).

The artwork in which Wagner deposits all of his hopes for the redemption of mankind is that which he himself has created. His notion of Gesamtkunstwerk—“The Great United Art-work, which must gather up each branch of art to use it as a mean [. . .] for the unconditioned, absolute portrayal of perfected human nature” (88)—is well-known. One of the most extreme articulations of aesthetic redemption, the Gesamtkunstwerk envisions a future state of harmony, unity and equality among men heralded by the amalgamation of all of the arts into one form that
will realize “the glory of general Mankind in Art” (184). Wagner explicitly identifies the religious origin of his theory, stating that we must recover the “garment of Religion” that enveloped Hellenic art and extend it to encompass the future religion of “Universal Manhood ['Allgemeinsamkeit'],” of which the artwork of the future is the “living presentation” (“Das Kunstwerk ist die lebendig dargestellte Religion”) (90). Significantly, and in opposition to Schopenhauer (who was interested in transcending life by both aesthetic and religious means), both the artwork and the religion of the future are concerned expressly with revitalizing the conditions of life; Wagner criticizes literature, for instance, for having “cut itself adrift from fair warm Life,” just as he criticizes Christianity for “believ[ing] that it must break away from physical man, to spread in heaven’s boundless aether to freest waywardness” (138). Wagner’s aim in investing art with religious significance again is to restore “the beauteous bond of brotherhood” (166) that he believes was severed when art split into “crippled, self-seeking art-tendencies and art-varieties” (155)—that is, when Greek tragedy became obsolete. What we need to do now is recover the sense of universal fellowship that has been eroded by the evolution of civilization since the collapse of Greek religion and the rite of tragedy: “The period from that point of time down to our own to-day is, therefore, the history of absolute Egoism; and the end of this period will be its redemption ['Erlösung’] into Communism” (166-67).

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32 Nietzsche adopts this religious intention and tone in his own early essay on Wagner (“Richard Wagner in Bayreuth”) published in July 1876, one month before the opening of the Bayreuth Festival. Here Wagner is exalted as the “new bringer of light” (221) to the modern world, the man who has restored to art its “desecrated sanctity ['unentweihte Heiligkeit']” (220).
Wagner’s late essay *Religion and Art* (1880) reveals how the influence of Schopenhauer’s pessimism led Wagner to modify his early utopian theory of art. Rather than championing the fusion of art and religion that was practiced in ancient Greece, as he did in *The Artwork of the Future*, here he focuses on the suitability of art for expressing and advancing the main tenets of Christianity. Wagner praises Christianity and Brahminism as the two “sublimest” religions because they “teach alienation from the world and its passions” (225), while the religion (including its artistic rites) of ancient Greece is now understood as mere “mummery” that attempted to mask, artificially and inadequately, the deplorable state of reality (230). Whereas the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a revitalized version of Greek tragedy, depended on the equal integration of all art forms, now music (as in Schopenhauer) is singled out as the purest form of art because it alone can circumvent phenomena to represent the truth beyond appearances: “[A]s pure Form of a divine content freed from all abstractions, we may regard it as a world-redeeming incarnation of the divine dogma of the nullity of the phenomenal world itself” (223). This declaration that “the nullity of the phenomenal world” is a “world-redeeming” principle is a far cry from Wagner’s earlier claim that the fragmented and egoistic state of the modern world would be redeemed into communism by the artwork of the future. Clearly, Wagner has modified his earlier concern with the conditions of life to suit Schopenhauer’s view that the phenomenal world is essentially null and void.

33 Schopenhauer (whose work Wagner was introduced to in 1854) influenced not only Wagner’s theoretical writings, but the very content and structure of his *Gesamtkunstwerke*. In *The Case of Wagner* (1888), Nietzsche discusses how Schopenhauer’s philosophy caused Wagner to adapt the originally optimistic message of his *Ring* cycle, which conveyed the hope that the destruction of the old would lead to a better future, to conform to pessimism. Once translated into “Schopenhauer’s terms,” *The Ring* depicts how “Everything goes wrong, everything perishes, the new world is as bad as the old: the nothing, the Indian Circe beckons” (164). Of all Wagner’s operas, *Tristan und Isolde* is perhaps most saturated in the Schopenhauerian theme of deliverance from the insatiable will.

34 But he declares Christianity to be the superior of the two, as it is open to all men (*das Volk*) and requires no intellectual knowledge, whereas Brahminism is a religion only accessible to the cultured elite (214).
Unable to wholly give up his former optimism, however, Wagner declares that Schopenhauer’s pessimistic school of thought is the only theory that can “afford us any solid hope” (237); for if humans have degenerated into the lowliest, bloodthirsty beings (as subjects of the will), the future must still hold the possibility for our improvement. In accordance with Schopenhauer, Wagner asserts that moral behaviour is the result of awareness—most often achieved through intense suffering—of the “unity of all that lives” (226). He prophesies that a new redeemer will come in the form of an artist—a “Poet priest [‘dichterische Priester’]” (247)—to reveal to us once again the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and the eternal oneness that transcends it. Wagner does not see his belief in this artist-redeemer as a challenge to the doctrine of Christianity; on the contrary, Jesus is the exemplar of the “Poet priest” who “was ever sent to humankind at epochs of its direst error, as mediating friend” (247). Furthermore, the need for redemption is declared to be the driving force behind both religion and art. Not only are all religions united in “the knowledge, given in infinite variety of forms, of the Need for Redemption” (248-49), but the artistic impulse is merely the expression, sanctified by Christ himself, of the human longing for deliverance from the pain of this world: “The Redeemer himself has bidden us to sound and sing our longing, faith and hope. Its noblest legacy the Christian Church has left us in the all-uttering, all-expressing soul of the Christian religion” (249). Art (expressly music) redeems through expressing the otherwise inexpressible truth that “this insistent World of Will is also but a state that vanishes before the One” (250). Ultimately,
Wagner concludes that art and religion are in fact indivisible, that true art is “altogether one with true religion” (251).

Both Schopenhauer and Wagner, then, emphasize the way in which aesthetic experience can deliver us from worldly suffering through enabling us to momentarily transcend the painful and unsatisfactory conditions of phenomenal existence. For them, it is this world-fleeing function of art that makes aesthetic creation and contemplation such valuable, even essential, human activities. Both thinkers concur that the need to be redeemed from the circumstances of this world is not only the guiding principle of aesthetics but a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Although Wagner’s early theory of redemption through art focuses on the terrestrial nature of the ‘saving’ that art can accomplish (as that which will combat society’s decadence and bring about the creation of a communist utopia) and is therefore more humanly or internally transcendent than Schopenhauer’s, Wagner ultimately succumbs to the allure of Schopenhauer’s otherworldly asceticism and even surpasses Schopenhauer in his unequivocal espousal of the Christian religion. As we will see in chapter two, it is this endorsement of Christian values, and specifically of the need for redemption (“the quintessence of all Christian needs” [The Case of Wagner 191]), that will become the central point of contention between Nietzsche and Wagner (although in his youthful works Nietzsche is far from critical of this line of thought). For late nineteenth-century lovers of beauty less wary of the allure of otherworldly ideals than Nietzsche, however, Wagner’s operas came to epitomize the decadent, ethereal aesthetic they themselves were striving to cultivate.
Aesthetic Asceticism: Overcoming the Creaturely

During his ‘decadent’ phase in the 1880s (preceded by an interest in naturalism and followed by a conversion to Roman Catholicism), Joris-Karl Huysmans expressed profound reverence for both Schopenhauer and Wagner: he later confessed to having “admired [Schopenhauer] more than was reasonable” during this period (“Preface” to Against Nature 186), while his essay “The Overture to Tannhäuser [‘L’Ouverture de Tannhæuser’],” published in La Revue Wagnérienne in 1885, attests to his veneration of the composer. It is not surprising, then, that Huysmans’s 1884 novel À rebours (Against Nature) presents one of the most extreme fin de siècle articulations of the world-rejecting or extrahuman aesthetics of redemption championed by Schopenhauer and Wagner. Huysmans’s protagonist, the decadent aristocrat Des Esseintes, is “a frail young man of thirty, nervous and anaemic [‘un grêle jeune homme de trente ans, anémique et nerveaux’ (2)] (3), whose “contempt [‘mépris’] for humanity” and the modern Americanized way of life prompt him to turn to artifice as a means of fleeing a world he abhors. Des Esseintes experiments with the possibility that art might provide an alternate realm of being in which the self can reign supreme, exercising absolute authority over every aspect of its own existence. He creates a paradis artificiel far from the metropolis, where he refuses all human companionship (except for that of two servants who agree to do their work as inconspicuously as possible) and custom designs every detail of his abode to elicit distinct aesthetic effects. He spends his days in solitary artistic contemplation—reading, looking at art, experimenting with the sensations

36 Consider the final passage of the Tannhäuser essay: “And, trembling and enraptured, you come out of the vulgar hall where the miracle of this essential music has been performed, carrying with you the indelible memory of this overture to Tannhäuser, this prodigious and initial summary of the overwhelming grandeur of its three acts [‘Et tremblant et ravi, l’on sort de la vulgaire salle où le miracle de cette essentielle musique s’est accompli, emportant avec soi l’indelébile souvenir de cette ouverture de Tannhæuser, de ce prodigieux et initial résumé de la babelique grandeur de ses trois actes’ (Croquis Parisiens 170)]” (Parisian Sketches 159).
elicited by synthetically produced tastes and smells. Tired of experiencing disappointment because of the inability of reality to live up to his imagination, Des Esseintes prefers imaginary voyages to real ones: “What was the point of moving, when one could travel so splendidly just sitting in a chair?” (114).37

Des Esseintes’s abhorrence of the outside world stems from his belief that “artifice [is] the distinguishing characteristic of human genius,” whereas “Nature has had her day; she has finally exhausted, through the nauseating uniformity of her landscapes and skies, the sedulous patience of men of refined taste” (20).38 His most radical attempt to subject nature to artifice is (famously) his decision to gild and bejewel a living tortoise in order to “set off the brilliance of [the oriental carpet’s] tones” (35), however the tortoise cannot withstand the weight of its unnaturally embellished shell and soon dies. Like the tortoise, Des Esseintes himself struggles to thrive in this immensely artificial atmosphere, and as the novel progresses he becomes increasingly sicker, increasingly prone to nervous attacks. A moment of triumph for him in his battle against nature, despite the severity of his illness, is when he must be nourished through a peptone enema:

The operation was successful, and Des Esseintes could not forbear from tacitly congratulating himself on the event, which was in a sense the crowning achievement of the life he had created for himself; his predilection for the artificial had now—without his even desiring it—achieved its supreme fulfillment; one could go no further; to take

37 “A quoi bon bouger, quand on peut voyager si magnifiquement sur une chaise?” (209)
38 “[…] la nature a fait son temps, elle a définitivement lassé, par la dégoûtante uniformité de ses paysages et ses ciels, l’attentive patience des raffinés” (35).
nourishment in this manner was unquestionably the ultimate deviation from the norm that anyone could realize. (170-1)\(^{39}\)

With this wholly unnatural method for receiving sustenance, Des Esseintes reaches the absolute height of aberration. But such an existence is not sustainable. A doctor pronounces Des Esseintes’s experiment in artificial living to be a total failure: if he continues living in this way, he will suffer insanity, tuberculosis and a very early death (173). Nature has won the battle, and Des Esseintes must leave his aesthetic retreat and return to live in her domain. At the end of the novel, Des Esseintes abandons his Eden of artifice and returns, begrudgingly, to Paris.

Despite the lack of religious faith attributed to Des Esseintes, his aesthetic retreat is described both at the beginning and at the end of the novel as a vessel of salvation, “a snug, immovable ark where he could take refuge, far from the incessant deluge of human folly [‘une arche immobile et tiède où il se réfugierait loin de l’incessant déluge de la sottise humaine’ (10)]” (7). Unlike the Biblical ark, however, which sheltered Noah, his family and a selection of animals from the flood sent by God to wipe out sinful humanity, Des Esseintes’s “ark” shelters only one individual (a sickly neurotic one at that) and therefore pointedly lacks generative significance. Des Esseintes is anything but a beacon of hope for the future of humanity; while the vulgar Americanization of European society may repulse him, his radical aestheticism is hardly an attempt to transform or regenerate a decadent world. Once Des Esseintes’s experiment has failed, his haven is again metaphorically figured as a ship braving a flood:

\(^{39}\)“L’opération réussit et des Esseintes ne put s’empêcher de s’adresser de tacites félicitations à propos de cet événement qui couronnait, en quelque sorte, l’existence qu’il s’était créée; son penchant vers l’artificiel avait maintenant, et sans même qu’il l’eût voulu, atteint l’exaucement suprême; on n’irait pas plus loin; la nourriture ainsi absorbée était, à coup sûr, la dernière déviation qu’on pût commettre” (318).
Exhausted, Des Esseintes collapsed into a chair. ‘In two days’ time I shall be in Paris,’ he exclaimed; ‘it really is all over; the waters of human mediocrity, like a tidal wave, are rising up to the sky and will engulf this haven whose sea-walls I have with my own hands most unwillingly breached. Ah! My courage fails me and I am sick at heart! Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who longs to believe, on the galley-slave of life who is setting sail alone, at night, under a sky no longer lit, now, by the consoling beacons of the ancient hope! (180-81)\(^{40}\)

The outside world Des Esseintes was so desperate to escape is here characterized as “the waters of human mediocrity,” which have now perforated the walls his aesthetically buffered vessel. Rather than surviving the flood and stepping out into a cleansed, purified world, Des Esseintes must abandon his life raft and brave the still raging torrent alone. Neither Des Esseintes nor God has been able to curb the progressive decay of modern civilization, of which Des Esseintes himself is a product. Because his world-fleeing aestheticism is quite literally toxic to life (to the living organism), if he is not yet ready to face death he has no choice but to give up this contrived existence and return, at least partially, to the world he abhors.

The despairing plea for some form of religious consolation in the above passage (taken from the novel’s last paragraph) anticipates the author’s own eventual conversion to Catholicism. Reflecting back on *Against Nature* twenty years later from the perspective of a devout Catholic, Huysmans confirms Barbey d’Aurevilly’s comment that “‘After such a book, the only thing left

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\(^{40}\) “Des Esseintes tomba, accablé, sur une chaise. —Dans deux jours, je serai à Paris; allons, fit-il, tout est bien fini ; comme un raz de marée, les vagues de la médiocrité humaine montent jusqu’au ciel et elles vont engloutir le refuge dont j’ouvre, malgré moi, les digues. Ah ! le courage me fait défaut et le cœur me lève ! —Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute, de l’incrédule qui voudrait croire, du forçat de la vie qui s’embarque seul, dans la nuit, sous un firmament que n’éclairent plus les consolants fanaux du vieil espoir!’” (337).
for the author is to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross’” (“Preface” to *Against Nature* 197).\(^{41}\) In his subsequent novels *Là-bas* (1891), *En route* (1895), *La cathédrale* (1898), and *L’oblat* (1903), Huysmans tracks the spiritual progress of a semi-autobiographical character (Durtal) who evolves from despair to religious conversion to becoming an oblate, as Huysmans himself did in a Benedictine Abbey in 1901. That Huysmans’s later protagonist, as well as the author himself, ultimately find refuge from worldly suffering through committing to a near-monastic way of life suggests that Des Esseintes’s withdrawal into the aesthetic realm was an inadequate response to a deeper religious yearning for an absolute or cosmic form of salvation—one that Schopenhaurianism, ultimately, could not provide him with. (As Huysmans wrote in his belated Preface to *Against Nature*, Schopenhauer’s philosophy of resignation recognized the symptoms of worldly suffering but did not provide a lasting cure: “The Church […] elucidates origins and cause, points to conclusions, offers remedies […] whereas the German quack, after having proved to you beyond any question that the condition afflicting you is incurable, turns his back on you with a sneer” [187].\(^{42}\) Whether as a Catholic (Durtal) or an aesthete (Des Esseintes), Huysman’s characters find modern existence intolerable, and the uncanny similarity of their ostensibly disparate methods for coping with this fact reveals that art, like religion, can provide a refuge for the weary, a buffered realm in which the individual shelters him or herself from the pain of life.\(^{43}\)

\(^{41}\) “Après un tel livre, il ne reste plus à l’auteur qu’à choisir entre la bouche d’un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix” (xxviii).

\(^{42}\) “[L’]Église […] explique les origines et les causes, signale les fins, présente les remèdes […] alors que le médicastre allemand, après vous avoir bien démontré que l’affection dont vous souffrez est incurable, vous tourne, en ricanant, le dos” (xiii).

\(^{43}\) Both Pater and Wilde subscribed to this monastic view of art at certain points in their lives; Pater suggested that fine art provides “a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world” (“Style” 18), while Wilde
In À rebours, Des Esseintes expresses profound admiration for the decadent depths of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry, for its daring to explore the “morbid depravities [‘maladive dépravation’] and other-worldly aspirations [‘au delà’]” that literature all too often disregards (132). He finds in Baudelaire’s writings both a recognition of the fallenness of the world and a desire to retreat into the aesthetic sphere that mirror his own pessimistic stance. Baudelaire too was a devotee of Schopenhauer and Wagner, and much of his work from the Second Empire period—that is, post Napoleon III’s coup on December 2, 1851, which left Baudelaire “physiquement dépolitiqué” (qtd. in Sanyal 58)—manifests an acute longing to flee the trauma of history via art. Devastated by the outcome of the republican uprisings of 1848, in which he actively participated, Baudelaire thematizes the unbridgeable fissure between the purity of poetic vision and the depravity he observes around him (and within himself) in conspicuously religious terms. The theory of the dandy put forth in “The Painter of Modern Life [‘Le Peintre de la vie modern’]” (1863), for instance, rests on an ascetic-like contempt for the creaturely side of (human) nature that prefigures and most probably inspired the contempt Des Esseintes exhibits toward nature in À rebours.

Baudelaire’s endorsement of “dandyism” (le dandysme) stems from his contention that human beings have an ethical obligation to transform nature or the raw materials of life, which are characterized as inherently corrupt. Baudelaire declares that a false understanding of nature argued that the aesthete’s militant detachment from life renders him impermeable to “the sordid perils of actual existence” (“Critic as Artist” 102).
deriving from eighteenth-century ethics, which considered nature the “basis, source, and prototype of all possible forms of good and beauty” (425), has clouded his generation’s ability to appreciate true beauty. Contrary to these mistaken interpretations of nature as innately good, Baudelaire argues that it is inherently criminal: “[N]ature teaches us nothing or nearly nothing; in other words, it compels man to sleep, drink, eat and to protect himself as best he can against the inclemencies of the weather. . . .[N]ature can do nothing but counsel crime” (425).44

Because we are naturally inclined to behave immorally (“Evil is done without effort, naturally” [426]), virtue must be the product of human intervention, of a rational taming of the creaturely: “It is philosophy (I am referring to the right kind), it is religion that enjoins upon us to succour our poor and enfeebled parents. [. . .] Everything that is beautiful and noble is the product of reason and calculation” (425).45 In pitting nature—“which is nothing but the inner voice of self-interest” (425)—against beauty and morality—which are “the product[s] of art” (426)—Baudelaire suggests that in order to constitute ourselves as moral and beautiful beings we must overcome the inherent wickedness of the world. One of the ways we can transcend our natural state of depravity is through aesthetic activity, through transforming our bodies and the world around us; thus, Baudelaire concludes, “I am led to regard adornment [‘la parure’] as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul” (425-26).46

44 “[L]a nature n’enseigne rien, ou presque rien, c’est-à-dire qu’elle contraint l’homme à dormir, à boire, à manger et à garantir, tant bien que mal, contre les hostilités de l’atmosphère. […] la nature ne peut conseiller que le crime” (715).

45 “C’est la philosophie (je parle de la bonne), c’est la religion qui nous ordonne de nourrir des parents pauvres et infirmes. […] Tout ce qui est et noble est le résultat de la raison et du calcul” (715).

46 We might contrast Baudelaire’s positive evaluation of self-adornment (as a form of this-worldly asceticism by which we ameliorate ourselves morally through the cultivation of physical beauty) with Kafka’s (theoretical but not actual) repudiation of fashionable clothing as that which distracts the artist from “his quest for the absolute” (Anderson Kafka’s Clothes 4). As Mark M. Anderson has persuasively argued, Kafka’s failure to fully transcend “the realm of ‘clothing’” in his writing—associated with both the “temporal order of the body, material existence,
This valorization of “adornment” as an indication that the human has consciously improved upon his natural and rudimentary criminality morally justifies the dandy’s preoccupation with aestheticizing his own existence. As virtue cannot be found in nature, the human cultivation of fashion or adornment testifies to “the taste for the ideal that floats on the surface of the human brain, above all the coarse, earthy and disgusting things that life according to nature accumulates” (426). A dandy is a man who devotes his entire life to realizing an ideal of beauty through his own being, with the objective of “in the end [looking] like his ideal image of himself [‘ce qu’il voudrait être’ (684)]” (391). This task is not merely undertaken on a superficial level: the dandy transfigures physical matter in order to make it correspond to the shape of his noble mind. Or, more precisely, the transfiguration of the external world in effect forms the nobility of his mind, as nobility is not a natural attribute but rather “the product of reason and calculation.” For this reason, the status or title of ‘dandy’ is said to “impl[y] a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of all the moral mechanisms [‘mécanisme moral’ (691)] of this world” (399). To mistake dandyism for “an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance” is to be blind to the fact that the dandy’s inordinately cultivated appearance is the physical manifestation of his virtuous mind or soul. Because of the correspondence Baudelaire draws between humanly cultivated beauty and the nobility of the soul, a dandy’s appearance reflects “the aristocratic superiority of his mind” and his “burning desire to create a personal form of originality [‘le besoin ardent de se faire une originalité’ (710)]” (420), rather than the mere arbitrary stylization of his body. The dandy is not trying to embellish, pretend, or seduce through his appearance; suffering, and death” (5) as well as the fin de siècle culture of ornament (15)—is precisely what determines his “paradigmatic status as a modern writer” (17).
rather, he is intent on cultivating a personal, original self that is as carefully and harmoniously constituted internally as it is externally. Baudelaire describes the dandy’s austere dedication to his aesthetic practice as “Spartan ['Lacédémonien'],” “close to spirituality and to stoicism,” and comparable to “the most rigorous monastic rule” (421). Dandyism, therefore, is clearly conceived of as a rigidly disciplined and explicitly moral practice of taming that which is “criminal” in our nature; it is not, as is often assumed, an immoral project of hedonistic self-indulgence.

Although Huysmans’s and Baudelaire’s experiments in mastering the unruly and offensive elements of their own bodies and the world around them through art are not exactly pious—that is, they are presented as the actions of autonomous individuals rather than servants of a higher power—they nevertheless parallel ascetic rejections of the world in their disdain of and despair at our ‘fallen’ state of nature. Even as they attempt to rival the divine creator in their creation of aesthetic sanctuaries and personal ideals of beauty, they do so without overthrowing the religious practice of evaluating (and disparaging) the world in relation to otherworldly ideals. While their scathing portrayals of social mores open up the possibility of reading their work as a form of political critique,47 the abhorrence Baudelaire and Huysmans express of not only the social but also the natural conditions of life recalls both Weber’s discussion of the ascetic’s attempt to “overcome[e] creatural wickedness in the [his] own nature” and Nussbaum’s characterization of external transcendence as an aversion to certain primary conditions of human life (such as contingency, vulnerability and neediness). Huysmans ultimately renounced the

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47 Walter Benjamin’s influential writings on Baudelaire drew attention to the political dimension of the poet’s portrayal of commodity capitalism in postrevolutionary Paris, and critics such as Ross Chambers (in The Writing of Melancholy) and Debarati Sanyal (in The Violence of Modernity) have further demonstrated the oppositional potency of Baudelaire’s work.
quest for aesthetic redemption, conceding that only the Catholic Church “treats you and cures you” of the “horror of existence” that was first revealed to him by Schopenhauer (“Preface” to Against Nature 186); in Baudelaire’s oeuvre, however, the interrelationship between religious and aesthetic forms of redemption remains far more equivocal. Alongside the ascetic element I have already identified in his theory of the dandy, principles of mysticism permeate Baudelaire’s later essays and poetry. It is to this mystical dimension of Baudelaire’s work that I would like to turn now.

Aesthetic Mysticism: Channelling the Divine

After attending a performance of selections from Wagner’s compositions at the Théâtre-Italien in 1860, Baudelaire wrote an essay in which he describes his experience of listening to Wagner in transcendent terms: he felt “as though transported from the earth […] freed from the constraint of weight,” until eventually achieving “a full apprehension of a soul floating in light, of an ecstasy compounded of joy and insight, hovering above and far removed from the natural world [‘l’idée d’une âme se mouvant dans un milieu lumineux, d’une extase faite de volupté et de connaissance, et planant au-dessus et bien loin du monde naturel’ (785)]” (“Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris” 330-1). For days after the concert, Baudelaire becomes as though possessed by an uncontrollable urge to lose himself once again in “effulgent majesty [‘majesté fulgurante’] of this music” (332); he scours Paris in search of places—whether friends’ parlours or casinos packed with “malodorous crowds [‘cohues malsaines’]”—where he might be able to once again surrender himself to Wagner’s music (333). Baudelaire is irresistibly attracted to the “Eternal [‘l’Éternel’]” element of Wagner’s work (348), to the “ardour of mysticism [‘les ardeurs
de la mysticité’] in Lohengrin and the “two infinities” of the human mind, “heaven and hell,” that are the central leitmotivs of Tannhäuser (342). In this respect, Baudelaire’s praise of Wagner bears conspicuous resemblance to his panegyric on another originally underappreciated artist of the nineteenth century: Edgar Allan Poe.

Studies of l’art pour l’art generally fail to note that one of the seminal figures of aestheticism and decadence, Edgar Allan Poe, actually ascribed a religious function to art—a fact that calls into question the very notion of ‘autonomous art’ that l’art pour l’art purportedly professes. In “The Poetic Principle,” first delivered as a lecture in 1849 then published posthumously in 1850, Poe proclaims the autonomy of art (decrying “the heresy of The Didactic” and defending the “poem written solely for the poem’s sake” [182]) while simultaneously (and perhaps contradictorily) suggesting that poetry should remain in the service of the divine. According to Poe, the task of the poet is to discern the presence of the divine in the sensorial world and to make this presence apprehensible through poetry: the poet “recognises the ambrosia which nourishes his soul” in a variety of different elements (such as “the bright orbs that shine in Heaven […] the song of birds […] the beauty of woman”), and seeks to reveal “Supernal Beauty” through his poetry (197). While Poe is very explicit in his rejection of the notion that poetry must inculcate a moral message (“Unless incidentally, [Poetry] has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth” [185]), he concedes that the “Supernal Beauty” which Poetic Sentiment aims to reveal requires that poetry essentially concern itself with the good. The immoral is aesthetically anathema to poetry; poetry rejects vice “solely on the ground of her deformity—her disproportion—her animosity to the fitting, to the appropriate, to the harmonious—in a word, to Beauty” (183). The aspect of the human being that poetry nourishes or elevates is identified as “the soul,” as distinct from Reason—which is satisfied by truth—and
Passion—which is “the excitement of the heart” (185). This distinction between the passion of the heart and the “pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the soul” demarcates the domain of poetry as spiritual (above and against the sensual passions); the pleasure experienced in “the contemplation of the Beautiful” is not carnal, but rather of “the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense” (185) kind. In keeping with this characterization of the celestial nature of poetic activity, Poe lauds Alfred Tennyson as the “noblest of poets” because the poetical excitement he induces is “at all times, the most ethereal—in other words, the most elevating and the most pure. No poet is so little of the earth, earthly” (197).

Not only does art nurture the higher, more spiritual dimension of human nature, but it also provides us with a momentary glimpse of heavenly harmony: “We are often made to feel with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which cannot have been unfamiliar to the angels” (184). It is Poe’s definition of art as a means of putting us in contact with the divine realm—which is conceived of as wholly foreign and superior to our earthly realm—that marks his aesthetics as world-fleeing:

Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep then [...] through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses. (184)
Like the contemplative mystic who deems “Mystic, orgiastic, and ecstatic experiences” to be modes of redemption (“The Social Psychology of the World Religions” From Max Weber 289), Poe conceives of aesthetic experience as an “ecstatic,” “divine,” and “rapturous” flight from the world, a momentary union with the “Loveliness” and “glories” that await us “beyond the grave,” in “eternity.” Aesthetic contemplation, when formulated in this way, becomes indistinguishable from mystical contemplation: both seek to induce an extraordinary emotional state that breaks the boundaries of the physical world and puts us in contact with the transcendent. Furthermore, both mysticism and Poe’s aesthetics perceive the unity of man with God achieved through contemplation to be the “essential meaning of the world” (The Sociology of Religion 173); the highest point in life is thus figured as the momentary transcendence of life in pursuit of that which lies beyond. Redemption is conceptualized, in both cases, as deliverance from an imperfect world through beholding or resting in the divine.

Baudelaire was profoundly influenced by Poe; he appropriated not only Poe’s argument for the autonomy of art, but also his dubious exemption of religion from the list of “heresies” from which art should free itself. In his essay “Further Notes on Edgar Poe [‘Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe’]” (1857), Baudelaire decries (following Poe) the “heresies” of “didacticism […] passion […] truth and morality” (203), but he (again, following Poe) goes on to ascribe religious significance to poetry and music. Consider the following passage, in which certain phrases are literal word for word translations (although they are not presented as such) of the section from “The Poetic Principle” quoted above:

Our unquenchable thirst for all that lies beyond, and that life reveals, is the liveliest proof of our immortality. It is both by poetry and through poetry, by music and through music, that the soul dimly descries the splendours beyond the tomb; and when an
exquisite poem brings tears to our eyes, those tears are not the proof of overabundant joy: they bear witness rather to an impatient melancholy, a clamant demand by our nerves, our nature, exiled in imperfection, which would fain enter into immediate possession, while still on this earth, of a revealed paradise. (204-5)\textsuperscript{48}

Poetry and music, Baudelaire writes, are the only even remotely effective means of assuaging our “unquenchable thirst for all that lies beyond,” which afflicts us as long as we remain alive, “exiled in imperfection.” Trapped in our conflict-ridden bodies on a conflict-ridden planet, we yearn for the peace and plenitude that only eternal rest in God can bring. Art can reveal to us, albeit “dimly,” the “paradise” that awaits us after death. Baudelaire subscribes so fully to the “element of immortality that Edgar Poe demanded of the muse” (205) that he quotes this and other passages from the Poe essay in his later essay on Théophile Gautier (1859), prefacing the lengthy citation with the assertion that “A man may occasionally, I presume, be allowed to quote from his own writings [`Il est permis quelquefois, je présume, de se citer soi même’ (112)]” (266). In presenting Poe’s theory of the autonomy of art as his own, including this avowal of the otherworldly nature of poetry and music, Baudelaire confirms his commitment to an aesthetic that, despite its professed ‘autonomy,’ continues to collude with religion. This is all the more striking given the fact that Gautier, who remains (notwithstanding the extended quotation from the essay on Poe) the subject of this later essay, makes no such concessions to

\textsuperscript{48} “La soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au delà, et que révèle la vie, est la preuve la plus vivante de notre immortalité. C’est à la fois par la poésie et à travers la poésie, par et à travers la musique que l’âme entrevoit les splendeurs situées derrière le tombeau; et quand un poème exquis amène les larmes au bord des yeux, ces larmes ne sont pas la preuve d’un excès de jouissance, elles sont bien plutôt le témoignage d’une mélancolie irritée, d’une postulation des nerfs, d’une nature exilée dans l’imparfait et qui voudrait s’emparer immédiatement, sur cette terre même, d’une paradis révélé.” (334).
religion in his preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (considered one of the seminal texts of *l’art pour l’art*).

Baudelaire’s comment in “Further Notes on Edgar Poe” that the “immortal, instinctive sense of beauty” awakened by art inclines us to “look upon the spectacle of this world as a glimpse, a correspondence with heaven” (204) appears to be corroborated by the initial poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (first published in 1857). Like Poe’s portrayal of the poet in “The Poetic Principle” as the one who reveals the “Supernal Beauty” in earthly things, the poem “Correspondances” is concerned with evincing the spiritual core of sensuous phenomena. “Correspondances” depicts Nature as a “temple,” a sacred realm of “symboles” through which man wanders. There are no lifeless or spiritless objects in this temple of nature; the pillars are alive (“vivants”), infused with the ability to speak, just as the forests have eyes and are able to regard Man as a fellow creature (“these groves of symbols, each / Of which regards him as a kindred thing [‘des forêts de symboles / Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers’]”). All things are inherently meaningful, although precisely what they mean is not superficially apparent. Because everything in this realm is connected through the synaesthetic law of correspondences—“Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent”—the poet is able to express the supernatural unity of all phenomena through language, by employing the poetic device of analogy or metaphor. Odours have a corresponding texture (“fresh as a baby’s skin [‘frais comme des chairs d’enfants’]”), a sound (“Mellow as oboes [‘Doux comme les hautbois’]”), and a colour (“green as meadow grass [‘verts comme les prairies’]”). What is more, sensorial perception is shown to correlate directly with the spiritual side of man, as these rich scents are described as “Singing the senses’ rapture, and the soul’s [‘chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens’].”
Although this affirmation of the spiritual essence of sensuous phenomena may appear to run counter to the mystic’s aim of “exploding all forms” (“Religious Rejections” 342), it speaks to the central paradox that Weber identifies in mystical flights from the world. As Weber explains, while the mystic conceives of his ultimate goal (union with the divine) as “beyond all empirical reality” (*Sociology of Religion* 173), he is nevertheless bound, as a physical being, to experience the divine through his senses. The “sacred value” for the mystic, thus, is actually “a psychological state in the *here and now*.” Primarily this state consists in the emotional attitude *per se*, which [is] directly called forth by the specifically religious (or magical) act” (“The Social Psychology of the World Religions” *From Max Weber* 278). Mysticism is actually, in this sense, more accepting of worldly experience than asceticism, since it is only through sensuous indulgence that the mystic can experience (‘touch’ or ‘feel’) God. Hence mysticism’s suspicion of asceticism, and vice versa: the mystic views the ascetic’s ethical action in the world as a misguided “externalization of the divine in the direction of some peripheral function,” whereas the ascetic views the mystic’s contemplative flight as “self-indulgence—a wallowing in self-created emotions prompted by the deification of the creaturely” (*Sociology of Religion* 171).

Although Baudelaire’s theories on art are at times more reminiscent of the ascetic’s valorization of willful action (as I pointed out in my discussion of “The Painter of Modern Life”), his logic of *correspondances*, according to which the heavens can be perceived in earthly beauty, is in keeping with the mystic’s tendency to exalt the creaturely as a means of accessing the divine.

The belief that sensuous experience contains spiritual significance, which distinguishes mysticism from asceticism, might also account for the fact that aestheticism, symbolism and decadence flourished particularly well in Catholic cultures such as France and Austro-Hungary. The Neoplatonic tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, with its rituals, sacraments, and ornate
cathedrals, is far more mired in the world of things than ascetic Protestantism, which spurns sensuous indulgence as a pernicious impediment distracting one from the duty to serve God through ethical, rational conduct. As is well known, a number of aesthetes were either devout Catholics or eventual converts to Roman Catholicism, and Protestant aesthetes who never converted to Catholicism (such as Walter Pater) often admired the ritualism and ornate sensuousness of the Church of Rome, which they saw as a gateway to the “supreme tradition of beauty” of ancient Greece (*Renaissance* 120). In Protestant England, as Ellis Hanson points out, Catholicism and the cult of ‘art for art’s sake’ “were often condemned in much the same terms” as proponents of pagan or diabolical sensuality (8). And even Nietzsche, one of the most vehemently anti-Christian voices of the period, had some oblique praise for the Catholic Church: what Luther diagnosed as “the corruption of the papacy” Nietzsche identified as “the triumph of life [….] the great Yes to all high, beautiful, audacious things!” (*Antichrist*, section 61, 654). Nietzsche blamed the Germans not only for impeding “the last great cultural harvest which Europe could still have brought home—that of the Renaissance” (section 61, 653), but also for inventing and imposing the “most unclean kind of Christianity that there is, the most incurable, the most irrefutable: Protestantism” (section 61, 655).

Roman Catholicism, however, is not the only religious culture that fostered the sacralization of art. As Heinz Schlaffer has argued, Pietism—a mystical and anti-intellectual reform movement within Protestantism—also served as particularly fertile soil for the development of Kunstreligion. Schlaffer views the outpouring of creative energy in Germany around 1800 to be the felicitous result of “Pfarrersöhne [the sons of pastors]”49 transposing Pietism’s spoken and

49 All translations from Schlaffer’s book are my own.
written means of expression into non-devotional literature (with the notable exception of Goethe, whose artistic inspiration owes little, if anything, to the Protestant Church [58]). That the subsequent surge in German language literature (around 1900) occurred in Catholic Austro-Hungary, particularly within the Jewish minority populations of Prague and Vienna, is the consequence, Schlaffer argues, of a near-repetition of the fortuitous circumstances that gave rise to Romanticism—namely the “Schwächung der überlieferten Religion [weakening of traditional religion]” coupled with a “quasi-religiöse Begeisterung für die große Werke der Kunst [quasi-religious enthusiasm for great works of art]” (140). Schlaffer stresses the conservative orientation of German-language modernist writers such as Rilke, Hofmannsthal, Borchardt, Thomas Mann, and Kafka, whose work runs counter to the spirit of “fröhlicher Zerstörung [joyful destruction]” that characterizes the modernist movement more broadly (144). While I remain skeptical of Schlaffer’s claim that the transcendent disposition of German Romantic and Postromantic literature is wholly divorced from religious belief (77), reactions (both celebratory and nostalgic) to the attenuation (or, in Schlaffer’s terms, the secular transformation) of the numinous quality of art under modernity are littered throughout the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**The Poet Loses his Halo**

Despite Baudelaire’s apparent agreement with Poe in terms of the spiritual nature of the poet’s task in “Correspondances,” many of his readers, most notably Walter Benjamin, have been wary of interpreting the poem as a straightforward portrayal of the poet as an interpreter or conveyer of correspondences between the supernatural and the natural worlds. In his essay “On Some
Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin speculates about the existence of “a secret architecture in this book [Fleurs du mal],” suggesting that “the cycle of poems that opens the volume probably is devoted to something irretrievably lost” (181). “Correspondances,” then, as the fourth poem of the first section “Spleen et idéal,” becomes an account of or lament for the breakup of divine coherence in nature, rather than an affirmation of spiritual-terrestrial wholeness and the poet’s role in revealing this. For Benjamin, Baudelaire is the poet of modernity par excellence because he bears witness to the breakdown of the “ritual elements” of experience (181) in modern life, what Benjamin phrases alternately as “the disintegration of the aura” (189). Seen in this light, “Correspondances” would seem nostalgically to recall a past in which the principle of poetic metaphor captured the spiritual essence inherent in all phenomena, to gesture back to an “idéal” form of experience that is longer possible in a world consumed by “spleen.”

We might look to Baudelaire’s prose poem “Perte d’auréole” (“Lost Halo”) from Le Speen de Paris (published posthumously in 1869) to corroborate Benjamin’s claim that Baudelaire’s poetry registers a crisis or fundamental shift in the spiritual affiliation of the poet. “Perte d’auréole” suggests that the modern poet has forsaken his divine insignia and will concern himself from now on with purely terrestrial—and indeed explicitly debauched—phenomena. The poem presents a dialogue between a poet and an unknown speaker who come across one another in an unwholesome place (“un mauvais lieu”), most likely a brothel or bar. The unknown speaker expresses surprise at seeing a poet, one who consumes the sustenance of the gods (“vous, le buveur de quintessences! vous, le mangeur d’ambroisie!”) in such a debased locale. Baudelaire’s depiction of the poet as an ‘ambrosia eater’ directly recalls Poe’s portrayal of the poet as one who “recognises the ambrosia which nourishes his soul.” Baudelaire’s poet, however, goes on to narrate how he just lost his “auréole” while crossing a street in the modern,
chaotic metropolis, and how his fear of being killed by the onslaught of traffic (“des chevaux et des voitures”) prevented him from returning to retrieve it. Far from lamenting the loss of his celestial status, the poet relishes his newfound freedom, which will permit him to indulge in the baser sensual delights that earthly existence has to offer: “Now I can stroll about incognito, do mean things, launch into debauches, like ordinary mortals [‘Je puis maintenant me promener incognito, faire des actions basses, et me livrer à la crapule, comme les simples mortels’].” The poet indicates that in losing his halo, in relinquishing his bond with (and subjection to) God, he is also renouncing his obligation to concern himself with “la dignité”—a fact which suggests that the poet only concerned himself with lofty or noble sentiments out of subservience to the will of the divine, not because he necessarily had any innate inclination for the good.

Unlike “Correspondances,” then, in which indulgence in the senses was depicted as having a corresponding spiritual resonance, “Perte d’auréole” places sensual delight in opposition to the dignified task of the celestial poet. We might explain the poet’s shift in allegiance as a reversal from an aesthetic that parallels the mystical aspiration to unite with the divine through contemplation, to an aesthetic that affirms, albeit vexedly, what Weber calls the “diabolical nature of art.” 50 This equivocation in regards to the divine or demonic orientation of the poet is a central concern of Baudelaire’s poetry—however as T. S. Eliot pointed out, it is only within a Christian context that diabolical debauchery (as a form of rebellion against God) becomes meaningful: “Satanism […] was an attempt to get into Christianity by the back door. Genuine blasphemy […] is a way of affirming belief” (“Baudelaire” 421). Although poetry is stripped of its celestial resonance in “Perte d’auréole,” we might view the debauched intoxication it is now

50 In his essay “Théodore de Banville” (1861), Baudelaire himself expresses the view that “l’art moderne a une tendance essentiellement démoniaque [modern art has an essentially demonic tendency]” (168).
aligned with as a parallel means of extracting oneself from everyday life: it serves as a kind of reverse transcendence, a flight from the world towards hell, rather than heaven. As Jonathan Culler has noted, this diabolical dimension of Baudelaire’s poetry, its stubborn preoccupation with demons and Satan, is considered “the very antithesis of Baudelaire’s modernity” and therefore tends to be “pass[ed] over […] in silence” by contemporary critics (“Baudelaire’s Satanic Verses” 86).

Baudelaire was certainly not the only modern writer to gesture towards a perceived collapse of spiritual unity in experience and art; “Ein Brief” or “Chandos-Brief” (first published in 1902) by the Austrian poet, playwright and essayist Hugo von Hofmannsthal in many ways epitomizes the crisis of meaning that engulfed a great number of artists and thinkers at the fin de siècle. “Ein Brief” is an epistolary prose piece—professedly written by a young seventeenth-century poet (Lord Philipp Chandos) to the English philosopher Francis Bacon 51—that shows a writer undergoing an artistic and existential crisis reminiscent of Benjamin’s description of the “disintegration of the aura” in modernity. Hofmannsthal’s portrayal of a young poet’s grief at the disappearance of the numinous dimension of poetic language suggests that he himself may have harboured mixed feelings about the poet’s “loss of a halo” in the modern world.

Lord Chandos recalls his earlier days of poetic productivity, describing how an overwhelming sense of the concord between the material and spiritual worlds nourished his poetry:

51 Jacque Le Rider has suggested that addressing the Chandos Letter to the founder of English empiricism highlights the story’s “general theme of the crisis of identity in an ego undermined by an empiricist-type critique which reduced subjectivity to a series of perceptions” (49). He interprets “Ein Brief” as Hofmannsthal’s reaction to Ernst Mach’s reduction of “the ego and the world to ‘complexes of sensations’” (42).
I lived at that time in a kind of continuous inebriation and saw all of existence as one
great unity. The mental world did not seem to me to be opposed to the physical; likewise
the courtly and the bestial, art and barbarism, solitude and society [. . . .] At other times I
had the intuition that everything was symbolism and every creature a key to all the
others, and I felt I was surely the one who could take hold of each in turn and unlock as
many of the others as would open. (120)\textsuperscript{52}

Chandos’s invocation of the logic of “Gleichnis” (which could be also be translated as
“allegory” or “parable”), according to which all things resemble each other in possessing a
deeper signification that can be unlocked or opened by the poet, echoes Baudelaire’s appeal to
the \textit{correspondances} in Nature’s temple and Poe’s claim that the poet “recognises the ambrosia
which nourishes his soul” in disparate phenomena. The young poet articulates a distinctly
mystical understanding of poetic activity, which involves feelings of ecstasy or intoxication
(“Trunkenheit”), a sense of unity (“Einheit”), and the tendency to “deif[y] the creaturely” that
Weber identified with mysticism (in Chandos’s conviction that all physical things possess
spiritual significance).

This sense of the inherent meaningfulness and connectedness of all things, however, is precisely
what Lord Chandos loses. He summarizes his crisis thus: “In brief, this is my case: I have

\textsuperscript{52} “Mir erschien damals in einer Art von andauernder Trunkenheit das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit: geistige
und körperliche Welt schien mir keinen Gegensatz zu bilden, ebensowenig höfisches und tierischen Wesen, Kunst
und Unkunst, Einsamkeit und Gesellschaft [. . . .] Oder es ahnte mir, alles wäre Gleichnis und jede Kreatur ein
Schlüssel der andern, und ich fühlte mich wohl den, der imstande wäre, eine nach der andern bei der Krone zu
packen und mit ihr so viele der andern aufzusperren, als sie aufsperren könnte” (340-41).
completely lost all the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all” (121). As a poet, of course, Chandos is devastated by his sudden inability to string words together or to employ them as comprehensible referents to extra-linguistic things. It is particularly the abstract or highly conceptual words like “Geist,” “Seele,” and “Körper” (“spirit,” “soul,” and “body”) that become not only incomprehensible but also utterly unpalatable to him: they “disintegrated in my mouth like rotten mushrooms ([‘zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze’ [342]])” (121). Chandos is not at all hopeful that he will recover from this peculiar form of aphasia (he ends his letter by confirming that he will never write again), but he does gesture towards the possibility that another, perhaps even more intense feeling of unity with the world can be experienced by circumventing language. Chandos describes how, since his crisis, he has repeatedly experienced moments of intense plenitude, during which mundane objects appear suddenly to be filled “with a swelling tide of higher life [‘mit einer überschwellenden Flut höheren Lebens’ (343)]” (123); he describes this event in religious terms, as a “revelation [‘Offenbarung’ (343)]” (123), while also stressing the fact that language is not capable of adequately expressing what he has felt. He tries several times to articulate these moments of revelatory wholeness in ways that emphasize their super-linguistic nature, suggesting that they require us “to think with our hearts [‘mit dem Herzen zu Denken’ (346)]” (125), and alternately that they involve “thinking in a medium more direct, fluid, and passionate than words [‘Denken in einem Material, das unmittelbarer, flüssiger, glühender ist als Worte’ (348)]” (127). He repeatedly invokes the sense that he is in contact with something beyond the phenomenal world through employing expressions such as “rising tide of heavenly feeling [‘steigenden Flut

53 “Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dies: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen” (341).
göttlichen Gefühles’ (343)” (123), and “presence of the infinite [‘Gegenwart des Unendlichen’ (345)]” (124). What comes across from his various attempts to express the content of these experiences is that they are both intensely aesthetic—that is, they are moments in which his faculty for sensory perception seems greatly heightened—and intensely spiritual.

Chandos’s letter seems to suggest, ultimately, that it is only through unmediated moments of sensorial contemplation that the one-time poet is able to access the mystical sense of wholeness and infinitude that both unites and transcends the sensuous world. Jacques Le Rider has described Chandos’s revelation as a “mystical experience of immanence” (50), however I would stress that Hofmannsthal’s use of religious terminology suggests that these moments of ecstasy contain a transcendent element as well. The ‘immanent’ element of Chandos’s experience is a corollary of mystical experience itself, of the paradoxical fact that, as bodily creatures, we can only experience the transcendent through our senses. For Le Rider, Chandos’s turn to mysticism represents an attempt to reconstitute the “‘deconstructed’ ego” that has been “broken down into complexes of sensations” by empiricism (49); what I am trying to emphasize here, though, is the fact that it is the precipitous failure of art to serve as a means of mystical redemption that occasions Chandos’s appeal to these new, supralinguistic modes of experience. Rather than abandoning the pursuit of mystical oneness, Chandos abandons poetry, since its instrument (language) has been stripped of the ability to convey and connect the erstwhile poet with a unity that lies beyond the phenomenal world.
Chandos has lost his faith in language as Logos, as a revelation of divine order; he no longer perceives a correspondence between words and the Word. While direct aesthetic (as in sensorial) experience remains a vehicle, perhaps the *only* vehicle, for the perception of spiritual depth, the poet—and potentially all other artists, as art cannot but act as a mediator or filter that is once removed from direct experience—is now expressly excluded from this revelatory event. Far from embracing the “diabolical nature of art,” the fact that aesthetic experience resembles other forms of inner-worldly irrationality (as Baudelaire does in “Perte d’auréole”), Chandos renounces writing in favour of a purer, more direct means of accessing what Weber refers to as the mystical “All-oneness.” Unlike the other texts I have examined in this chapter, which characterize art as a vehicle for transcending an impure and finite world, “Ein Brief” portrays art, specifically poetry, as a spiritually bankrupt form of expression that inhibits rather than enables transcendence. Notably, Chandos’s epiphany in regards to the metaphysical nullity of art approximates Nietzsche and Weber’s claim that art is inherently hostile to religiously transcendent principles; however, in Chandos’s case, this realization leads to the exact opposite verdict. Rather than continuing to write in celebration of human autonomy and the newfound relativity of experience, Chandos chooses to fall silent. Poetry divested of its numinous dimension is—for Chandos—hollow. That Hofmannsthal himself renounced the writing of poetry around the time he wrote “Ein Brief” (1902), turning instead to drama and eventually to

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54 Although she does not refer to it, the Chandos letter illustrates precisely the transition from a theological to a secular or autonomous understanding of language that Linda Dowling traces in her book *Language and Decadence in the Victorian fin de siècle.*
opera, has led many to assume that Lord Chandos’s disillusionment with the transcendent capacity of poetic language mirrored the writer’s own.  

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This chapter has explored how art—because of its ambiguously transcendent status—can be positioned against the world (as a higher, more desirable alternative to life) in a way that parallels the ascetic and mystical modes of world rejection Max Weber identifies in salvation religions. I have suggested that the aesthetic philosophies of life underpinned by such world-rejecting notions of art are motivated by a desire to eradicate certain ineradicable conditions of human existence (such as mortality, vulnerability and neediness) and thereby exemplify the extrahuman form of transcendence theorized (and criticized) by Martha Nussbaum. As we will see in subsequent chapters, however, the transcendent dimension of art can also lead to the formulation of aesthetic worldviews that celebrate and enrich life in what Nussbaum calls internally transcendent terms, by attuning us to the complexity of the world and modeling the kind of transformative impact we can have on the world through our presence and our actions. Internal transcendence, according to Nussbaum, involves “a delicate and always flexible balancing act between the claims of excellence, which lead us to push outward, and the necessity of the human context, which pushes us back in” (“Transcending Humanity” 381). Maintaining this balance is not an easy task—which may account for the fact that the aspirations to internal transcendence that I explore in the work of Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde yield, at times, to the siren call of otherworldly ideals. The following three chapters consider aesthetic approaches to life that strive to counter religious suspicion of and hostility towards the sensuous

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55 Critics have also suggested that the character of Lord Chandos was modeled on Hofmannsthal’s close friend Leopold Andrian, who gave up creative writing after the publication, in 1895, of his novel Der Garten der Erkenntnis (Klieneberger 102).
world—the world of the here and now. Their many pitfalls and shortcomings demonstrate how truly difficult it is for art—for any system of values, in fact—to wrest itself from the allure, and the remnants, of the absolute.
A lexical search of Nietzsche’s complete works\(^56\) reveals that the word *Erlösung* (redemption), or one of its grammatical variants (*erlösen, erlöst, Erlösungsbedürfnis* etc.), appears a total of 541 times.\(^57\) While the term occurs most frequently in later texts and fragments (particularly those of 1887 and 1888), it makes an appearance as early as 1870. The stark changes in the context in which the term is used and the connotative value ascribed to it are telling. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), redemption is identified, in laudatory terms, with the Apollonian illusion or appearance (*Schein*) that veils the “eternally suffering and contradictory” nature of the Dionysian substratum and thereby makes life bearable, even pleasurable (section 4, 45).\(^58\) By the time we get to *The Case of Wagner* (1888), however, the need for redemption is denounced as “the most honest expression of decadence,” as that which has sprung from the “morbid” soil of “Christian value concepts” and therefore “impoverishes, pales and makes uglier the value of things” (“Epilogue” 190-91). What aspects of Nietzsche’s thought have altered so dramatically that redemption has evolved from a vital necessity to a symptom of

\(^{56}\) *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari and Paolo D’Iorio.

\(^{57}\) A search for (possible) synonyms such as *Heil* (salvation), which occurs 187 times, or *Rettung* (rescue), which occurs 27 times, does not produce such clearly relevant results, as these terms are often employed in a non-religious sense (*Heil* can mean “Hail,” for instance, and *heil* can mean “intact” or “healed”). While the term *Erlösung* also possesses non-religious meanings (such as “relief” or “release”), Nietzsche uses it quite consistently, particularly in his later work, to refer to Christian redemption.

\(^{58}\) Nietzsche often, in his early work, employs the phrase “Erlösung durch den Schein” or “Erlösung im Scheine.” See, for instance, *Birth of Tragedy*, sections 4, 5, 8, 12, and 16; *Socrates and Greek Tragedy*, section 1.
disease and decline? And how are we to reconcile the *Erlösung* purportedly accomplished by Apollonian art with the morbid yearning for *Erlösung* experienced by the religious decadent?

Despite the pejorative meaning attributed to *Erlösung* in most of his later work, Nietzsche’s condemnation of the concept of redemption is not invariable. Unlike the phrase “*Heil der Seele* ['salvation of the soul’],” which is deprecated without exception and appears most often within quotation marks, there are significant passages in which the term *Erlösung* is ‘redeemed,’ as it were, from its Christian (and, for Nietzsche, world-negating) sense and appropriated as an aspiration of Nietzsche’s own very anti-Christian (world-affirming) philosophy. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), for instance, Zarathustra says of priests (whom he depicts as miserable, black clad corpses): “Would that someone would yet redeem them from their Redeemer! [‘Ach dass Einer sie noch von ihrem Erlöser erlöst!’]” (Part II “On Priests” 203). This call to “redeem [the priests] from their Redeemer,” however much in jest, suggests a commitment on Nietzsche’s part to salvaging the notion of redemption from its entanglement with other Christian concepts such as God, the afterlife, sin, and divine judgment; “*Heil der Seele,*” in contrast, is inseparable from the belief in an immortal soul and is therefore immune to attempts at secularization. One of the most notable passages in this regard is the section from *Zarathustra* entitled “On Redemption [‘Von der Erlösung’],” in which Zarathustra famously proclaims: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone

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59 Much has been written on Zarathustra as Redeemer, and the eternal recurrence and the Übermensch as doctrines of redemption. See, for example, the fifth chapter (“Zarathustra’s descent: a teaching of redemption”) of Keith Ansell-Pearson’s *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau*, Lawrence J. Hatab’s *Nietzsche and Eternal Recurrence: The Redemption of Time and Becoming*, H. Kiowoski’s “Das Problem der Erlösung: Schopenhauers Reduktion und Nietzsches Invokation des Willens,” Christian Koecke’s *Zeit des Ressentiments, Zeit der Erlösung*, and Paul Valadier’s “Dionysus versus the Crucified” in *The New Nietzsche*.

60 The phrase is echoed in the Postscript to *The Case of Wagner* (1888), in which Nietzsche relates how the inscription on Wagner’s funeral wreath, “Redemption for the redeemer! [‘Erlösung dem Erlöser!’],” was altered by some to read “Redemption *from* the redeemer! [‘Erlösung *vom* Erlöser!’]” (182).
should I call redemption! [‘Die Vergangnen zu erlösen und alles „Es war“ umzuschaffen in ein „So wollte ich es!“ –dass hiesse mir erst Erlösung!’]” (Part II “On Redemption” 251). According to Zarathustra’s doctrine, an individual capable of adopting a wholly affirmative attitude towards time, capable of willing (rather than repenting for or resenting) all past, present and future occurrences, would be considered ‘redeemed.’ In this chapter, my aim will be to show how the act of artistic creation, as it is defined in Nietzsche’s work, places the artist precisely in this ‘redeemed’ position in relation to the conditions of this world. Nietzsche’s philosophy of art—or, more precisely, his philosophy of the artist—can be understood as a formula for temporal and autonomous redemption.

A number of studies have dealt with the issues of art and redemption—some separately, some in conjunction—in Nietzsche’s philosophy. While there is no dearth of books devoted to highlighting the religious dimension of Nietzsche’s thought,⁶¹ the most sustained study of soteriology in Nietzsche’s work is Giles Fraser’s Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief. Fraser convincingly argues that Nietzsche’s entire oeuvre can be read as “a series of experiments in redemption” (2), although he limits his analysis of salvation as art to The Birth of Tragedy—which is typical of studies that address the redemptive aspect of Nietzsche’s aesthetics. Much has also been written on the art of self-fashioning in Nietzsche, epitomized by his call in The Gay Science to “‘give style’ to one’s character” and to make of oneself a work of

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⁶¹ Recent theological interventions in Nietzsche criticism include Bruce Ellis Benson’s Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith, Eugen Biser’s Nietzsche: Zerstörer oder Erneurer des Christentums?, David Dean’s Nietzsche and Theology: Nietzschean thought in Christological anthropology, Craig Hovey’s Nietzsche and Theology, and Nietzsche im Christentum: Theologische Perspektiven nach Nietzsches Proklamation des Todes Gottes (Eds. Daniel Mourkojannis and Rüdiger Schmidt-Grépály).
art (section 290, 232); these studies, however, tend to focus more on problems of subject formation and identity rather than aesthetics proper. Julian Young’s influential book *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art* extends the analysis of Nietzsche’s aesthetics across the philosopher’s entire career (which he separates into four periods) and contends that Nietzsche’s final writings return to the Schopenhauerian pessimism and the depiction of art as a refuge of lies that is presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*. As will become clear, I do not share the view that Nietzsche’s late philosophy of art represents a full-circle return to his earlier pessimism, nor do I agree with the claim that Nietzsche’s early conviction about the fundamental untruthfulness of artistic activity is fully reinstated. While I will touch on many of the issues raised in these previous works, my focus here will be to illustrate how the vital function Nietzsche attributes to art in both his first and last writings represents an attempt to bypass the otherworldly nature of religious notions of redemption and to redefine redemption as an earthly phenomenon. Despite his late denunciation of the need for redemption and the significant differences between the aesthetic theories espoused in *The Birth of Tragedy* and his final works, I would like to suggest that the Apollonian principle of formation and demarcation serves, in both instances, as the mechanism enabling Nietzsche to conceive of and endorse a certain kind of non-metaphysical, non-moral, and non-eschatological salvation.

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62 Alexander Nehamas’s important contribution *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* would largely fall under this category. See also, for instance, Andrew Bowie’s *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, and Michael Ure’s *Nietzsche’s Therapy: Self-cultivation in the Middle Works*.

63 Young’s thesis has become more or less standard in subsequent (English) studies on Nietzsche’s aesthetics, as can be seen in Aaron Ridley’s assertion that Nietzsche’s late writings on art yield to the temptation of endorsing “the artist’s need for the discharge of ‘strength’, with or without honesty” (*Nietzsche on Art* 122), and Philip Pothen’s claim that there is a consistent thread throughout Nietzsche’s oeuvre that treats art as “an endeavour corrupted by deception, decadence and the reactive standpoint” (*Nietzsche and the Fate of Art* 8).
Redemption through Illusion: *The Birth of Tragedy*

In his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which is heavily indebted to Wagner’s notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Schopenhauer’s distinction between the realm of the will and the *principium individuationis*, Nietzsche puts forth the radical and much discussed thesis that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that the world is eternally justified [‘denn nur als aesthetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt’]” (section 5, 52). Art, he declares, comprises the dialectical tension of Apollonian “*dreams [Traum]*” and Dionysian “*intoxication [Rausch]*” (section 1, 33). These two forces are said to be in continuous and creative combat in nature as well as in art: the individuating, form-giving force of Apollo endlessly constructs images or figures out of the chaotic, amoral and primal unity of the Dionysian. The Dionysian element, a principle of irrationality and destruction, represents a stark departure from contemporary conceptions of Greek culture; nineteenth-century Hellenism was still dominated by the idealistic view, espoused by Winckelmann and embraced by Goethe, that classical art was characterized by “a noble simplicity and a calm greatness” (Winckelmann 42). Unlike Winckelmann, who had seen the consummation of the Hellenic ideal of beauty in (the Apollonian art of) Greek sculpture, Nietzsche extolls Greek tragedy (pre-Euripides) as the exemplary embodiment of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality: the actors, images and poetry give form to the Dionysian force expressed by the Satyr chorus (section 7, 59). Witnessing the aesthetic distillation of these two poles in tragedy is said to provide the spectator with the “*metaphysical comfort [‘metaphysische Trost’] . . . that life is at the bottom of things, despite all"

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64 The correspondence between the Apollonian and the *principium individuationis*, and the Dionysian and the will, is unmistakable. Nietzsche designates Apollo the “glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*” (36), while Dionysus is characterized as that which “seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness” (38).
the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (section 7, 59). Nietzsche suggests that the Dionysian is metaphysical in origin (in correspondence with Schopenhauer’s understanding of the metaphysicality of the will), whereas the Apollonian principle (like the *principium individuationis*) is a product of the phenomenal world: the Dionysian is “the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomena into existence,” while the Apollonian is the “new transfiguring illusion [‘Verklärungsschein’]” emerging “in the midst of this world” because of the need to disguise the terrifying dissonance at the centre of all things (section 25, 143). In identifying the forces that created the world as the very same tensions that comprise the work of art, Nietzsche not only aestheticizes the natural and supernatural world, but he imbues artistic activity with metaphysical significance. Indeed, as he states in the “Preface to Richard Wagner” (written in 1871), he takes art to be “the truly *metaphysical* activity of this life” (31-32). 65

Nietzsche’s contention that life is an aesthetic phenomenon presumes, of course, an original artistic creator. 66 Regardless of the ambiguity surrounding the nature of this creative force, the artist-god is attributed human qualities throughout the text, referred to as the “sole author and

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65 The metaphysical significance attributed to the act of artistic creation here calls to mind Mircea Eliade’s notion of the “transformation of chaos into cosmos” (10) that is celebrated by primitive religions through repeated rites of construction and creation. According to Eliade, every primitive rite “repeats the preeminent cosmogonic act, the Creation of the world” (18), thereby periodically abolishing historical or profane time (along with the suffering and weariness that man has inevitably accumulated during this time) and reestablishing sacred or mythical time (in which man is purified and figuratively reborn so that he can begin, unburdened, to live again) (57). Similarly, the rite of tragedy evokes and repeats the initial creation of the world by the artist-god, thus breaking the spell of historical time (characterized by the illusion of the *principium individuationis*) and reconnecting us with the mystical oneness from which we are said to have sprung. Nietzsche’s later philosophy of eternal recurrence will preclude this restorative aspect of art because it denies that becoming has any beginning or end (and hence art cannot reproduce any initial act of creation), but in *The Birth of Tragedy* this notion of primordial repetition is central to the mechanism of aesthetic redemption.

66 Nietzsche will later, in the 1886 preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, describe this creator as a “reckless and amoral artist-god” (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” section 5, 22).
spectator” (section 5, 52) of this world, a being who creates as part of an “artistic game” that he plays with himself out of sheer pleasure (section 24, 141). This “sole author and spectator” is also, of course, a deity in the sense that he is external and prior to the world and infinitely more powerful than us; however, his godly nature is expressly non-Christian in that he embodies amorality rather than absolute goodness. Besides his immense powers, this artist-god is far more human—and therefore far more like the gods of ancient Greece, in whom “all things, whether good or evil, are deified” (section 3, 41)—in his attributes and behaviour than the god of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Whereas the force behind the artistic inception of the world is humanized according to this creation narrative, human beings themselves are objectified: we become nothing more than art objects, mere “images and artistic projections for the true author” (section 5, 52). As works of art, our lives are incapable of possessing any value higher than the purely aesthetic (despite all of our efforts and assertions to the contrary); like “soldiers painted on canvas” (section 5, 52) who possess no notion of the significance of the battle scene in which the painter has chosen to place them, we are unable to fully perceive our heteronomous status as art objects in a world of phenomena created at the whim of some unknowable, metaphysical artist.

If our world, ourselves, even our suffering, can never possess any value other than the aesthetic—a value which we cannot even enjoy because we are trapped inside the work of art and are therefore unable to contemplate it in its totality—how is it that the creation and contemplation of art can make life worth living for us? Essentially, there are two distinct dimensions to the redemptive capacity of art in *The Birth of Tragedy*—a fact which is often
obscured in the secondary literature: one is explicitly metaphysical (in that it incorporates the beyond or the transcendent), while the other remains within the bounds of the phenomenal world. The first and most commonly commented upon is the rapturous or intoxicating experience of Dionysian ecstasy: art puts us in contact with the primal and eternal unity of all that exists, breaking the spell of the *principium individuationis* and conjuring the “augury [‘Ahnung’] of a restored oneness” (section 10, 74). This aspect of aesthetic experience is intensely religious (Nietzsche even refers to it as “the *mystery doctrine of tragedy* ['die Mysterienlehre der Tragödie']” (section 10, 74), calling to mind the mystic who, through various practices and rituals, strives to achieve oneness with God. Aesthetic pleasure is explained as the “primordial joy experienced even in pain” which can be aroused by dissonant music and tragic myths that reveal how “even the ugly and disharmonic are part of an artistic game that the will in the eternal amplitude of its pleasure plays with itself” (section 24, 141). Dionysian experience redeems us by connecting us to the beyond, restoring to us the “mystical feeling of oneness” (section 2, 38) that we are incapable of perceiving as long as we remain mired in the phenomenal (illusory) world of things; it momentarily abolishes our (and the world’s) status as art objects and gathers us back into the mind of the creative genius from which we originally sprung.

Rather than making our lives worth living, however, this metaphysical or Dionysian element in

67 Perhaps because of the significance of Dionysus in Nietzsche’s later philosophy, most critics tend to focus on the Dionysian aspect of the equation. While Julian Young is right to go against this trend and identify two “solutions” to the problems of life in *Birth of Tragedy* (Apollonian illusion and Dionysian intoxication), he suggests not only that Nietzsche “favors the Dionysian solution” (45), but that both solutions represent “a flight from, a ‘denial’ of human life” (27). I would like to suggest that Apollonian illusion presents far less of a “flight” from human life than Dionysian intoxication does.

68 In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James identifies the “overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute” as “the great mystic achievement” that is “hardly altered by differences of clime or creed” (419).
aesthetic experience in fact works against the will to live and, if left unchecked by Apollonian resistance—the second redemptive dimension in Nietzsche’s theory of art—would culminate in the renunciation of this world.69 Nietzsche clearly articulates the “ascetic, will-negating mood” induced by Dionysian experience in his comparison of Hamlet and the Dionysian man (section 7, 60). Hamlet’s inaction, he claims, is the result of his having peered into the abyss and seen the tragic “essence of things,” which produces nausea towards life and “inhibits action” (section 7, 60). Action, Nietzsche writes, “requires the veils of illusion”; this is where the phenomenal element in art, the Apollonian, comes in as a “saving sorceress [. . .] to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror and absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live” (section 7, 60). Nietzsche also gestures toward the world-negating character of the Dionysian when he describes the anticipated effect that Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde would have on a spectator deprived of the Apollonian aspects of performance (images and words) and left solely with the music, with his ear put up directly against “the heart chamber of the world will” (section 21, 127). Such an event would so overpower the individual that he would “inexorably fle[e] toward his primordial home [‘Urheimat’], as he hears this shepherd’s dance of metaphysics” (section 21, 127). The Dionysian, like a “hollow sigh from the core of being,” lures us away from life, leaving us “breathless” and with “little remain[ing] to tie us to our present existence” (section 21, 127). We can only be resuscitated or restored to life by the “healing balm of blissful illusion [‘dem Heilbalsam einer wonnevollen Täuschung’]” (section 21, 127), which “tears us out of the Dionysian universality and lets us find delight in individuals” (section 21, 128).

69 As discussed in Chapter 1, it is precisely this world-fleeing (ascetic or mystical) aspect of art that makes aesthetic experience so valuable for Schopenhauer.
The world-redeeming thrust of the Apollonian, then, works directly against the mystical pull of the Dionysian to bring us back to the phenomenal world and to make life (at least appear to be) worth living. Its aim, expressly, is to “deliver [‘entlasten’] us from the Dionysian flood and excess” (section 21, 129) through beautiful appearances. Although Nietzsche at times writes more euphorically about the Dionysian element in art (and specifically about music as the Dionysian art par excellence), his exaltation of Wagner as a composer not of absolute music but of Gesamtkunstwerke—which represent the rebirth of the multifaceted art of Greek tragedy—marks the Apollonian as just as essential to the ideal work of art as the Dionysian. The Apollonian provides an element of aesthetic pleasure distinct from Dionysian primal joy in that it “satisfies our sense of beauty” through creating order and form out of chaos (section 21, 128). It is this veil of beauty that permits us, even inspires us, to live despite the terrifying dissonance of which life is constituted at the most profound level. In the figure of Apollo, Nietzsche subsumes “all those countless illusions of the beauty of mere appearance [‘Illusionen des schönen Scheins’] that at every moment make life worth living at all and prompt the desire to live on in order to experience the next moment” (section 25, 143).

This is where, I would argue, Nietzsche’s theory of art diverts from Schopenhauer’s in a significant way. For Nietzsche, there is no truth-value in the Apollonian element of art, while for Schopenhauer even the non-musical arts are conveyors of truth in that they present us with the Platonic Ideas (immediate objectifications of the will). In fact, the Apollonian is valuable for Nietzsche precisely because it has the power to dissimulate, to mask the insufferable truth of

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70 Gilles Fraser also recognizes that “Apollo becomes the saving agency” in The Birth of Tragedy (68), although he does not comment on the significance of the Apollonian principle as a redemptive mechanism in Nietzsche’s later work; he argues instead that Nietzsche unreservedly “drop[s] Apollo” after his first book (69).
primal dissonance, not because it intimates it. Not only is there nothing truthful in the Apollonian, but there is nothing transcendent in it either: it consists entirely of Schein, of appearance, surface. The Apollonian is the *principium individuationis*, whereas for Schopenhauer all art (even the plastic arts) transcends this principle to reveal either the Platonic Ideas or the will itself. That aesthetic experience is *not* analogous to ascetic experience for Nietzsche, as it was for Schopenhauer, is a consequence of the work of Apollo. In Nietzsche’s dialectical formulation, art must simultaneously reveal metaphysical truth and beguile us back to life with the illusion of beauty. While the “metaphysical comfort” provided by the Dionysian may tempt us to renounce this world, Apollonian beauty entices us to continue living in it. It is the Apollonian principle, then, and not the Dionysian, that puts art in the service of life and most clearly gestures towards the life-affirming momentum of Nietzsche’s subsequent work.

It may be argued that the redemptive capacity of the Apollonian is undercut by the fact that it is dependent on mendacity, since delusion and deception are proposed as remedies for the pain of living. That Apollonian redemption embraces falsehood is indisputable; however, when we examine this in the context of Nietzsche’s narrative of the creation of the world, it becomes clear that the Apollonian ‘saves’ the world the only way the world can be saved—that is, in accordance with the terms of phenomenal existence. The Dionysian, if we remember, is considered external and prior to our world as “the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomena into existence,” while the “transfiguring illusion” of Apollo develops later, within the bounds of this world, “in order to keep the animated world of

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71 Nietzsche writes: “In fact, we might say of Apollo that in him the unshaken faith in this *principium individuationis* and the calm repose of the man wrapped up in it receive their most sublime expression; and we might call Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of ‘illusion,’ together with its beauty, speak to us” (section 1, 36).
individuation alive” (section 25, 143). Illusion (Schein) is identified, then, as the very thing that makes life possible and sustainable; if illusion is not in fact synonymous with life, it is at least indivisible from it. Stripped of Apollonian illusion, the individual would, quite literally, cease to live—Nietzsche employs the metaphor of breathlessness (athmenlos, verathmen) when describing the effect that Dionysian experience has on us (section 21, 127), as if it deprived us of oxygen, the most basic requisite for survival. Brought to the brink of “orgiastic self-annihilation [‘orgiastischen Selbstvernichtung’]” by the Dionysian, we can only be resuscitated by the “healing magic [‘heilkundige Zauber’]” (section 21, 128) of Apollonian illusion. Beauty may be illusory, a delightful veil thrown over the Dionysian abyss, but in this respect it is no different from the entire phenomenal apparatus that comprises our world. In affirming the redemption through illusion that art brings us, Nietzsche affirms the conditions of the phenomenal world—mendacious as they may be—without which life would altogether perish.

Although Nietzsche will later characterize The Birth of Tragedy as “an impossible book: [. . .] badly written, ponderous, embarrassing” (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” section 3, 19), he will identify in this exaltation of beautiful lies over life-negating truth the beginnings of his critique of Christian morality. In “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” which Nietzsche added as a preface to The Birth of Tragedy in 1886,72 he recognizes in his “artists’ metaphysics” a radical inversion of the metaphysics of Christianity (section 5, 22). Nietzsche states that Christianity, which is based on the premise that the God who created the world epitomizes absolute goodness and truthfulness, not only “negates, judges and dams art” as a product of the “realm of lies,” but

72 At which point he also, as Walter Kaufmann notes, reissued the remaining copies of the first two editions (1872 and 1878) under the title The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism and Pessimism, revised from the original The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music. One might surmise that, in doing so, Nietzsche intended to obscure the significant role Wagner’s work played in the development the book’s central thesis.
also disparages life, which is bound to appear inadequate when measured against the ideal of morality “because life is something essentially amoral” (section 5, 23). Since nature is not bound by morality, any attempt to judge the natural world—of which the human animal inextricably forms a part—according to absolute moral codes will inevitably lead to the conclusion that life is “unworthy of desire and altogether worthless” (section 5, 23). The main point of contention between Nietzsche’s project and the Christian worldview is, as he articulates here, that Christianity adheres to “the moral interpretation and significance of existence,” whereas Nietzsche vehemently repudiates morality’s primacy in relation to life (section 5, 22). Nietzsche’s “reckless and amoral artist-god,” in contrast to the Christian God, experiences his own “joy and glory” in both “the good and in the bad” aspects of the world he has created, and thus the world in its dissonant totality is not inferior to him but rather an apposite form of self-expression (section 5, 22). Furthermore, it is in the constant and dynamic creation of this world that the artist-god attains his own “salvation [‘Erlösung’]” (section 5, 22): in the act of creation, this god “frees himself from the distress of fullness and overfullness and from the affliction of the contradictions compressed in his soul” (section 5, 22). Since it is meant to reflect the artist-god’s own “afflicted, discordant, and contradictory being” rather than absolute goodness (section 5, 22), the world in its current state cannot be deplored as a fallen version of God’s original plan. Indeed, the very notion of goodness, of morality, is here demoted from a transcendental principle to a product of “the realm of appearance”—morality becomes one more illusion among the multitude that populates the phenomenal world (section 5, 22). Where Christianity would historicize suffering as a corollary of original sin, then, Nietzsche historicizes morality: he replaces the Christian story of genesis, which declares that the world and its creator are primordially ‘good’ and that suffering is the punishment we must endure for our
disobedience to God, with an amoral story of aesthetic creation, in which suffering is cosmic and prior to the world (experienced by the artist-god himself) and the categories ‘good and evil’ are human inventions. The historicization of morality allows Nietzsche to redeem as worthy (in an aesthetic sense) all aspects of lived experience.

Despite this life-affirming dimension of Nietzsche’s philosophy of art in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is important to note that it remains part of an overwhelmingly pessimistic and metaphysical worldview. That Nietzsche celebrates the seductive power of Apollonian appearances does not take away from the fact that he ultimately subscribes to the wisdom of Silenus—“‘What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon’” (section 3, 42). The view that life, which is inherently tragic, needs to be redeemed through beautiful illusions will later be denounced as a symptom of weakness and decadence;\(^\text{73}\) in this early text, however, Nietzsche’s scorn is directed not at romantic pessimists like Schopenhauer and Wagner, or even specifically at Christianity,\(^\text{74}\) but at Socratic optimists who assert that knowledge can “heal the eternal wound of existence [‘die ewige Wunde des Daseins heilen’]” (section 18, 109). While this optimistic faith in science is ontologically comparable to “art’s seductive veil of beauty” in that both are “illusion[s] spread over things” by the will in an effort to entice us to continue living (section 18, 109), Nietzsche disparages science because it wholly disregards Dionysian (that is, tragic) wisdom. He champions “tragic culture”—in which “wisdom [‘Weisheit’] takes the place of science [‘Wissenschaft’] as the highest end”—over what he calls “Alexandrian culture,” which considers the laws of the

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\(^{73}\) See, for instance, *The Will to Power*: “[T]he artists of decadence, who fundamentally have a nihilistic attitude toward life, take refuge in the beauty of form” (section 852, 450).

\(^{74}\) Although in 1886 he reads the “careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the whole book” as a presage of his later attack on Christian morality (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” section 5, 23).
phenomenal world (time, space and causality) to be universally applicable (section 18, 112). Art, as the fabricator of the veil of beauty, recognizes the primacy of Dionysian dissonance (and for this very reason constructs beautiful illusions that render it palatable), whereas Socratic optimism fallaciously denies the eternally suffering nature of this metaphysical force and attempts, unsuccessfully, to submit it and the world to its own intellectual/logical principles. Nietzsche’s concept of “tragic culture”—whose aim is to “grasp, with sympathetic feelings of love, the eternal suffering [‘das ewige Leiden’] as its own [‘das eigne Leiden’]” (section 18, 112)—remains religious in the sense that it incorporates the metaphysical or the beyond into its account of existence and aims to connect the individual or the phenomenal with that beyond. Art (specifically tragedy) becomes the primary vehicle for disseminating “tragic culture” because it is able to put us in contact with the “eternal suffering” of the absolute without driving us to despair. The scientific (Socratic or Alexandrian) worldview is, in contrast, a secular one, in that it does not admit the validity of any laws other than those it observes in the world around it. In pitting his own tragic worldview against scientific optimism, Nietzsche conveys his (youthful) affinity for transcendent rather than immanent modes of knowledge.

While it is clear that in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche’s thought has not yet overcome the impulse (both Schopenhauerian and religious) to understand this world in relation to another more primary, more truthful sphere, his “artists’ metaphysics” makes significant strides towards conceptualizing the world independently of any alternative (that is, ulterior, eternal, metaphysical) mode of existence. In characterizing the Dionysian “foundation of all existence” (section 25, 143) as amoral, dissonant and suffering, he marks the beyond as fundamentally equivalent to our own world—a fact which, as he will later point out, counters the Christian depreciation of our world as unworthy of the absolute goodness of its divine creator.
Furthermore, the method of redemption explored in this text is (for the most part)\textsuperscript{75} worldly as opposed to otherworldly; Nietzsche’s use of the term \textit{Erlösung} refers predominantly to the “redemption in illusion ['Erlösung im Scheine']” (section 16, 99) that seduces us to remain in this world of appearances, rather than to the metaphysical consolation that we receive from mystical communion with the absolute. As Nietzsche later articulates, this book clearly announces its author’s loyalty to life—which is in “need of lies” in order to be lived (\textit{The Will to Power}, section 853, 451)\textsuperscript{76}—over and above the nihilistic will to (ultimate) truth. Although the eternal suffering of the Dionysian will is presented as “truth” here, “truth does not count as the supreme value, even less as the supreme power” (section 853, 453); rather, man’s “will to art, to lie, to flight from ‘truth,’ to \textit{negation} of ‘truth’” is endorsed and exalted (section 853, 452). \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} proclaims the “artists’ gospel” (section 853, 453) in declaring that “Art and nothing but art” is “the great means of making life possible ['Ermöglicherin des Lebens’], the great seduction ['Verführerin’] to life, the great stimulant ['Stimulans’] of life” (section 853, 452). Although these later reflections (most likely written in 1886) on \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} no doubt downplay the undeniable life-negating elements of the aesthetic metaphysics that the book espouses, we can nevertheless recognize in the Apollonian principle the foundations of Nietzsche’s life-affirming philosophy which will dispute, at all costs, life-denying forms of thought. In rendering redemption a mechanism of the Apollonian will to live, rather than the

\textsuperscript{75} Nietzsche refers only once, in language clearly reminiscent of Schopenhauer, to the redemptive aspect of Dionysian mysticism, which “seeks to destroy the individual and redeem ['erlösen'] him by a mystic feeling of oneness” (section 2, 38); this instance is plainly outnumbered by references to redemption through Apollonian illusion (see sections 4, 5, 8, 12, 16, 19, and 21).

\textsuperscript{76} This section of the Nachlass is most likely, according to Walter Kaufmann, a draft version of the preface (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism”) that Nietzsche published with the 1886 edition of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} (\textit{The Will to Power} 451). As I will discuss in the context of Nietzsche’s mature philosophy of art, the published version of the preface significantly omits this formulation of art as untruth.
outcome of ascetic world-renunciation, Nietzsche has begun to dissociate himself from Schopenhauer’s depiction of life as total and continuous suffering that can only be overcome through complete self-denial. Its valorization of art’s capacity to redeem life through illusion marks *The Birth of Tragedy*, despite its tragic outlook, as a text that ultimately gravitates towards the affirmation rather than the negation of the conditions of this world.

**“What is left of art”: Art after Metaphysics**

Before turning to Nietzsche’s mature articulation of the service art renders to life—explored most fully in *Twilight of the Idols*, the two polemics against Wagner, and the *Nachlass*—I would like to briefly highlight a significant passage from *Human, All Too Human* as a means of transition. *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, the first instalment of which was published in 1878 (followed by *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* in 1879 and *The Wanderer and his Shadow* in 1880), presents a surprisingly substantial contrast to *The Birth of Tragedy* and the essays praising Schopenhauer and Wagner (written in 1874 and 1876, respectively) in *Untimely Meditations* in that Nietzsche’s perspective shifts from that of a romantic pessimist to that of an enlightened “free spirit.” Here the “rigorous methods of acquiring truth” are championed over religion and art, both of which are indicted for performing the same harmful and dissembling function: “the momentary amelioration and narcoticizing” of human suffering (section 108, 60).

A more dramatic reversal of Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification of existence in *The Birth Tragedy*, in which beautiful illusions were revered over the rational principles of science, is hardly imaginable. While *Human, All Too Human* represents a turning point in Nietzsche’s thought in more ways than one, I would like to concentrate on how his rejection of metaphysics
impacts his valuation of art.

Nietzsche does not outright deny the existence of a metaphysical world in this book; what he
does, rather, is dismiss all metaphysical assumptions as the results of “passion, error and self-
deception” and therefore render void and meaningless all attempts to let “happiness, salvation
[‘Heil’] and life depend on the gossamer [‘Spinnenfäden’] of such a possibility” (section 9, 15).
It is because of this rejection of all metaphysical speculation as false and purposeless that
Nietzsche, in a chapter from the first volume entitled “From the Souls of Artists and Writers,” prophesies the death of art. He admits, with “profound sorrow” (section 220, 102), that throughout time the best artists have “raised to heavenly transfiguration precisely those conceptions which we now recognize as false: they are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of mankind” (section 220, 102). With the decline in religious and metaphysical belief, high art can never again flourish; works such as the “Divina Commedia, the pictures of Raphael, the frescoes of Michelangelo, the Gothic cathedrals” will become enduring monuments to the time when art possessed “metaphysical significance,” but they will no longer resonate with humanity (section 220, 102). Artists and artworks are fated to become “relic[s]” (section 223, 105), testaments to the longing for metaphysical certainty that we suffered from for so long, repositories of our nostalgia for the transcendent. From the superior vantage point of the “scientific man,” we will look back on art as “a moving recollection of the joys of youth” (section 223, 105).

Nietzsche somewhat obliquely lays to rest his own aesthetic theory from The Birth of Tragedy during this general interment of art. In section 222 entitled “What is left of art [‘Was von der Kunst übrig bleibt’],” he mentions and declares to be “false” the metaphysical presupposition that “suppose[s] our visible world were only appearance” and consequently valorizes “the
illusory world of the artist” as a fundamentally similar phenomenon (section 222, 105). If we remember, Nietzsche’s reverence for the beautiful illusions produced by art in *The Birth of Tragedy* was grounded in his postulation, following Schopenhauer, of the ontological divide between the (Apollonian) world of appearance and the (Dionysian) realm of the will. With the disappearance of this division between the phenomenal and the metaphysical, between the realm of lies and the realm of truth, art can no longer signify the triumph of beautiful illusions (as it once did for Nietzsche), nor can it be understood as a revelation of metaphysical truth (as it was by Schopenhauer and also, to a certain extent, Nietzsche). In light of the end of metaphysics, what value can art retain? Nietzsche answers thus:

Above all, [art] has taught us for thousands of years to look upon life in any of its forms with interest and pleasure, and to educate our sensibilities so far that we at last cry: ‘life, however it may be, is good!’ This teaching imparted by art to take pleasure in life and to regard the human life as a piece of nature, as the object of regular evolution, without being too violently involved in it—this teaching has been absorbed in us, and it now reemerges as an almighty requirement of knowledge. One could give up art, but would not thereby relinquish the capacity one has learned from it: just as one has given up religion but not the enhancement of feeling and exaltations one has acquired from it.78

(Section 222, 105)

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77 The quotation is from the final line of Goethe’s poem “The Bridegroom” (“Der Bräutigam”) (1824).

Despite its historical implication in the metaphysical or religious interpretation of the world, art has above all instilled in us the ability to experience “interest and pleasure” when we contemplate life. As in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he emphasized the vital role art plays in redeeming us from the desire to renounce the world, Nietzsche again highlights how art affirms life, as it is, as inherently good. At the same time, however, he implies that artistic activity will be rendered obsolete now that it has lost its metaphysical dimension; art’s fundamental teaching—that we should observe life with pleasure—will be taken over by “knowledge” and will reappear as its most powerful driving force. Now that this life-redeeming aspect of art has been salvaged and transferred to the practice of scientific inquiry, it appears that art itself can be discarded; human beings have evolved beyond it. As Nietzsche states at the end of this section: “The scientific man is the further evolution of the artistic” (section 222, 105).

If we were to read only this section of *Human, All Too Human* and from it draw conclusions about Nietzsche’s views on art, we would be hard-pressed to imagine the significant role that art will play in the philosopher’s later work. Indeed, we would be led to assume that here Nietzsche renounces all interest in art as a mode of knowledge or way of life, and that he will no longer concern himself with an activity that appears to have been rendered obsolete by human development. This assumption, of course, would be mistaken. Despite his (from now on) anti-romantic stance, exemplified in the conclusiveness of his denouncement of Wagner, in the preface (written 1886) to the second volume of *Human, All Too Human*, as a “decaying, despairing romantic” whose music “deprives the spirit of its severity and cheerfulness and lets rampant every kind of vague longing and greedy, spongy desire” (section 3, 211), aesthetic concerns will occupy a central position in many of the works and notes written in 1888 (the last
sane year of his life). After dismissing art as a refuge of residual longing for metaphysical comfort following the demise of religious belief, Nietzsche will have to radically alter his formulation of the redemptive power of beautiful illusions in order to recuperate art for the life-affirming purposes of his philosophical project. Art, which is to all appearances discarded here along with “romantic pessimism, that is to say the pessimism of the renunciators, the failed and defeated” (section 7, 213), will need to be reclaimed as an attribute of “courageous pessimism,” defined as “the antithesis of all romantic mendacity” and Nietzsche’s self-appointed “task” (section 4, 211). In order for this to be possible, Nietzsche will have to eradicate all traces of otherworldly redemption from his philosophy of art, for it is precisely the need to be saved or relieved from life that distinguishes the romantic or decadent pessimist from the courageous one.

### Art as Tonic

All of the texts written and compiled in 1888 (The Case of Wager, Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist, Ecce Homo and Nietzsche Contra Wagner) share, on a fundamental level, a concern with delineating Nietzsche’s enmity towards otherworldly forms of thought. In these late texts,

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79 Of the five books written in 1888, two (The Case of Wager and Nietzsche Contra Wagner) take Wagner as their main theme and are therefore fundamentally concerned with aesthetic issues, while Twilight of the Idols contains lengthy and significant passages on art. Furthermore, in both On the Genealogy of Morals (1887) (section 8 of the third essay) and The Case of Wagner (section 7), Nietzsche mentions his plans for an upcoming work to be devoted entirely to aesthetics entitled Toward a Physiology of Art. Although this book was never written, the notes for it (mostly dated 1887-1888) collected under the title “The Will to Power as Art” (Book 3, Part 4) in his posthumously published Will to Power provide significant insight into the line of thought he intended to pursue.

80 Both Wagner and Schopenhauer are clearly implicated in this charge.
Schopenhauer, Wagner, and the Christian religion are aligned as proclaimers of the imperative to renounce the world, an imperative that is said to stem from sickness, from decadence, from “the soil of impoverished life” and to be concomitant with “all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond [‘die ganze Falschmünzerei der Transcendenz und des Jenseits’]” (The Case of Wagner “Postscript” 183). Nietzsche sees world renunciation as a corollary of the need for redemption, the overwhelming desire to be saved or released from worldly suffering that vanquishes the weak and constitutes “the most honest expression of decadence” (The Case of Wagner “Epilogue” 191). He will counter the nihilistic instinct to renounce the world that he identifies in Schopenhauer, Wagner and the Christian faith with his own philosophy of life-affirmation, which comprises a number of key concepts such as noble (vornehme) or master morality (Herren-Moral), Dionysian or tragic art, courageous pessimism, the will to power, amor fati, the Übermensch and the eternal recurrence (die ewige Wiederkunft). While Nietzsche’s philosophy is perhaps, in practice, no less ascetic than that of his antipodes, it distinguishes itself by taking the sanctification of life as its task, by viewing life itself, rather than an extramundane god, as that which should be venerated through man’s every thought and action. For Nietzsche, the (Dionysian or tragic) artist will come to represent the man who has overcome all decadent urges to be redeemed from worldly suffering and who continually celebrates and affirms life through his work.

81 The Wagner here denounced is, above all, the post-Schopenhauer Wagner, the Wagner who “translated [his work] into Schopenhauer’s terms” (that is, into world-renouncing pessimism) (The Case of Wagner, section 4, 164), the Wagner who, with his final opera Parsifal (1882), sealed his fate as a “despairing romantic [who] suddenly sank down helpless and shattered before the Christian cross” (Human, All To Human, Book II, section 3, 210-11). While Nietzsche never really shared Wagner’s early utopian enthusiasm about the social change that could be brought about through art (except, perhaps, in his praise of Kultur at the end of his 1874 essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” as that which will deliver the youth from the malady of history), Wagner’s theoretical work produced around the time of The Artwork of the Future is far less inimical to Nietzsche’s late philosophy than that which he produced under Schopenhauer’s influence.
But how is it that artistic activity, which, to go back to *The Birth of Tragedy*, was hailed as that which redeems through the creation of beautiful illusions (and to a lesser extent through momentarily connecting us with the absolute), can now be exalted as that which altogether defies the need for redemption? Furthermore, how can Nietzsche claim that art fully celebrates and affirms the world as it is when the main activity of art is to *transform* reality? Does the will-to-transform not always imply the presence of the will-to-negate? For Nietzsche, the answer to this last question would be a resounding no, since the tragic artist is “precisely the one who says Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible”—and even, presumably, to the banal (*Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” section 6, 484). Yet how can this be, given the transfiguring nature of the artist’s task? In order to tackle these difficult questions it will be necessary to return once again to Schopenhauer and Wagner so as to outline precisely how their work *fails* to accomplish the life-affirming feat of the Dionysian artist. It is in the critique of his “antipodes” that Nietzsche most clearly demonstrates his own mature views on art.

Nietzsche ascribes the world-renouncing nature of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art to a fundamental error: the belief that beauty is an intimation of the supersensuous will. As discussed in Chapter 1, Schopenhauer conceived of the pleasure experienced in aesthetic contemplation as analogous to the bliss experienced by the ascetic who has completely mastered his drives. Beauty is able to lift us above worldly suffering, specifically above sexual appetite, and instil in us a profound sense of peace because in it we recognize “the adequate and suitable manifestation of the will in general, through its merely spatial phenomenon” (I: 224); beauty is the quality of an object (observable in art more readily than in nature) “which facilitates knowledge of its Idea” (I: 202). Nietzsche finds the claim that beauty is not of the phenomenal world, that it functions as a “bridge on which one will go farther, or develop a thirst to go
farther” and that it therefore redeems one “from sexuality,” from the “drive toward procreation” (*Twilight of the Idols*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” section 22, 527-28), to be completely untenable. This erroneous notion is said to be derived partly from the misguided tendency in aesthetics to examine art and beauty not from “the point of view of the artist (the creator)” but rather “from that of the ‘spectator’” (*Genealogy of Morals*, “Third Essay,” section 6, 103)—which leads one to theorize receptivity rather than creativity. According to Nietzsche, we may take the liberty to “laugh a little at [the] expense” of aestheticians who (following Kant) “never weary of asserting” that “one can even view undraped female statues ‘without interest’” (*Genealogy*, “Third Essay,” section 6, 104). He points to the myth of Pygmalion, the artist who fell in love with his sculpture and who was “in any event not necessarily an ‘unaesthetic man,’” as proof that artists can in fact desire intensely and not uninterestedly the beauty of their creations (*Genealogy*, “Third Essay,” section 6, 104).

The section “On Immaculate Perception [‘Von der unbefleckten Erkenntniss’]” in *Zarathustra* derides those allegedly “‘pure perceivers,’” such as Schopenhauer and Kant, who maintain that they are content to “touch [the earth’s] beauty only with [their] eyes” (Part II 234). Zarathustra calls such men “sentimental hypocrites” and “lechers [‘Lüsterne’]”; he accuses them of harbouring repressed desires to possess what they see and thereby exposes the “shame” and “bad conscience” that contaminate their purportedly “immaculate” perception (234-35). Zarathustra compares these professedly “pure perceivers” to the moon, who “[p]iously and

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82 Heidegger also comments on the influence of Kant’s theory of the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic contemplation on Schopenhauer’s philosophy. He argues that Schopenhauer essentially misinterpreted Kant’s statement—by which he meant that we do not desire to possess the beautiful or gain anything by it—to mean that “the aesthetic state is one in which the will is put out of commission and all striving brought to a standstill; it is pure repose, simply wanting nothing more, sheer apathetic drift” (*Nietzsche: I: The Will to Power as Art* 108).
silently [. . .] passes over carpets of stars” and is “lecherous after the earth and all the joys of lovers” (234). In contrast, the sun is said to love the earth “impatiently,” with “thirst” and “hot breath”; her relationship with the earth is not one of (feigned) disinterested contemplation, but rather one of acknowledged “creative longing,” in which she “would suck at the sea and drink its depth into her heights” (236). This kind of openly avowed desirous looking, which acknowledges the “will to procreate” and in which the observer freely engages with the observed object rather than attempting to preserve an unsullied and dishonest distance, is regarded as the only kind of ‘innocent’ perception and the only way for one to truly “love the earth.” For Zarathustra, “perceptive knowledge” means: “all that is deep shall rise up to my heights” (236).

Against the proponents of “Immaculate Perception,” Nietzsche argues that nature herself clearly refutes the claim that beauty runs counter to or can be separated from the will to procreate:

To what end is there any such thing as beauty in tone, color, fragrance, or rhythmic movement in nature? What is it that beauty evokes? Fortunately, a philosopher contradicts him [Schopenhauer] too. No lesser authority than that of the divine Plato (so Schopenhauer himself calls him) maintains a different proposition: that all beauty incites procreation, that just this is the \textit{proprium} of its effect, from the most sensual up to the most spiritual.\(^8\) \textit{(Twilight of the Idols, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” section 22, 528)}

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Far from redeeming one from the tumult of sexual desire, beauty cannot but stir and augment one’s desires and was indeed invented by nature for this very purpose. Beauty stimulates procreation in all forms, from the sensual to the intellectual, rather than instigating and facilitating one’s escape from this most worldly of activities. Here Nietzsche breaks with a long tradition of artists and philosophers who have seen in beauty a glimpse of the divine to locate beauty purely within the realm of the earthly and the sensuous. The nature of the pleasure induced by aesthetic experience (both contemplative and creative) is declared to be precisely the opposite of what Schopenhauer purported; not the blissful negation, but rather the frenzied enhancement of the “drive toward procreation” accounts for the pleasure we experience in the aesthetic state.

Despite this alignment of the creative and the sexual drive, Nietzsche makes clear that aesthetic creation is a transfigured (transfigurirt) and consequently spiritualized (vergeistigt) manifestation of the will to procreate. Far from equating the creation of art with the sexual act (or with pornography), he asserts that the “sweetness and plenitude peculiar to the aesthetic state” is the result of the sublimation of sexual instincts: “[S]ensuality ['Sinnlichkeit'] is not overcome ['aufgehoben'] by the appearance of the aesthetic condition, as Schopenhauer believed, but only transfigured ['transfigurirt'] and no longer enters consciousness as sexual

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84 He is certainly not alone in doing so, however. One could also name Darwin, Freud, and Weber among those modern thinkers who have written about beauty as a sexual phenomenon. In *The Origin of Species* (1859) Darwin writes: “Sexual selection has given the most brilliant colours, elegant patterns, and other ornaments to the males, and sometimes to both sexes of many birds, butterflies, and other animals” (447-48); for Freud, “All that seems certain [about beauty] is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling. [. . .] ‘Beauty’ and ‘attraction’ ['Reiz'] are originally attributes of the sexual object” (*Civilization and its Discontents* 34). And according to Weber, “the spheres of esthetic and erotic life” together represent the most intense of “anti-rational” and “this-worldly life-forces,” which is why rational salvation religions are so often hostile toward them (“Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” *From Max Weber* 341).
excitement [‘Geschlechtsreiz’]” (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” section 8, 111). That sensuality is said to be transfigured rather than overcome (aufgehoben, unlike transfigurirt, contains connotations of cancellation or abolishment as well as raising or lifting up) indicates that aesthetic activity feeds off of and transforms the sexual instinct without negating it. Nietzsche illustrates this point by referring to the example of artists who abstain from sex “in states of great spiritual tension and preparation,” not out of any “ascetic scruple or hatred of the senses” but because “their ‘maternal’ [‘mütterlicher’] instinct ruthlessly disposes of all other stores and accumulations of energy, of animal vigor, for the benefit of the evolving work: the greater energy then uses up the lesser” (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” section 8, 111). The artist, driven by the “maternal” need to create, submits the “lesser” energy of his “animal vigor” to the “greater energy” that engenders his artistic work.

Although Nietzsche claims that there is nothing “ascetic” about this activity, it certainly appears to enjoin the artist to practice a form of self-denial. In a posthumous fragment on the asceticism of the artist dated summer-fall 1888, he goes as far as to state that the artist, although “necessarily a sensual [‘sinnlicher’] man,” is “often even chaste,” and that to “squande[r]” (verschwenden) his energy in sexual activity would “betra[y] a lack of instinct” and could be “a sign of decadence” (Will to Power, section 815, 432). It seems that Nietzsche, although he vehemently rejects otherworldly forms of asceticism (that is, the kind of asceticism espoused by Schopenhauer and practiced by religious monks and mystics), feels he cannot sanction artistic and philosophical pursuits without condoning certain forms of worldly asceticism. Walter Kaufmann reads the third essay of Genealogy as Nietzsche’s unequivocal endorsement of asceticism as the method behind “all truly worth-while human achievements” (Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist 245); by contrast, I view the attitude towards asceticism
expressed in the third essay as being far more cryptic. While in the concluding lines Nietzsche admits that the ascetic ideal has provided man with a “meaning [‘Sinn’]” for his existence through which “the will itself was saved [‘gerettet’]” (section 28, 162), the nature of this meaning is described in terms anathema to Nietzsche’s philosophical project, as the realization of “a will to nothingness, an aversion [‘Widerwillen’] to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life” (section 28, 163). I take this to mean that, although Nietzsche views asceticism to be ultimately inescapable—in the sense that the adherence to or creation of a system of values (which is the only thing that staves off “suicidal nihilism” [section 28, 162]) necessitates some kind of self-discipline, a patterning of one’s behaviour in relation to that value system—he endorses asceticism only when it involves harnessing the instincts to further engage them in the service of life. The focal point of all Nietzsche’s willing, esteeming (schätzen) and creating—the three activities that Zarathustra celebrates as antitheses to the “great weariness” (Part II “Upon the Blessed Isles” 199)—is, invariably, the enhancement (not just the preservation) of life itself. In order to flourish, to enhance themselves rather than merely survive, human beings need to be able to control and employ their drives; to give in to all impulses would be a symptom of weakness or powerlessness (as is the need to mortify the flesh, which I discuss below). Nietzsche stresses the earthly direction of the ascetic practices he endorses by employing the language of childbirth (mütterlicher, Schwangerschaft) when speaking of intellectual or physical output (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” section 8, 111). In doing so, he signals that the strenuous efforts made by philosophers, athletes and artists to re-channel their instincts into their work are put back into the service of life; these activities involve not a cancelling or repressing of natural drives, but rather a processing or refinement of those drives. While we may query the extremity or real-life applicability of Nietzsche’s notion of the ‘chaste’
artist, this act of sublimation will come to function, as we shall see, as a celebratory ritual through which a certain form of earthly piety is created and expressed.

Nietzsche contrasts the intellectual and artistic sublimation of the instincts—which he clearly endorses—with what he describes as the castrating policy of the Christian religion. Instead of asking “How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a craving? [‘wie vergeistigt, verschönt, vergöttlicht man eine Begierde?’],” he claims that Christianity has instead “at all times laid the stress of discipline on extirpation [‘Ausrottung’]” (Twilight, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” section 1, 487). He inculpates the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament for propagating the notion that we must fully root out our inconvenient urges (especially our sexual desires); specifically, he points to Jesus’s teaching that “If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (King James Version Matthew 5. 29) in support of his argument. This kind of aggressive and total denial of one’s instincts is said to be the preferred method of self-control for the weak, for those who are “too degenerate [. . .] to be able to impose moderation on themselves” (section 2, 487). Nietzsche sees in this “attack on the roots of passion” the crux of Christianity’s antagonism towards life, as “the roots of passion” are the very “roots of life” (section 1, 487). In contrast to the “excision [‘Ausschneidung’]” of the passions taught by the church, Nietzsche counsels the “spiritualization [‘Vergeistigung’] of the passions” (section 1, 487), the elevation or deification of the “roots of life.” Near the end of

85 Schopenhauer is also implicated in this attack on Christianity’s castrating principles as “the heir of the Christian interpretation,” with the exception that “only he knew how to approve that which Christianity had repudiated, the great cultural facts of humanity—albeit in a Christian, that is, nihilistic, manner (namely, as ways of ‘redemption,’ as anticipations of ‘redemption,’ as stimuli of the need for ‘redemption’)” (Twilight, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” section 21, 527). According to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer spurious co-opted art—one of the “great self-affirmations of the ‘will to life’”—for the purposes of a “nihilistic total depreciation of life” (section 21, 527).
Twilight of the Idols, he describes the Dionysian mystery rites of ancient Greece as exemplifying precisely this veneration of the will to procreate—a gesture which necessitates, concomitantly, veneration of the pain of childbirth: “Every single element of the act of procreation, of pregnancy, and of birth aroused the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrine of the mysteries, pain is pronounced holy: the pangs of the woman giving birth hallow all pain: all becoming and growing—all that guarantees a future, involves pain” (“What I Owe to the Ancients,” section 4, 561-62). Against Christianity’s explanation of the pain of labour as a form of punishment, the unnatural (as in not innate to the conditions of life) consequence of original sin, Nietzsche calls for the sanctification of not only the pain involved in childbirth but also the sexual drive that initiates the act of procreation. His profound grievance against the Christian religion is epitomized in its execration of the means and manner of human reproduction: Christianity has “made something unclean [‘Unreines’] of sexuality: it threw filth [‘Kot’] on the origin, on the presupposition of our life” (section 4, 562).

The will to life celebrated in the Dionysian mysteries is further enhanced in the act of artistic creation: the sexual drive is identified as the “most ancient and original form of frenzy [‘Rausch’]”—with frenzy constituting the “one physiological condition” declared

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87 “Unto the woman [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (KJV Genesis 3. 16). Modern translations express this point more clearly; the NRSV of Genesis 3. 16 reads: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children[‘].”

88 Nietzsche no longer considers Rausch the sole property of Dionysus; rather, both the Apollonian and the Dionysian are now “conceived as kinds of frenzy” (“Skirmishes,” section 10, 519). In fact, the opposition between the Apollonian form-giving principle and the Dionysian state of intoxication virtually collapses in Nietzsche’s later theory of art (except for the distinction he continues to makes between the Apollonian visual arts and Dionysian
“indispensable” for “any aesthetic doing and seeing” (“Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” section 8, 518). Here, Nietzsche renders artistic inspiration an entirely physiological (as opposed to intellectual or transcendent) phenomenon, declaring it to be an offshoot of “the frenzy of sexual excitement [‘Geschlechtserregung’].” The most significant attribute of the state of frenzy is that it involves “the feeling of increased strength and fullness [‘das Gefühl der Kraftsteigerung und Fülle’]” (section 8, 518). In the case of the artist, this sense of power becomes so overwhelming that it overflows into the external world, compelling one to transfigure things to reflect one’s own strength. Artistic creation becomes an act of idealization (Idealizieren)—not in the commonly understood sense of “subtracting [‘abziehen’] and discounting [‘abrechnen’] the petty and inconsequential,” but in terms of the drive and ability to emphasize or enrich the already appealing elements of an object; the artist infuses the “main features” of an aspect of reality with so much strength that the uninfused features simply “disappear [‘verschwinden’]” (section 8, 518). This creative process of transformation is said to be a compulsion, the irrepresible result of an “overcharged and swollen will” (section 8, 518) that cannot but reshape the world in its own image. Art, according to this theory, becomes the product of man’s uncontrollable urge to extend and perfect himself: “A man in this state transforms things until they mirror his power—until they are reflections of his perfection. This having to transform into perfection is—art” (section 9, 518).89

89 “Der Mensch dieses Zustandes verwandelt die Dinge, bis sie seine Macht wiederspiegeln—bis sie Reflexe seine Vollkommenheit sind. Die Verwandeln-müssen ins Vollkommen ist—Kunst.”

music); as Walter Kaufmann writes, “The late Dionysus is the synthesis of the two forces represented by Dionysus and Apollo in The Birth of Tragedy” (129).
If the artist is to beautify and enrich the world through rendering it a reflection of his own will, then he must be of an innately strong, healthy and appealing constitution; otherwise, the effect of his work will be the impoverishment and corruption of reality. Nietzsche’s late polemics against Wagner follow precisely this line of thought: Richard Wagner, a sick and decadent man, is denounced for having poisoned and corrupted us all with his music. In *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, finished just days before his mental collapse, Nietzsche brings together selections from his previous works in order to make it absolutely clear for posterity that his philosophical position on life, religion, and art is entirely at odds with Wagner’s decadent pessimism. Because he has shifted towards a physiological understanding of aesthetics (declaring here quite unequivocally that “aesthetics is nothing but a kind of applied physiology” [“Where I Offer Objections” 664]), Nietzsche is able (and in fact obliged) to attack Wagner on biological, rather than merely conceptual or ideological, grounds. Nietzsche analyzes how Wagner’s music affects him as a living organism, concluding that it triggers sensations which run counter to those associated with good health:

What is it that my whole body really expects of music? For there is no soul. I believe, its own ease: as if all animal functions should be quickened by easy, bold, exuberant, self-assured rhythms: as if iron, leaden life should lose gravity through golden, tender, oil-smooth melodies. My melancholy wants to rest in the hiding-places and abysses of

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90 In keeping with his physiological aesthetics, Nietzsche understands beauty as a corollary of strength and vitality, and ugliness as a corollary of weakness and degeneration. In a note (dated March-June 1888) published in *The Will to Power* he writes: “‘[B]ecoming more beautiful’ is a consequence of enhanced strength. [. . .] Ugliness signifies the decadence of a type, contradiction and lack of co-ordination among the inner desires—signifies a decline in organizing strength, in ‘will,’ to speak psychologically” (section 800, 420).
perfection: that is why I need music. But Wagner makes sick.\textsuperscript{91} (“Where I Offer Objections” 664)

Having dispensed with the soul, Nietzsche denounces Wagner’s music on account of the physical rather than spiritual harm it inflicts on the human being. The dissonance and unending melodies of Wagnerian music drama not only fail to stimulate a healthy response in the body, but they literally make one “sick.” Far from contributing towards the perfection of the listener or spectator, Wagner’s art is detrimental to the biological functioning of the human organism. Nietzsche contrasts Wagner’s enervating music to the music of Bizet, which makes one “fertile [‘fruchtbar’]” (\textit{The Case of Wagner}, section 1, 158) and returns one to “nature, health, cheerfulness, youth, \textit{virtue}!” (section 3, 159-60). Bizet also “redeems [‘erlöst’],” but in precisely the opposite way that Wagner purports to redeem: his music (expressly the opera \textit{Carmen}) redeems us from the “damp north” so noxiously infested with “the Wagnerian ideal” and delivers us to a healthier climate, one charged with a “more southern, brown, burnt sensibility” (section 2, 158). The redemption offered by Wagner’s operas, in contrast, is oriented towards the otherworldly call of the abyss; the glorification of “‘ chastity’ [‘Keuschheit’]” in his art induces one to “withdraw from the corrupted [‘verderbten’] world” (section 3, 160).

It is precisely because it is inspired by sickness rather than the struggle against sickness that Wagner’s art epitomizes the aesthetics of decadence. In \textit{The Case of Wagner} Nietzsche identifies himself, like Wagner, as a decadent, as one who has suffered from “impoverished

\textsuperscript{91} “Und so frage ich mich: was \textit{will} eigentlich mein ganzer Leib von der Musik überhaupt? \textit{Denn} es gibt keine Seele. . . Ich glaube, seine \textit{Erleichterung}: wie als ob alle animalischen Funktionen durch leichte, kühne, ausgelaßne, selbstgewisse Rhythmen beschleunigt werden sollten; wie als ob das eherne, das bleierne Leben durch goldne zärtliche ölgleiche Melodien seine Schwere verlieren sollte. Meine Schwermut will in den Verstecken und Abgründen der \textit{Vollkommenheit} ausruhn: dazu brauche ich Musik. Aber Wagner macht krank.”
[‘verarmte’] life, the will to the end, the great weariness [‘Müdigkeit’]” (“Preface” 156). Unlike Wagner, however, he maintains that he has “comprehended” and “resisted” the life-negating attitude that “marks him as a child of his time,” thereby demonstrating the innate healthiness of his own constitution. Wagnerism, Schopenhaurianism, “modern ‘humaneness’ [‘Menschlichkeit’]”—all are elements of the contemporary sickness (decadence) from which the world in general is suffering and from which Nietzsche himself claims to have personally recovered (“Preface” 155). Because he both recognized the harm in and had the capacity to cure himself from his former influences, Nietzsche counts himself among the strong: “Sickness itself can be a stimulant to life: only one has to be healthy enough for this stimulant” (section 5, 165). Wagner and all the unrepentant Wagnerians, on the other hand, exemplify the weak-willed who have surrendered fully, without resistance, to the symptoms of this modern disease: “How closely related Wagner must be to the whole of European decadence to avoid being experienced by them as a decadent. [. . .] For that one does not resist him, this itself is a sign of decadence. The instincts are weakened. What one ought to shun is found attractive. One puts to one’s lips what drives one yet faster into the abyss” (section 5, 165). Wagner’s operas stimulate the frayed and damaged nerves of the European multitudes already suffering from decadence, causing their deleterious state of overexcitement to intensify. Because the “exhausted are attracted by what is harmful” (section 5, 165), they are drawn to Wagner despite or rather as a consequence of the harm he does them. The stimulus provided by Wagner’s operas

92 “Die Krankheit selbst kann ein Stimulans des Lebens sein: nur muss man gesund genug für dies Stimulans sein!”

93 “Wie verwandt muß Wagner der gesamten europäischen décadence sein, daß er von ihr nicht als décadent empfunden wird. [. . .] Denn daß man nicht gegen ihn sich wehrt, das ist selbst schon ein Zeichen von décadence. Der Instinkt ist geschwächt. Was man zu scheuen hätte, das zieht an. Man setzt an die Lippen, was noch schneller in den Abgrund treibt.”
works against one’s vital or healthy instincts, leading one further down the road of ill health or decay and ultimately, one may presume, towards death.

The “névrose” of Wagner must be resisted at all costs as the most “complete [‘vollständigen’]” and therefore most dangerous embodiment of degeneration, of the will to negate life (section 5, 166); the tragic or Dionysian art that Nietzsche endorses, in contrast, is said to embody and encourage precisely the opposite worldview. In Nietzsche’s notes on aesthetics collected under the title “The Will to Power as Art” (Book III, Part IV) in *The Will to Power*, the formulation (dated 1888) of tragic art as a *tonic* is explored. After breaking away (or recovering) from the world-renouncing decadence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche is left to grapple with the problem of the ostensible indivisibility of the pessimistic worldview and Greek tragedy—the form that is declared in his first writings and his last to be the epitome of art. Schopenhauer had claimed that the depiction of atrocities in tragedy counselled an attitude of resignation; Wagner had claimed that, through his *Gesamtkunstwerke* (modeled after the multidisciplinary form of Greek tragedy), the spectator would be reminded of the illusory and transient nature of earthly life and thereby delivered from worldly suffering. In order to recuperate tragedy as an art form he can endorse, Nietzsche must find in it an affirmation of life despite or even because of the suffering inherent to it. Schopenhauer’s and Wagner’s hostile-towards-life theories must be discarded—along with Aristotle’s famous formulation of *catharsis*, the arousal and purgation of pity and fear, which would make tragedy the stimulator of “two depressive affects” and therefore an art “harmful to health [‘gesundheitsschädlich’]” (section 851, 449). Nietzsche maintains that the inaccuracy of the view that tragedy has a depressive or weakening effect is not difficult to disprove; one must simply undertake an empirical examination of the effect Greek tragedy had on its spectators. Once we free ourselves from the “absolute
mendaciousness” of systematic thought, which led Schopenhauer to assert that tragedy teaches resignation even though the Greeks “to his annoyance did not ‘resign themselves,’” we will recognize that tragedy in fact functions as a “tonic” (section 851, 449), as an art form that induces pleasure through arousing and enhancing one’s own feelings of strength.

The invigorating effect of tragedy is not something that can be experienced by everyone, however; according to Nietzsche, one must already be strong to be made stronger by it. This is why tragedy is characterized not as a panacea, not as a source of ultimate and universal redemption, but rather as a tonic, a substance that enhances or revitalizes one’s own sense of vigour. While the weak may “take refuge [‘flüchten’] in the beauty of form”—in that which has already been perfected by nature and therefore can be enjoyed without requiring transformation—only the strong, “heroic spirits” can “experience suffering as a pleasure” and therefore find “[p]leasure in tragedy” (section 852, 450). The nature of this pleasure is neither masochistic nor sadistic; rather, it derives from the recognition of one’s ability to transform suffering into something beautiful, to confront the terrible with an abundance of personal strength and to greet it with “courage and good-humor [‘wohlgezügelt’]” instead of with dread (section 852, 450).94 Essentially, those incapable of assuming this affirmative stance will inevitably misinterpret tragedy according to “their own value feelings [‘Wertgefühle’]” (as, for

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94 Gilles Fraser has noted that Nietzsche’s formula for overcoming suffering in this way begins to look like a wishful and ultimately untenable construct when applied to actual and particularly horrific instances of human suffering, such as the holocaust. He writes: “My overall objection to Nietzsche is that he glamorizes suffering. His sense that suffering has the capacity to edify the noble spirit is only possible from the perspective of one who knows not the destructive power of excremental assault [a reference to Terrence Des Pres’s essay “Excremental assault,” which describes the use of human excrement “as a means of torture and humiliation” in Nazi concentration camps (123)]. Following the holocaust, Nietzsche’s prescriptions for redemption can only be looked on as those of a more comfortable age. The holocaust re-define nihilism in such a way that Nietzsche’s strategy for overcoming it is rendered obsolete” (139). I agree with Fraser’s analysis of the inadequacy of Nietzsche’s account of human suffering in this regard, however I do not believe that this discredits Nietzsche’s attempt to work out a non-transcendent formula for redemption, or that it detracts from the value of our endeavour to trace the development of that formula here.
instance, the “‘triumph of the moral world-order’” or an “invitation [‘Aufforderung’] to ‘resignation’”) in order to find meaning and pleasure in it (section 852, 450). In effect, whether or not one experiences tragedy as a tonic becomes a kind of litmus test indicating the health of one’s physiological makeup; Schopenhauer, Wagner, Aristotle and anyone else who reads alternate meanings into tragedy thereby reveal their own constitutional deficiencies. Tragedy, ultimately, is “not meant for” people of this sort (für sie nicht erdacht).

While it may appear that Nietzsche has conflated the problem of aesthetic reception with that of aesthetic creation in his treatment of tragedy (or that he has conveniently avoided the problem of aesthetic reception altogether), he in fact views these two issues as one and the same. Only those who create art are able to truly appreciate art: to experience the “aesthetic state [‘ästhetische Zustand’]” one must already be “capable of that bestowing [‘abgebenden’] and overflowing fullness of bodily vigor;” whereas the “sober, the weary, the exhausted, the dried-up (e.g., scholars) can receive absolutely nothing from art, because they do not possess the primary artistic force [‘die künstlerische Urkraft’]” (Will to Power, section 801, 422). The invitation to continued transformation presented by art is only perceived by those who are already familiar with the pleasure of exercising their transfiguring abilities; Dionysian artists are spurred to create art whenever they are confronted with tragedy, both on the stage and in real life.

The opposite of the Dionysian individual who is invigorated by tragedy would be the (much more common) individual who cannot accept the “terrifying [‘furchtbaren’] and questionable [‘fragwürdigen’] character of things” (which tragedy exposes) and consequentially requires “some sort of ‘solution’ [‘Lösungen’] at the end” (section 852, 450). The inability to affirm what is represented in tragedy reflects a larger inability to accept the “‘corruption’ [‘Verderbnis’] of man” and the riddle [‘Rätsel’] of existence” (section 852, 450). The contrast
between these two reactions to suffering illustrates the crux of Nietzsche’s opposition between “artists’ pessimism”—the stance of those who recognize pain as a primal condition of life and are vigorous enough to accept and affirm it—and “religio-moral pessimism”—the stance of those who view suffering as an unbearable offense and demand some kind of redemption from or solution for it (the words Erlösung and Lösung echo one another in German). Those who subscribe to religio-moral pessimism cannot “endure life” without appealing to “entrancing visions ['entzückenden Visionen']” that soothe their pain and despair; the religious notion of “‘blessedness’ ['Seligkeit’]” is highlighted as one of the many fallacies to emerge out of this need for analgesic illusions (section 852, 450). While Wagner’s operas, Schopenhauer’s philosophy and the Christian religion undoubtedly classify as forms of religio-moral pessimism, one could argue that it is perhaps Nietzsche’s early theory of redemption through Apollonian illusion that most clearly exemplifies this reliance on “entrancing visions” in order to withstand life.

The Transformation of Apollo

In order for art to become a life-affirming activity that opposes the allure of “entrancing visions,” a major shift in Nietzsche’s appraisal of the phenomenal world has needed to occur. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche’s theorization of art as a vital necessity was grounded in the presupposition that both the phenomenal world and the Schein of art shared the task of masking the “eternal suffering” of the metaphysical substratum. This meant that both art (because of its Apollonian component) and the world were, in a sense, false, both untrue in relation to Dionysian (metaphysical, primal) truth. That redemption was a corollary of Apollonian illusion
meant that one must resort to lies in order to affirm life; as we saw in our analysis of religio-moral pessimism, however, this reliance on “entracing visions” in order to “endure life” is at bottom nihilistic. The Dionysian or tragic art that Nietzsche writes about in *Twilight of the Idols*, on the other hand, is no longer mendacious.\(^9^5\) This does not mean that Nietzsche simply abandons the Apollonian principle in his late configuration of art—although certainly the entire process of artistic creation is now subsumed under the term “Dionysian.” I would like to argue, rather, that the Apollonian principle, while unnamed, remains central to Nietzsche’s late aesthetics, and that the disappearance of the dissembling element in art is the result of Nietzsche’s inversion of the truth-value of the phenomenal and metaphysical worlds.

In *Human, All Too Human*, we saw how the dismissal of all metaphysical conjectures as void and meaningless led to art losing its privileged position both as a fabricator of appearances (which had connected it intrinsically to the world understood as the realm of appearances) and as a medium for connecting us with the beyond. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche goes a step further in his fight against metaphysics: he declares the millennia-long belief in a “true world

\(^9^5\) While in his final published works Nietzsche appears committed to affirming the veracity of art—most notably in *Twilight of the Idols* where art is revered as a force which transforms or enhances reality rather than disguising it and *The Case of Wagner* where Wagner is decried for being a “magician” and a counterfeiter who deceitfully conflates master morality with the need for redemption—a look at his posthumous fragments reveals that he may have remained divided on the question of the truth-value of art until the very end. I have already mentioned his draft (most probably written in 1886) for a preface for *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he declares art to be a manifestation of man’s will to lie; see also section 822 (dated spring-summer 1888) of the *Will to Power*, in which he states: “We possess art lest we perish of the truth [‘wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zu Grunde gehen’].” Julian Young bases his argument that Nietzsche’s late philosophy of art represents a return to the pessimistic thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy*—that life can only be redeemed through illusion—on these passages (Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art 134-35), however to do so is to ignore the very significant fact that the formulation of art as untruth does not appear in any of the works that Nietzsche finished for publication in the last year of his sane life. Heidegger, on the contrary, attempts to resolve this contradiction by claiming that whenever Nietzsche refers to the “will to truth” in the *Will to Power* he is referring to “the ‘true world’ in the sense of Plato and Christianity, the will to supersensuousness” (74), and is therefore pitting art against what is essentially false; whether or not this is the case in these passages, however, is far from clear, as Nietzsche does not qualify what he means by “truth.” I have chosen to base my argument here on the formulation of art presented in the published materials, as I feel they should take precedence over the notebooks whenever there is a point of contention.
[‘wahre Welt’]” external to our own to be an “error [‘Irrtum’],” the recognition of which requires that we abolish not only the “true world” but also the “apparent one [‘die scheinbare’]” (“How the ‘true world’ finally became a fable” 485-86).\(^96\) With the “true world” reduced to a “fable,” a fabrication, a lie, the “apparent world” loses its status as appearance and becomes “true” in the sense that it is recognized as the one, the only world. Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian has evolved in accordance with this non-metaphysical understanding of existence to become fundamentally synonymous with life itself; no longer that which the phenomenal world and art obscure, the Dionysian has become the very essence of this world, signifying “the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction” (Will to Power, section 1050, 539).\(^97\) Contrary to Nietzsche’s earlier “artists’ metaphysics,” according to which a primordial artist was held responsible for the initial and continuous creation of the world, Nietzsche now espouses the doctrine of eternal recurrence (die ewige Wiederkunft), which rejects creation ex nihilo (the world “becomes, it passes away, but it has never begun to become and never ceased from passing away” [Will to Power, section 1066, 548])\(^98\) and maintains that the world is “a circular movement [‘Kreislauf’] that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game in infinitum” (section 1066, 549). Dionysus has become synonymous with the force (Kraft) whose eternal and annular flow constitutes the world; Nietzsche’s “Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying” is nothing other than “the will to power,” the base drive to which all of life can be reduced

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\(^96\) Heidegger provides an extremely insightful reading of this section in his lectures on Nietzsche (Nietzsche: I: The Will to Power as Art 202-08).

\(^97\) Fragment dated spring 1888.

\(^98\) Fragment dated spring 1888.
While this conceptualization of life as the will to power recalls Schopenhauer’s understanding of the will as the primal unity underlying all that exists, Nietzsche, significantly, no longer draws any distinction between the will to power and the phenomenal world: they are one, whereas in Schopenhauer’s view the phenomenal world is merely an objectification of the will distorted by the laws of time, space, and causality.

Though the vital function of Apollo as that which seduces one to continue living through enveloping one in beautiful illusions appears diminished beside this reformulation of Dionysus as a principle of life (rather than a metaphysical principle that lures one away from life), the work of transformation and beautification that Nietzsche earlier attributed to Apollo remains central to his mature articulation of artistic activity. Although the nihilistic distinction between our world of appearance and an ulterior world of truth has been abolished, this does not mean that we should spurn the artist’s love of Schein as a concomitant expression of nihilism. On the contrary, artistic creation, which entails the enhancement and refinement of the features of our world, is said to affirm rather than disparage reality:

That the artist esteems appearance higher than reality is no objection to this proposition [that “Any distinction between a ‘true’ and an ‘apparent’ world . . . is only a suggestion of decadence.”]. For ‘appearance’ in this case means reality once more, only by way of selection, reinforcement, and correction. The tragic artist is no pessimist: he is precisely

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99 Fragment originally dated 1885, but with significant later revision by Nietzsche.

100 As John Sallis observes in his essay “Shining Apollo,” the sun god Apollo’s proper name in Greek “bespeaks brightness, radiance, shining” (62); it is this irradiating sense of Schein—although no longer attributed to Apollo—that remains central to art once the world of appearance has been abolished.
the one who says Yes to everything questionable, even to the terrible—he is Dionysian.101 (Twilight of the Idols, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” section 6, 484)

Schein is no longer conceived as something false, as a principle that counters and obscures Dionysian truth. The connotation of illusion, semblance, or appearance is now absent from the term; what remains is the sense of shining, of brilliance. The work of art is understood as the result of a process of singling out and highlighting certain elements of reality; it is a representation of reality made radiant by the strength and joy of the artist.102 That art transforms the world does not mean it negates the world for, according to the doctrine of eternal recurrence, the world itself is nothing other than the constant and dynamic transmutation of force. Far from providing an escape from reality in the refuge of beautiful illusions, art is said to actually produce “perfection and plenitude” in the world; “art is essentially affirmation, blessing, deification of existence ['Bejahung, Segnung, Vergöttlichung des Daseins']” (Will to Power, section 821, 434).103 Artistic transformation, then, not only affirms life, but it also renders it sacred. While Nietzsche’s conspicuous appropriation of religious terminology here makes it difficult (or downright misleading) to label his mature view of art as ‘secular,’ we can, I think, discern the immanent orientation of his theory, the absence of an otherworldly frame of reference.

101 “Dass der Künstler den Schein höher schätzt als die Realität, ist kein Einwand gegen diesen Satz […Die Welt scheiden in eine „wahre“ und eine „scheinbare“ . . . ist nur eine Suggestion der décadence“]. Denn „der Schein“ bedeutet hier die Realität noch einmal, nur in einer Auswahl, Verstärkung, Correctur... Der tragische Künstler ist kein Pessimist, --er sagt gerade Ja zu allem Fragwürdigen und Fuchtbaren selbst, er ist dionysisch...”

102 In a recent article, Christopher Janaway has also noted the truth-value of Nietzsche’s late aesthetic theory, stating that the “skilful process of selecting, simplifying, seeing from a distance, and so on” that artistic creation requires results in the artist “gaining truth about oneself” (“Beauty is False, Truth Ugly: Nietzsche on Art and Life” 55).

103 Fragment dated spring 1888.
In re-baptizing the transformative power of Apollo as “Dionysian,” Nietzsche marks its consonance with the primal Rausch of the will to procreate, with the very “roots of life.” He aligns art with love in order to illustrate “how far the transfiguring power of intoxication [‘die Transfigurationskraft des Rausches’] can go” (Will to Power, section 808, 426). The man in love does not merely imagine himself to be “transfigured, stronger, richer, more perfect,” he actually becomes more perfect; like animals who develop “new weapons, pigments, colors, and forms” to attract a mate, man’s “whole economy [‘Gesamthaushalt’] is richer than before, more powerful, more complete [‘ganzer’] than those who do not love” (section 808, 426-27). Artistic Rausch affects the same enhancement of the individual and the world around him as the Rausch of love; this is art’s “organic function [‘organische Funktion’],” the “intestinal fever [‘intestinalen Fieber’]” that makes it “the greatest stimulus of life [‘größtes Stimulans des Lebens’]” (section 808, 426-27). Understood in this way, what could be more conducive to the flourishing of life, more “true” in relation to the way in which life reproduces itself, than the transfiguring power of art?

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I would like to conclude this study of the relationship between art and redemption in Nietzsche by highlighting the way in which the transformative thrust of Nietzsche’s late physiological aesthetics constitutes a reformulation of his earlier conception of Apollonian redemption. Despite the fact that he unequivocally repudiates the need for redemption in his late formulation of art (dismissing it as a symptom of decadence or sickness that the healthy artist is either cured from or immune to), Nietzsche is unwilling—or unable—to fully disentangle his valorization of

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104 Dated spring 1888.
artistic activity from the will to redeem the world. Whereas decadent or religio-moral pessimists (such as Schopenhauer and Wagner) are said to cling to forms of redemption that allow them to escape (momentarily and, eventually, eternally) from the world, strong (artist) pessimists are said to be capable of redeeming themselves through the exertion of their will: “Those imposing artists who let a harmony sound forth from every conflict are those who bestow upon things their own power and self-redemption: they express their innermost experience in the symbolism of every work of art they produce—their creativity is gratitude for their existence” (Will to Power, section 852, 451). According to this formulation, artistic creation functions as a process of “self-redemption” whereby the artist transforms the chaos both within and outside of him into consonance. This transformative act is performed not out of resentment towards or dissatisfaction with the dissonant conditions of life, but rather out of gratitude for one’s own being, out of the sheer joy experienced in exercising one’s abilities. Conceptualized as a corollary of artistic transformation, redemption becomes a continuous, self-reflexive and non-eschatological movement, a verb (an action) that can never become nominalized (completed). Nietzsche has replaced Schopenhauer’s self-denying, world-negating mechanism of redemption with a this-worldly process of redemption through sublimation and creation; the artist channels his instincts and his suffering into the work of art, refining and transfiguring them through the controlled exertion of force. While there remains an element of asceticism (and perhaps even a

105 “Die überwältigenden Künstler, welche einen Konsonanz-Ton aus jedem Konflikte erklingen lassen, sind die, welche ihre eigene Mächtigkeit und Selbsterlösung noch den Dingen zugute kommen lassen: sie sprechen ihre innerste Erfahrung in der Symbolik jedes Kunstwerkes aus, —ihr Schaffen ist Dankbarkeit für ihr Sein.” This section is dated spring-fall 1887; revised spring-fall 1888.
That the transformation which is achieved in art is conceptualized as a redemptive act is paradigmatic of the way in which Nietzsche’s life-affirming philosophy culminates in what could be termed a wholly terrestrial religion—a system of worship that hinges not on an extramundane god figure but on the absence of one. At the centre of Nietzsche’s project is the attempt to reclaim, without recourse to otherworldly notions, all aspects of existence as worthy of reverence and glorification. As I hope this chapter has shown, Nietzsche’s fight is not so much against a religious approach to life (for how can we understand his endorsement of art as “affirmation, blessing, deification of existence” in a non-religious sense?) as against a specifically Christian one; for it is Christianity, he believes, that has disparaged the natural conditions of our world and impaired our ability to experience the act of living as sacred. Nietzsche considers the locus of Christian redemption—Christ on the cross—as “an objection [‘Einwand’] to this life, as the formula of its condemnation [. . .] a curse on life, a pointer [‘Fingerzeig’] to seek redemption from it” (Will to Power, section 1052, 543). The redemption realized through artistic transformation in Nietzsche’s earthly religion, however, is

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106 It stands in opposition, that is, to the ‘ascetic ideal’ which ushered in the “hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself” (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” 28, 162-3). It is not so much against physical drives as in honour of them that the Dionysian artist creates.

107 One might query the validity of this claim in light of the prominent role Greek gods, namely Dionysus and Apollo, play in what I am characterizing as a wholly ‘ungodly’ religion. In response, I would argue that these pagan gods serve a purely figurative function in Nietzsche’s philosophy; the names are meant to encapsulate forces that exist within the world, rather than attribute these forces to the work of supernatural divinities. On his use of the term Dionysian, Nietzsche himself explains that he took “some liberty” as a “philologist and man of words” in naming his “purely artistic and anti-Christian” worldview after a Greek deity (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” section 5, 24).

108 Dated spring 1888.
of a radically un-Christian nature: not the work of an external ‘Redeemer,’ but the autonomous work of an individual who possesses the capacity to affirm and rejoice in existence without availing himself to supernatural aid; not redemption from the conditions of this world, but a means of shaping those conditions so that they are no longer discordant with one’s own “inner experience.” The Dionysian work of art is a testament to the fact that its creator has no need to be delivered from life, that he is capable of reconciling himself to the circumstances of life through his own artistic activity.

That man is granted the capacity to redeem himself is his reward for having done away with God, who until now posed “the greatest objection to existence”: “We deny God, we deny the responsibility in God: only thereby do we redeem the world” (Twilight of the Idols, “The Four Great Errors,” section 8, 501).109 In Nietzsche’s godless world, art functions as a vehicle for “secular redemption,”110 a medium through which the strong (those capable of affirming a world without God) can exercise their autonomy and delight in their abilities. Ultimately, it is the Apollonian principle of formation that remains at the centre of this process of aesthetic redemption in both Nietzsche’s early and late writings. Although it has evolved from the dissembling veil that saves one from the Dionysian abyss to the transfiguring activity through which one harmonizes one’s drive, the form-giving faculty of Apollo continues to represent the element in art that makes life worth living. As “the urge to perfect self-sufficiency ['der Drang zum vollkommenen Für-sich-sein'],” as the “moderation ['Mäßigung']” that moulds the Dionysian “[p]lenitude of power ['Fülle der Macht']” into “the highest form of self-affirmation

109 “Wir leugnen Gott, wir leugnen die Verantwortlichkeit in Gott: damit erst erlösen wir die Welt.”
110 Shoshana Ronen has used the term “secular salvation” to describe the aim of Nietzsche’s and Wittgenstein’s philosophical projects in her book Nietzsche and Wittgenstein: In Search of Secular Salvation.
[‘Selbstbejahung’] in a cool noble, severe beauty” (Will to Power, section 1050, 539),\textsuperscript{111} Apollo serves as the inspiration for the spiritualizing or sublimating power that, in Nietzsche’s later work, man must employ in order to make of himself (and the world) something worth exalting. In order to worship life, it seems, one must possess the ability to give it form.

\textsuperscript{111} Dated 1888.
Like Schopenhauer and Kant before him, Walter Pater, the (somewhat unwitting) founder of British Aestheticism, stressed the contemplative dimension of aesthetic experience. Against a “means and ends” approach to life in which action is prioritized over being, Pater championed “impassioned contemplation” as the ideal attitude one should strive to cultivate, an attitude inspired by the “sterility” of poetry and art, which encourage “beholding for the mere joy of beholding” (“Wordsworth” 61-2). The characterization of poetry and art as sterile emphasizes the way in which Pater considers aesthetic contemplation, and the “impassioned contemplation” of life in general, to be meaningful in themselves and not in relation to some external or future outcome: for Pater, “To treat life in the spirit of art, is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified: to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry” (“Wordsworth” 62). This avowal of the self-contained significance of experience resists not only an instrumentalist approach to life (the “means and ends” attitude Pater decries), but also, and more importantly for our purposes, the extramundane implications of the Christian redemption narrative. In opposition to a Christian worldview that would contextualize an individual’s life on earth within the eschatological framework of an afterlife, Pater proposes a fully earthbound approach to temporality in which an individual’s life is considered an agglomeration of unique experiences valuable purely for their own sake.
Pater shares with Nietzsche\textsuperscript{112} a fundamental belief in the temporal nature of art, of art’s relevance to the sphere of living, of its value as a model for relating to the phenomenal world. Both thinkers not only reject metaphysical frameworks in their understanding of the human condition, they also find in art a means of valorizing the sensuous and ephemeral facets of life that they believe have been detrimentally disparaged by Christianity over the past two millennia. Despite this similarity, a Nietzshean critique\textsuperscript{113} of Pater’s aestheticism exposes where life-denying forms of thought may lurk beneath what initially appears to be a life-affirming alternative to the religious depreciation of the world. This chapter will argue that Pater’s attempt to counteract the otherworldly trajectory of Christian eschatology by advocating the aesthetic appreciation of life ends up fostering an attitude at least equally and potentially even more hostile to mundane experience. In contrast to the prevalent critical tendency to dissociate Pater’s worldly, anti-Christian early writings from his more religiously-amenable late work,\textsuperscript{114} I would like to suggest that Pater’s contemplative aestheticism, in both its early and late formulations, is

\textsuperscript{112} While their lives spanned virtually the same period (Nietzsche 1844-1900; Pater 1839-1894) and their work shares a number of similar concerns, Nietzsche and Pater do not appear to have been aware of each other’s work. See Chapter 2 of Patrick Bridgwater’s \textit{Nietzsche in Anglosaxony}, where he outlines several parallels between Nietzsche and Pater while stressing that there is no evidence to suggest that either thinker read the other. Bridgwater therefore thoroughly disagrees with Michael Hamburger’s claim that Pater “was among that \`elite whose recognition established Nietzsche as an international figure when he was scarcely read in Germany” (qtd. in Bridgwater 21).

\textsuperscript{113} My method here is inspired, in particular, by the third essay (“What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”) from Nietzsche’s \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}.

\textsuperscript{114} Although hard facts about Pater’s religious beliefs and practices are scant, there is a general consensus (largely derived from Thomas Wright’s early biography \textit{The Life of Walter Pater}) that Pater renounced his boyhood (Anglican) faith around 1860, then once again became receptive to Christianity (of the High Church variety) around the time he was writing \textit{Marius the Epicurean} (1881-1884). As Denis Donoghue, one of Pater’s more recent biographers, puts it, by the mid 1880s Pater conceded that “the case for crediting Christianity was no worse than that for crediting anything” (93). Unlike the bulk of studies that address the topic of religion in Pater’s work, my study is less concerned with tracing changes in Pater’s personal faith than with exposing the consistent yet inconspicuous otherworldliness of his aesthetic theory. My analysis thus builds on the work of other critics who have also, albeit on different terms, complicated the widely accepted ‘early’ and ‘late’ distinction in Pater criticism; see, for instance, Carolyn Williams’ “On Pater’s Late Style,” \textit{Nineteenth-Century Prose} 24.2 (1997), 143-60, and William F. Shuter’s \textit{Rereading Walter Pater}, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
predicated upon a quasi-religious impulse to transcend or even renounce worldly activity. This desire to rise above the conditions of everyday life makes Pater’s aestheticism far more complicit in the propagation of otherworldliness than is initially apparent. While Pater inarguably strives to valorize life in secular terms, his efforts are undercut by the spiritually circumscribed view of art that informs his aesthetic theory.

As a means of framing our critical interrogation of Pater’s proposal that we “treat life in the spirit of art,” I would like to turn to a painting that depicts the phenomenon of earthly existence in a particularly evocative way: The Garden of Earthly Delights by Dutch master Hieronymus Bosch (see figure 1). The central panel of this early sixteenth-century triptych—framed to the left and right by depictions of the Garden of Eden and the torments of Hell—portrays nude men and women in an outdoor setting (replete with fantastical animals and oversized fruits) partaking unabashedly in a variety of sexual activities.

![The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymus Bosch](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights_by_Hieronymus_Bosch.jpg)

While most art historians agree that this overtly erotic scene would have been intended and understood, in the early sixteenth century, as “a condemnation of unbridled sensuality” (Gibson 10), many modern viewers of the painting have found in it an innocent and positive representation of the pleasures of life on earth.\(^{115}\) I propose that this more recent approach to Bosch’s painting mirrors the aesthetic attitude towards life that Pater encourages us to adopt. Like the modern, secular viewers of The Garden of Earthly Delights who disregard the eschatological significance of the religious images flanking the depiction of earthly life—Eden and Hell, “the origin of sin and its punishment” (Gibson 80)—Pater urges us to turn our attention solely to the “middle world”\(^{116}\) we currently inhabit, to the “interval” between birth and death or the “indefinite reprieve” that constitutes our temporal existence (Renaissance 153). With no eternal afterlife beyond the horizon and no lost paradise to mourn, we are enjoined to turn our efforts towards the expansion of the brief interval we have on earth, a feat that involves “getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (153). Pater claims that aesthetic experience is the most effective means of stirring the “Great passions” that lead to the development of a “quickened, multiplied consciousness”; if we cultivate “poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake” (153), then the phenomenal world really can,

\(^{115}\) In his book Hieronymus Bosch, Walter S. Gibson singles out Wilhelm Fraenger’s interpretation of the central panel as having been particularly influential (although not historically verifiable). Fraenger claimed that Bosch was a member of a religious sect known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit, whose members “practised sexual promiscuity as part of their religious rites, through which they attempted to achieve the state of innocence possessed by Adam before the fall” (10). While Fraenger therefore interpreted the central panel of The Garden of Earthly Delights as a representation of the “‘vegetative innocence […] pure joy, pure bliss’” of human sexuality (qtd. in Gibson 80), Gibson points out that Bosch’s placement of this scene “between Eden and Hell, the origin of sin and its punishment,” suggests that the central panel is meant to portray “the deadly sin of Lust” (80).

\(^{116}\) The term is taken from Pater’s essay on Botticelli in The Renaissance, where Pater expresses his preference for the “middle world” depicted by Botticelli—the earthly realm populated by men and women “in their mixed and uncertain condition,” “undisturbed by any moral ambition”—over the other worlds depicted by Dante (36).
in a sense, become a ‘garden of earthly delights.’ As liberating as this theory may appear, the notion that one can derive pleasure from the phenomenal world just as one derives pleasure from a work of art will be shown to conflict problematically with the attempt to ‘redeem’ sensuous experience from its religious devaluation. Pater’s aestheticism, which initially claims to deliver us from over-spiritualization, ends up prescribing a near-total withdrawal from worldly activity that resembles, paradoxically, the otherworldly spirituality of a religious ascetic or mystic.

The Spirit of the Renaissance and Christian Spirituality

Much of Pater’s early work is concerned with demonstrating the antagonistic relationship between Hellenic sensuousness, which he aligns with his own aesthetic philosophy, and the world-rejecting asceticism of medieval Christianity—elements of which he recognizes in the Puritan sentiment of his own time. Even before the publication of Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which Arnold expounds his famous dialectic of Hellenism and Hebraism, Pater’s work exhibits a comparably dialectical understanding of the tension between Greek and Christian approaches to life. In his early (and anonymous) essay “Poems by William Morris” (1868) (the final paragraphs of which were reworked as the infamous

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118 As William Shuter points out, this early essay, along with “Winckelmann” (1867) and “Coleridge’s writings” (1866), was published “in the intellectually progressive, and even radical, pages of the *Westminster Review*” (5). See Laurel Brake’s “The Discourses of Journalism: ‘Arnold and Pater’ Again—and Wilde” in *Pater in the 1990s* and the chapter “Journalism and Literary Form” in her book *Walter Pater* for a detailed exploration of the ways in which the reputation and readership of Victorian periodicals influenced the reception (and content) of Pater’s works.
Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater discusses the Renaissance as a “supreme instance” of the transition from “dreamlight”—a period of religious reverie wherein “delirium,” “illusion” and “experiences of mere soul” reigned while “the body and the bodily senses [slept]”—to “daylight”—the awakening of the “human spirit” to the beauty of the sensuous world (305). The return to an “earthly” daylight, “open only to the senses,” is associated with the return of “pagan” or “Hellenist” sentiments that confront and contest the elevated spiritual vision of the medieval “monk in his cloister” (305). The elements of “Hellenism” in Chaucer’s work, for instance, are said to be exemplary of “that earliest return from the overwrought spiritualities of the middle age to the earlier, more ancient life of the senses” (307). Pater’s first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), is comprised mostly of previously published essays on figures in western culture whom Pater viewed, in one way or another, as representatives of this transition from “dreamlight” to “daylight.” Taken as a whole, the book traces the movement of the Renaissance not only through fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, but wherever Pater discerns the return of a Hellenic attitude privileging delight in the senses, the intellect and imaginative creation for their own sake over a moralizing attitude of religious self-renunciation.

The tension Pater sets up between the Renaissance and medieval Christianity differs in a significant way from Arnold’s dialectic of Hellenism and Hebraism: whereas Arnold views Hellenism and Hebraism, despite their differences, as allies in the advancement of social and moral progress, Pater’s interest in the Renaissance return of Hellenic sentiment is void of any

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119 Four editions of *The Renaissance*, each one slightly different, appeared during Pater’s lifetime. Many of the changes Pater made were in response to the negative criticism provoked by the first edition. The most controversial section of *The Renaissance* was its Conclusion, which was omitted from the second edition of the book (1877). The Conclusion reappeared in the third (1888) and fourth (1893) editions in a slightly altered version: virtually all references to religion and morality were deleted, rendering the contrast between Pater’s radically aesthetic criteria for evaluating experience and more traditional religious or moral criteria implied rather than explicit. My citations here, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the 1893 edition.
commensurate utopian or religious teleology. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold famously defines Hellenism and Hebraism as collaborative means by which humanity strives to bring about “man’s perfection or salvation” (96): Hellenism is said to facilitate the pursuit of this goal through inducing us to “see things as they really are” (97) in nature and to cultivate “the two noblest things, *sweetness and light*” (40), while Hebraism teaches moral “conduct and obedience” (96) by promoting “*strictness of conscience*” (97). Arnold’s alignment of Hellenism and Hebraism as corresponding means of pursuing “man’s perfection or salvation” both undercuts the eschatological thrust of religion (rendering its ‘saving’ power earthly and dismissing its otherworldly aspect as “*Aberglaube*”120) and ascribes teleological significance to culture—rendering it a vehicle of moral and ultimately social betterment. T.S. Eliot famously accused Arnold of positioning “Culture in the place of Religion” and leaving “Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling” (“Arnold and Pater” 436); from the opposite perspective, we might also charge Arnold with subjecting culture to the teleological demands of religion and therefore contaminating aesthetic ‘feeling’ with an externally-imposed criterion—moral amelioration. Eliot, quite rightly, sees “the gospel of Pater follow[ing] naturally upon the prophesy of Arnold” (436), but while Pater in many ways draws on Arnold’s definitions of Hellenism, Culture, and Criticism, he rejects both the objective morality and the progress-oriented teleology Arnold ascribes to them. Where Arnold stresses the objective nature of detached contemplation, Pater highlights the highly subjective and emotionally charged nature of aesthetic spectatorship; where Arnold identifies Hellenism and Hebraism as parallel means of

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120 Arnold defines the German word *Aberglaube* (generally translated into English as ‘superstition’) in *Literature and Dogma* as “extra-belief, belief beyond what is certain and verifiable”; he uses the term to reason away the otherworldly or “fairy-tale” belief in the soul’s eternal salvation that pervades “popular Christianity,” while maintaining the mundane applicability and necessity of the pursuit of “righteousness” (86-7).
pursuing the same end—“man’s perfection or salvation”—Pater radically dissociates aesthetic experience from any end external to the pleasure it produces in the moment. The task that Pater’s aestheticism assumes is precisely that of delivering immediate experience from its subjection to future-oriented notions of fulfillment such as Arnold’s.

For Pater, the critic’s approach to a work of art exemplifies the ideal stance from which life (and art) should be appreciated. In his Preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater clarifies his own understanding of what criticism is before aligning it, as Arnold aligned his definition of Criticism with Hellenism, with the umbrella term which unites the sundry essays collected here. While ostensibly agreeing with Arnold’s assertion that Criticism must strive “to see the object as in itself it really is” (“The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” 9), Pater declares that the “first step” towards achieving this goal requires that one “know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (xiv). Because the object of aesthetic contemplation—Beauty—is “relative” (xiv) and cannot be abstracted from the context in which it is perceived or the particular intellectual and emotional apparatus of the spectator who perceives it, the task of the critic becomes to develop “a certain kind of temperament” consisting of “the power to be deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (xxx) and the ability to translate the unique quality of one’s impressions into words. Graham Hough has coined the term “impressionist criticism” to describe the highly individualistic and subjective nature of Pater’s critical writing. Indeed, many early reviews of *The Renaissance* criticized the book’s lack of basis in historical facts, yet commended its ability to convey a distinct impression of the works

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121 In his chapter on Pater in *The Last Romantics*, Hough identifies some essential similarities between Pater’s essays and the impressionist movement in painting: “In both there is the formal allegiance to science, but behind it an essentially lyrical mood; the same neglect of structure and definition in pursuit of delicate evanescent effects that are felt to be more real and more important, because more immediate” (160).
discussed. As Pater himself states, what is essential is that the critic distil the “peculiar or unique kind” of “pleasurable sensations” produced by a work of art (xxx); thus, it becomes the responsibility of every individual critic to refine and impart his own response to an artist’s work: “What is the peculiar sensation, what is the peculiar quality of pleasure, which his work has the property of exciting in us, and which we cannot get elsewhere? For this, especially when he has to speak of a comparatively unknown artist, is always the chief question which a critic has to answer” (33).

In Pater’s idiosyncratic rendition of the critic’s task, the pleasure induced in aesthetic contemplation is explicitly foregrounded: “[A]ll works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life” are regarded as “powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations,” with each individual work producing “a special, a unique, impression of pleasure” (xxx). It is not surprising, then, that the “Renaissance” works of art and thought taken as objects of criticism in these essays are shown to exhibit an evident preoccupation with producing pleasure for its own sake. Pater provides his definition of the term ‘Renaissance’ in the first essay of the collection (“Two Early French Stories”):

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122 In an unsigned review in the *Westminster Review* (April 1873), Emilia Frances Patterson (née Strong) declared that “The historical element is precisely that which is wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book,” yet she also praised Pater for his “unusual power of recognizing and finely discriminating delicate differences of sentiment” (*Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* 71-3). Similar opinions are repeated, for example, in Sidney Colvin’s review in *Pall Mall Gazette* (March 1873), W.J. Stillman’s review in *Nation* (9 October 1873), and Margaret Wilson Oliphant’s review in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (November 1873) (*Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* 47-54; 81-85; 85-91). The title of the book—*Studies in the History of the Renaissance*—was changed for the second edition to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, most likely in response to the charge that Pater’s scholarship lacked a historical basis. More recent critics have found merit in Pater’s unorthodox historiographical method: J.B. Bullen in “The Historiography of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*,” for instance, defends Pater’s “highly personal mode of historical discourse” (159) as a “metonymical approach” (162) to the subject of the Renaissance.

123 This essay appeared under the title “Aucassin and Nicolette” in the first (1873) edition; Pater substantially revised the essay, adding the story of Amis and Amile and changing the title, for the second (1877) edition.
For us the Renaissance is the name of 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, urging those who experience this desire to search out first one and then another means of intellectual or imaginative enjoyment, and directing them not only to the discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to the divination of fresh sources thereof—new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art. (1)

Pater’s assertion that the Renaissance movement encourages the enjoyment of the intellect and the imagination expressly “for their own sake” is a far cry from Arnold’s claim that Culture cultivates our best self “at the expense of our old untransformed self, [which takes] pleasure only in doing what it likes or is used to do” (*Culture and Anarchy* 71). Rather than curbing the pursuit of pleasure by helping us to recognize the authority of “right reason,” the spirit of the Renaissance promotes the discovery of unexpected sources of pleasure, both new and old. While Pater explicitly links his Renaissance to Arnold’s Hellenism by invoking its search to revive the “perfect sweetness in the Hellenic world” (2 emphasis mine), the parallelism with the religious pursuit of “man’s perfection and salvation” is conspicuously absent; indeed, Pater’s Renaissance is defined time and again as delighting in aspects of human experience that run counter to the demands of Christian morality.

Pater is able to identify “Renaissance” art, for instance, in the midst of medieval (twelfth- and thirteenth-century) France, because he perceives in certain works of this era a “rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time” (16). He writes:
In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian idea; and their love became sometimes a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion. It was the return of that ancient Venus, not dead, but only hidden for a time in the caves of the Venusberg, of those old pagan gods still going to and fro on the earth, under all sorts of disguises. (16)

While Pater had limited his definition of the Renaissance earlier to delight in “the intellect and the imagination,” here he clearly emphasizes the bodily or sensuous element that is also central to the movement. The association of the Renaissance spirit with the pagan goddess of love, fertility and beauty clearly distinguishes the corporeal sense of beauty celebrated by Renaissance art from a Christian sense of beauty grounded in the ethereal purity of the divine (or the chaste figure of Jesus). Specifically, Renaissance art is shown to rebel against the Christian ethic of self-renunciation in its celebration of pleasurable bodily sensations. While Renaissance art is likened to a “rival religion,” the “old pagan gods going to and fro” are not otherworldly exemplars of super-human virtue; rather, they represent the natural delight in sensuality that medieval Christianity is said to have stripped away from life. What the medieval Christian tradition would banish from the earth to the realm of perdition (to Venusberg), the Renaissance spirit resurrects and reaffirms as an essential and worthy aspect of lived experience.

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124 This alignment of the sensuous, the intellect and the imagination in the Renaissance is yet another example of how Pater dissents from the “disembodied, sanitized Hellenism of Arnold’s ‘sweetness and light’ in Culture and Anarchy” (Brake Walter Pater 23).
The link Pater draws between the temporal pleasure celebrated in Renaissance art and pagan/Hellenic culture is most explicitly explored in the essay on Winckelmann. For Pater, Winckelmann is a chief (if anachronistic) representative of the Renaissance because he turned away from the “crabbed Protestantism” of his time to embrace “the supreme tradition of beauty” that first flowered in ancient Greece (120). Whereas the Christian antagonist of other Renaissance essays has been a medieval form of monastic asceticism, here the Protestant tradition is also clearly under attack: it is the “Protestant principle in art” that is held responsible for “cut[ting] off Germany from the Hellenic “tradition of beauty” (120). Roman Catholicism, in contrast, is said to have “reconciled itself to the Renaissance,” and thus maintains “a certain antique and as it were pagan grandeur” (120). This Catholic connection to the “supreme tradition of beauty,” as we shall see, is precisely the aspect of Christianity that Pater (in stark

125 Although “Winckelmann” treats the most recent historical period and is therefore placed at the end of the collection (directly before the Conclusion), it boasts the earliest publication date of all the essays in the book (first appearing in Westminster Review, January 1867). The “Winckelmann” of The Renaissance underwent substantial revision; as with most of the works that Pater revised in his lifetime, many of the sentences that were outspokenly critical of Christianity were subdued or removed. The essay contains particularly important insights regarding Pater’s “theory” of the Renaissance; it is here, for instance, that he opposes the “superficial view” of the Renaissance as a “definite period” with the “deeper view” that sees it as “an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that [...] was ever taking place” (145).

126 Pater was raised Anglican, but early biographers report that Walter and his brother “were the first Paters who were not brought up as Catholics” (Gosse 243). Their father purportedly “quitted the Roman Church before his marriage, without adopting any other form of faith” (243). Gosse attributes Pater’s “haunting sense of the value of the sensuous emblem, the pomp of colour and melody, in the offices of religion” to his Catholic heritage (246-47). While Pater never converted to Roman Catholicism, he appears to have remained a High Church enthusiast all his life (attending services regularly even during the years when he openly expressed his lack of faith). From his boyhood days at King’s School, Canterbury, where the Reverend E. H. Woodall (who later converted to Catholicism) instilled in him a fondness for High Church ritual (Wright I 109), to his enjoyment (without taking Communion) of the “ornate services” (II 38) at the Reverend George Nugée’s St. Austin’s Priory, in Walworth—“‘a hotbed of so-called Romanism’” founded in 1878 (II 32)—to his frequent attendance near the end of his life at the “ritualistic S. Barnabas’s” (II 203), Pater’s penchant for the ritual elements of Christianity remained unflagging. A.C. Benson reports that Pater once formulated the following analogy, which clearly illustrates his partiality for Catholic ceremony: “Roman Catholicism, he said, was like a table draped in fair linen, covered with lights and flowers and vessels of crystal and silver; while Puritanism was like the same table, after it had been cleared, serviceable enough, but without charm or grace. The essential form present in both; but the one furnished with rich and dainty accessories, the other unadorned and plain” (204). See Chapter 3 (“Pater Dolorosa”) of Ellis Hanson’s Decadence and Catholicism for a study, albeit with “numerous qualifications,” of Pater as “a decadent, a homosexual, and an Anglo-Catholic” (170).
contrast to his generally derisive attitude towards Christianity as a whole in *The Renaissance*) will celebrate in *Marius the Epicurean*.

Pater subscribes to Winckelmann’s characterization of the Greeks as a cheerful people who had the good fortune that their thoughts and beliefs “were ever in the happiest readiness to be transformed into objects for the senses”; Greek religion, therefore, had the “privilege […] to be able to transform itself into an artistic ideal” (131). That the Greek intellect did not exceed the bounds of sensuous experience, that “the mind [had] not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh” (132), is taken to be the most salient (and most enviable) feature of Greek culture. Even Plato, often figured as one of history’s most avid purveyors of otherworldly ideals, appears to Winckelmann “still uninfected by any spiritual sickness, finding the end of all endeavour in the aspects of the human form, the continual stir and motion of a comely human life” (117). For Winckelmann and Pater, sculpture represents the pinnacle of Greek art not merely because it takes the human form as its subject matter, but because it imbues or fills the human form with the deepest spiritual or intellectual significance, “penetrat[ing] it with an imaginative motive” (136).

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127 In the early version of this essay, Pater explicitly links this idea to Hegel’s notion of the ideal: “With him [Hegel] the ideal is a Versinnlichen of the idea—the idea turned into an object of sense. By the idea, stripped of its technical phraseology, he means man’s knowledge about himself and his relation to the world, in its most rectified and concentrated form” (94). As F.C. McGrath has noted, Pater limits Hegel’s philosophy “to the realm of concrete experience” by adopting Hegel’s notion of the ideal (“the idea turned into an object of sense”) as his “ultimate goal” (123). Indeed, Pater’s understanding of the balanced union of spirit and sensory form in Greek sculpture is heavily influenced by Hegel’s philosophy of art, and he quotes him extensively in both versions of the essay. B.A. Inman has shown that, by the time he wrote “Winckelmann,” Pater had already read (in German) Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind, Science of Logic, History of Philosophy, and Philosophy of Fine Art* (Walter Pater’s Reading 9, 32, 34, 49-58). For a detailed study of Pater’s indebtedness to Hegel, see Giles Whiteley’s *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (London: Legenda, 2010).

128 We might contrast this characterization of Plato with Nietzsche’s critique of Socrates (see *Birth of Tragedy* sections 13-15 and “The Problem of Socrates” in *Twilight of the Idols*). For Nietzsche, Plato and Socrates are “symptoms of degeneration, tools of the Greek dissolution, pseudo-Greek, anti-Greek” (“The Problem of Socrates,” section 2, 474).
Pater contrasts the earthly focus of the Hellenic culture to which Winckelmann and he himself were so intensely drawn to the “frozen world” of medieval Christianity (118) that produced art “always struggling to express thoughts beyond itself” (131). He compares Fra Angelico’s *Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1432), in which “all that is outward or sensible […] is only the symbol or type of a really inexpressible world” (131), to the Venus of Melos, which is “in no sense a symbol, a suggestion, of anything beyond its own victorious fairness” (132). For Pater, the Venus of Melos does not lack spiritual significance; rather, she *embodies* spirituality, as opposed to merely allegorizing it: “The mind begins and ends with the finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive. This motive is not lightly or loosely attached to the sensuous form, as its meaning to an allegory, but saturates and is identical with it” (132). As Kate Hext points out, the nature of the “spiritual motive” said to be immanent in the classical work of art remains frustratingly unexplained: “The ontological status of pantheism in Pater’s work is irreducibly ambiguous: whether ‘spirit’ inheres in matter in any objective sense or whether it is but the product of the imaginative individual is unclear” (76). What we can say definitively about the “spiritual motive” in this passage, in my view, is that it only succeeds in fully penetrating matter through *artistic* embodiment; the complete and balanced union of “spiritual motive” and “sensuous form” seems to be constituted and restricted by the boundaries of the work of art; it is only in “ideal art,” of which the Venus of Melos is exemplary, that a perfect balance is struck between “thought” and “its sensible embodiment” (132). In another essay collected in *The Renaissance*, Pater lauds Leonardo da Vinci for performing a similar kind of “alchemy” in his work: “[T]he idea is stricken into colour and imagery: a cloudy mysticism is refined to a subdued and graceful mystery, and painting pleases the eye while it satisfies the soul” (73). Indeed, that art can become “a means of escape from the ‘tyranny of the senses’” for the
spectator is the result, according to Pater, of the fact that the artist “has gradually sunk his intellectual and spiritual ideas in sensuous form” and thereby tempered the “turbid fever” of life (142). While the “shameless and childlike” sensuousness of Greek art stands in direct contrast to the attitude of “Christian asceticism,” which “contend[s] for a perfection that makes the blood turbid, and frets the flesh, and discredits the actual world about us” (142-43), a distinction has nevertheless been introduced between the “turbid fever” of the “life of the senses” and the spiritually or intellectually mediated sensuousness of art. A reformulation of the qualified nature of artistic sensuousness can be found in the essay “The School of Giorgione” (1877), which Pater added to the third (1888) edition of The Renaissance: “[A]rt addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the ‘imaginative reason’ through the senses” (83).

F.C. McGrath’s book The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm provides a comprehensive account of the intellectually or spiritually mediated nature of sensuousness in Pater’s theory of art; what it does not address, however, is the fact that this conceptualization of art as “sensible spirit” poses a problem for Pater’s aesthetic philosophy of life. Indeed, the divide thus posited between sensuous matter in life and sensuous matter in art will prove exceedingly problematic in light of Pater’s larger claim that contemplative aestheticism can serve as an all-encompassing mode of approaching the world. I will return to this issue in the final section of this chapter.

129 Pater’s criticism of “Christian asceticism” is targeted directly at “Christianity” in the earlier version of “Winckelmann”: “But Christianity, with its uncompromising idealism, discrediting the slightest touch of sense, has lighted up for the artistic life, with its inevitable sensuousness, a background of flame” (104). In another section excised from the later version, Pater assigns accountability to Christianity for accelerating the decline of Hellenic art: “The worship of sorrow, the crucifixion of the senses, the expectation of the end of the world, are not in themselves principles of artistic rejuvenescence. Christianity in the first instance did quicken that decay” (106).

130 “Imaginative reason” is a concept Pater borrows from Matthew Arnold’s essay “Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment” (1864), in which “imaginative reason” is identified as “the main element of the modern spirit’s life,” in contrast to the “senses and understanding” that characterized pagan poetry and the “heart and imagination” that characterized medieval Christian poetry (161).
What unites all of the artistic works examined in *The Renaissance* is that they recapture the sinless pleasure that (according to Pater, in agreement with Winckelmann) the Greeks expressed in their celebration of the human form, of beauty as a sensuous phenomenon. While we might question just how world-embracing the highly normative or idealized bodies depicted in Greek sculpture really are, Pater nevertheless claims that—in opposition to the “mystical” and “corpse-like” bodies depicted in medieval Christian art—Greek sculpture glorifies the human body in wholly sensible terms (131). The return of the Hellenic affirmation of the senses in the Renaissance period is said to once again place art directly in the service of “human culture,” thereby countering the otherworldly thrust of medieval Christian art, which intimates spiritual truths that cannot be fully contained in sensuous form (131). Pater identifies the Greek-inspired affirmation of the senses in a number of Christian images from the Renaissance period—namely those that diminish the divine in their celebration of the human. Botticelli’s Madonnas, for instance, which are singled out for “their unique expression and charm” (36), are said to “shrink from the pressure of the divine child, and plead in unmistakeable undertones for a warmer, lower humanity” (39). Similarly, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* is admired for the way in

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131 While Pater readily adopts Winckelmann’s idealized conception of Greek sensuousness in this early essay, many of his subsequent works—most notably the essays “Study of Dionysus” (1876) and “The Bacchanals of Euripides” (1889), his *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), the unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour* (the first five chapters of which were published in 1888), and the short story “Apollo in Picardy” (1893)—question the supposed ‘innocence’ of Hellenic culture by exploring the dark underbelly of sensual experience. Billie Andrew Inman quite famously suggested in her essay “Estrangement and Connection” that Pater’s shift after 1874 towards darker subject matter—the appearance of “the theme of victimization and the tendency to glorify suffering” in his work (19)—is partially in response to the personal and professional crisis he suffered when Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, discovered his homoerotic relationship with undergraduate William Money Hardinge and subsequently blocked his chance at a University Proctorship.

132 Pater’s praise of the human quality of Botticelli’s Madonnas makes an interesting contrast to Joris-Karl Huysmans’ censure of Botticelli’s Madonnas in his 1898 novel *La cathédrale*, in which the protagonist Durtal laments the fact that Botticelli used the same fleshly model for Venus and the virgin Mary and thereby rendered both women “purely pagan. For the Venus, well and good. But the Virgin! [‘L’une et l’autre sont païennes; la Vénus se conçoit, mais la Vierge!’ (II: 140)]” (255).
which it strips away the accretion of spiritual meanings from the iconic scene and represents “the Eucharist, not as the pale Host of the altar, but as one taking leave of his friends” (77). Such Renaissance-era Christian images seem to represent, for Pater, an adaptation or appropriation of Christian iconography for the (pagan-inspired) purposes of celebrating earthly life. The spirit of the Renaissance is thus present for Pater wherever art can be seen breathing life into an overly spiritualized humanity, wherever humanity is brought back from the brink of renouncing the world, wherever the ascetic pursuit of otherworldly ideals is countered by an eruption of humanist sentiment. While Greek paganism is the antithesis to Christian spirituality most often evoked in The Renaissance, Pater’s Conclusion makes it clear that he believes modern day secularists—whom we might broadly define as those who disbelieve in anything ‘beyond’ the temporal realm—can also reverse the religious devaluation of earthly experience by cultivating an aesthetic appreciation of life. Stefano Evangelista has suggested that it was Goethe (in particular his 1804 poem “Generalbeichte”), far more than Winckelmann, who served as the model for Pater’s application of Greek culture to modern concerns: “Winckelmann’s Hellenism shuts itself off from its historical present and therefore entails a rejection of modernity. Goethe, by contrast, apprehends the principles of classicism from Winckelmann but, crucially, treats them as a form of intellectual self-discipline through which he learns how to become modern rather than retreat into a utopian past” (“‘Life in the Whole’: Goethe and English Aestheticism” 184-85). Despite Goethe’s ‘healthy’ (in Nietzschean terms)

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133 Despite being a central tenet of modern secularism, the disbelief in the ‘beyond’ is, of course, not an innovation of the modern period. Most notable in the context of Pater’s work is the Epicurean belief that the soul ceased to exist with the death of the body. Pater himself, as he stated in a footnote that accompanies the reinstatement of the Conclusion in the third edition, chose to “dea[l] more fully […] with the thoughts suggested by [the Conclusion of The Renaissance]” in a classical context in his novel Marius the Epicurean (150).
influence, however, Pater’s aesthetic philosophy will be shown ultimately to “retreat” from or “reject” modernity far more than it engages with it.

As alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, the Conclusion to The Renaissance presents the aesthetic attitude as a way of valuing temporal experience to the maximum. Quoting Victor Hugo, Pater writes that “we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve—les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis” (153); the “wisest” among “‘the children of this world’”134 (153) are those who spend this “indefinite reprieve” “in art and song,” pursuing “the poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake” (153).135 An awareness of death as the coterminous end of body and soul underlies this valorization of aesthetic experience. In “Poems by William Morris,” Pater had written that the “pagan” sense of mortality that pervades Morris’ The Earthly Paradise “contrasts with the bloom of the world and gives a new seduction to it,” and thus “the desire of beauty [is] quickened by the sense of death” (309)136; he later reformulates this notion (in “Child in the House,” 1878) to suggest that it is actually “the fear of death [that is] intensified by the desire of beauty” (89-90). Regardless of the causal relationship between the “fear of death” and the “desire of beauty”—whether death makes beauty more desirable, or beauty makes death more fearful—the belief that beauty’s allure is heightened or even constituted by its ephemerality is

134 The “children of this world” is a reference to Luke 16.8, in which “the children of this world” (the faithless) are contrasted to “the children of light” (the followers of God). Pater here specifies that he is writing for and about worldly individuals who do not believe in a higher, extra-temporal order of being.

135 The phrase “the love of art for its own sake” is a revision from the first- and third-edition versions of the Conclusion, which read “the love of art for art’s sake.” Pater’s decision to remove the well-known idiom from his final version of the Conclusion is demonstrative of his continued anxiety about the negative associations attached to the phrase, and perhaps reflects a desire to distance himself from the controversial movement later in life.

136 B.A. Inman has quite convincingly proposed that the Conclusion to The Renaissance is in fact Pater’s “elaboration upon this theme: the first half evokes the sense of death, the second half the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death” (“The Intellectual Context of Walter Pater’s ‘Conclusion’” 12).
one of the driving forces behind Pater’s aesthetic worldview. Transience thus becomes, for Pater, a boon as opposed to an affliction: the “splendour of our experience” and its “awful brevity” are inextricably intertwined (Renaissance 152).

Since the brief, physical life of the “children of this world” is not marginalized in relation to an eternal, spiritual afterlife, the experience of living takes on a new, earthbound significance:

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.

(152)

While Pater’s “flame” recalls Heraclitus’s doctrine of flux, of which fire is the underlying element, its “hard, gem-like” quality evokes the artistic element of form, the solid and carefully chiselled structure that shapes and refines the matter within. Although “To burn always with this gem-like flame” may be a paradoxical, even an impossible task, it expresses an ideal state of being in which content (flickering sensations, the fleeting impressions that constitute lived

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137 Many of Pater’s biographers have suggested that Pater’s lifelong preoccupation with death derives from the fact that he lost numerous family members at a young age; as Laurel Brake notes in Walter Pater, “By the time Pater was 14, death had claimed his father, uncle, grandmother, and mother” (8).

138 A quotation from Heraclitus serves as the epigraph for the Conclusion: “All things give way: nothing remaineth” (Pater’s translation of the Greek, qtd. in Notes to The Renaissance 174). In her essay “Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater,” Angela Leighton suggests that Heraclitean flux is both “a congenial theory” and “a style of writing” for Pater: “Pater’s exquisite, tentative, bodiless style is itself a way of disembodying the very notions he sets floating on his long, passenger-like sentences” (18).
experience) is enhanced and heightened by form (the contour and intentionality imposed by the individual). Aesthetic contemplation is said to be the most effective means of cultivating our “finest senses” and enabling us to “maintain this ecstasy,” since it maximizes the intensity of each passing moment and compels us to dwell in the immediate pleasure of sensuous experience. The “fruit” yielded by aesthetic contemplation is thus not some external or future reward, but rather the generation of a “quickened, multiplied consciousness” (153) that enhances our ability to assimilate the multitude of sensorial impressions surrounding us. Pater’s plea for the primacy of worldly, sensorial delight over deferred, otherworldly fulfillment is perhaps most unequivocally formulated not in the Conclusion to The Renaissance, but in his early essay on Coleridge: “Who would change the colour or curve of a rose-leaf for that […] colourless, formless, intangible, being […] Plato put so high?” (68).\

139 Virtually all of Pater’s essays from the 60s and early 70s strive to present contemplative aestheticism as a means of combatting the otherworldly aspects of Christian spirituality through immersion in the ‘garden of earthly delights.’

Marius the Immaculate Perceiver

If Nietzsche had been familiar with Pater’s aesthetic theory, he would almost certainly have dismissed it as a disingenuous profession of “Immaculate Perception” in line with the “lecherous” aesthetics of Schopenhauer and Kant (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part II, “On

139 This exact phrasing appears only in the revised (1880) version of the essay, which was published in Appreciations (1889). By the time he delivered his lectures on Plato, which were published in the volume Plato and Platonism (1893), Pater had developed a far more sympathetic view of Plato’s philosophical project.
Immaculate Perception,” 234). As we have seen, Nietzsche views the spectator’s relationship to the work of art as anything but sterile (as Pater characterized it): only “sentimental hypocrites” and “lechers” in disguise, Nietzsche says, would claim that this kind of pure and unsullied spectatorship is desirable or even possible (“On Immaculate Perception” 234-35). Indeed, if I am correct in my surmise that Pater would have concurred with the modern, approbatory interpretation of the central panel of Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights, the overt sexuality of the scene depicted raises important questions about whether or not the ‘aesthetic’ pleasure experienced by the viewer is in fact voyeuristic in nature. (Nietzsche, if we remember, scoffed at the Kantian idea that aesthetic pleasure is above or wholly divorced from sexual desire.) In accordance with this line of inquiry, much has been written on the homoerotic dimension of Pater’s work, particularly in relation to his affinity for Greek art and culture. Yet Pater’s contemplative aestheticism gives rise to a concern more fundamental than that of how his sexual proclivities might have informed his taste in art. In light of the ambitious scope of his project, which would make of an aesthetic principle a way of life, how is one to break free from the passivity attributed to the viewer of art by those who theorize aesthetics from a receptive perspective? Why participate in life when the highest good is deemed to be “beholding for the mere joy of beholding”? Despite the numerous accusations of immoral hedonism provoked by The Renaissance, Pater’s vision of a life spent in the ecstatic pursuit of “Great passions” is far tamer than most readers of the Conclusion would have imagined. As Graham Hough has remarked, “whatever it may be to

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140 Stefano Evangelista’s study British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece (2009) provides a detailed account of the links between deviant sexuality and late-Victorian Hellenism. The book’s first chapter is devoted to Pater (and Winckelmann’s influence on him).
burn with a hard gemlike flame, it is [for Pater] something that takes place at a rather low temperature” (144). The aesthetic attitude towards life, as formulated by Pater, encourages one to view the world in all its heterogeneity from the position of a neutral spectator, concomitantly discouraging active intervention in the world. Nietzsche’s likening of the professedly ‘immaculate’ contemplators of beauty to the man or “monk” in the moon, who peers down on the earth from up high without touching or even warming what he sees, is equally applicable to the eponymous protagonist of *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), an impartial drifter who comes across as more of an immaterial spectre than a flesh-and-blood human being. Significantly, just as Nietzsche lexically and conceptually ties the aesthetic notion of “Immaculate Perception” (*unbefleckte Erkenntniss*) to the Christian notion of “Immaculate Conception” (*unbefleckte Empfängnis*), in *Marius* Pater will explicitly align his contemplative aestheticism—in stark contrast to the way in which it was presented in *The Renaissance*—with the Christian worldview.

Published twelve years after the first edition of *The Renaissance*, *Marius the Epicurean* portrays the somewhat uneventful and relatively brief life of a young man coming of age in the

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141 Pater’s early biographers confirm that the life Pater led was far from intemperate. Benson, for instance, claims that Pater’s habits were marked by an “ascetic simplicity. He never took afternoon tea, he never smoked. His meals were plain to austerity” (19). Gosse describes Pater’s existence at Brasenose as “quiet, cloistered, and laborious […] divided between his college duties and his books” (259).

142 This is the gist of Oscar Wilde’s famous criticism of *Marius*: “Marius is little more than a spectator: an ideal spectator indeed, and one to whom it is given ‘to contemplate the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions,’ which Wordsworth defines as the poet’s true aim; yet a spectator merely, and perhaps a little too much occupied with the comeliness of the benches of the sanctuary to notice that it is the sanctuary of sorrow that he is gazing at” (*De Profundis* 109).

143 *Marius the Epicurean* went through three editions in Pater’s lifetime (March 1885, November 1885, and 1892); the changes made to the second edition are slight, and while the third edition was extensively revised, the changes do not significantly alter the central plot or ideas of the novel. My citations here are from the text of the third edition. For a detailed study of the changes Pater made to *Marius*, see Edmund Chandler’s *Pater on Style: an examination of the essay on “Style” and the history of “Marius the Epicurean”* (1958).
time of Marcus Aurelius (Emperor of Rome from 161 until 180 C.E.). No doubt influenced by Matthew Arnold’s essay “Marcus Aurelius,” in which Arnold declared that Aurelius lived “in an epoch akin to our own” (224), Pater chooses to return to the early days of the Christian church in order to (once again) measure the pagan and Christian worldviews against one another; this time, however, Christianity is portrayed in a much more sympathetic light. Returning to the second century allows Pater to depict a form of Christianity unmarred by the subsequent developments of medieval asceticism or “crabbed Protestantism” (both of which he had decried in The Renaissance), yet the denominational debates of the Victorian period are implied: as Mary Ward would later note in A Writer’s Recollections (1918), it is clearly “Christianity of the Catholic type” that is represented favourably in Marius (161). This “Catholic type” of Christianity is one of several worldviews that Marius considers subscribing to in the novel: he wavers between the naturalistic paganism of his rural childhood, Cyrenaicism or Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Christianity, without ever wholly committing to one way of life. Although Pater claimed that he intended this later work to be critical of Epicureanism, Marius’s unwillingness to fully accede to Christianity at the end of the novel makes it difficult to read the book as Pater’s recantation of pagan-inspired aestheticism in favour of a “Catholic type” of

144 Brake has suggested that another factor made Rome—as opposed to Greece, which had been the subject of the volume of essays Dionysus and Other Studies that Pater pulled from publication in 1878—a particularly appealing setting for Pater’s novel: he could thus avoid “the danger posed by the subject of Greek culture, commonly associated with homosocial discourse” (Walter Pater 43).

145 Carolyn Williams’ reading of Marius in “Typology as Narrative Form: The Temporal Logic of Marius” shows how typology proves to be a particularly fruitful method for unearthing the “pervasive historical analogy between the culture of Victorian England in the 1880s and second-century Rome in the Age of the Antonines” that runs through the novel (11).

146 In a letter to William Sharp, in response to Sharp’s review of Marius in Athenaeum, Pater wrote: “I did mean it to be more anti-Epicurean than it has struck you as being” (Letter 86, 58–9).
Christianity. Whether or not *Marius* bears witness to a change in Pater’s personal faith is of secondary concern to my reading here; what I would like to highlight, rather, is the (ostensibly newfound) congruity that Pater traces between the aesthetic and the religious appreciation of life.

While the young Marius is said to possess a “natural Epicureanism, already prompting him to conceive of himself as but the passive spectator of the world around him” (106), it is not until the death of his close friend Flavian that he begins to seriously study “the various schools of ancient philosophy” (106)—including Heraclitus and Aristippus of Cyrene, whose work precedes and prefigures Epicureanism. Flavian, the foppish dandy and decadent poet, exercises a profound influence on Marius during their brief friendship, and his untimely death fills the eighteen year old not with confidence in “the soul’s survival in another life,” but rather with an acute sense of the “soul’s extinction” (105). The sight of the “beloved, suffering, perished body of Flavian” makes of Marius a “materialist”; he turns away from the “wandering Platonic soul” towards “the sentiment of the body, and the affections it defined” (106). The “New Cyrenaicism” that Marius adopts at this point is clearly Pater’s defense and explanation of the contemplative aestheticism he had advanced in the Conclusion of *The Renaissance*, which had been decried variously as “hedonism,” “Cyrenaicism,” and “Epicureanism.”

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147 As Maureen Moran notes in her essay “Pater’s ‘Great Change’: *Marius the Epicurean* as Historical Conversion Romance,” critics (from the very first to the more recent) have considered “Marius’s development and death as a conversion process which offers insight into Pater’s own religious affiliation,” yet despite this widespread tendency, “there is no consensus on the ‘meaning’ of Marius’s narrative” (174). For a recent study that breaks with the deeply entrenched critical tradition of reading *Marius* in light of its author’s biography, see Sebastian Lecourt’s “‘To surrender himself, in perfectly liberal inquiry’: Walter Pater, Many-Sidedness, and the Conversion Novel,” *Victorian Studies* 53.2 (2011): 231-253.

148 See, for instance, early reviews by Sidney Colvin ( *Pall Mall Gazette* 1 March 1873), John Morley (“Mr. Pater’s Essays,” *Fortnightly Review* April 1873), Margaret Wilson Oliphant ( *Blackwood’s Magazine* November 1873) and the article “Modern Cyrenaicism” in *Examiner* (12 April 1873) (*Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage* 47-54, 63-71;
defends hedonism against reductive and falsifying claims that it is ineluctably immoral on the grounds that the “pleasures” it takes as its aim can be “so different in quality” as “the pleasures of wine and love, of art and science, of religious enthusiasm and political enterprise” (120). The pursuit of pleasure is therefore not necessarily incompatible with conformation to “the highest moral ideal,” and even the most vulgarly simplistic interpretation of hedonistic doctrine has the potential to yield noble results: “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die! – is a proposal, the real import of which differs immensely, according to the natural taste, and the acquired judgment, of the guests who sit at the table” (116). Despite this spirited defense of the pursuit of pleasure, Pater exonerates Marius from the “charge of ‘hedonism,’” since the “New Cyrenaicism” he subscribes to seeks “Not pleasure, but fullness of life, and ‘insight’ as conducting to that fullness” (120). The distinction drawn here between “fullness” and “pleasure” is indicative of Pater’s desire to detach the aesthetic worldview he espoused in *The Renaissance* from its negative association with base sensuality or sinful indulgence, and to identify it instead with a religiously-sanctioned yearning for plenitude.

Indeed, contemplative aestheticism, as it is described in *Marius*, becomes a means of turning the phenomenal world into an image of eternal beatitude. Wary of his words being (mis)interpreted, once again, as an endorsement of the unbridled pursuit of sensual gratification, Pater very clearly describes New Cyrenaicism as a method of making the ‘here and now’ resemble a paradise compatible with religious notions of the afterlife. Because works of art—“the products

85-91; 73-78). Pater himself encouraged readers to view *Marius* as an extension of the Conclusion: upon reinstating the Conclusion in the third edition of *The Renaissance*, he added a footnote in which he clarifies that he has “dealt more fully in *Marius the Epicurean* with the thoughts suggested [here]” (150).
of the imagination”—are representative of “the most perfect forms of life—spirit and matter alike under their purest and most perfect conditions” (118), individuals devoted to their study develop “an exquisite appreciation of all the finer traits of nature and of man” (118). One so artfully trained in the contemplation of sensuous material, whose “power of reception” has undergone “expansion and refinement” because of his/her “aesthetic’ education,” is able to make “fleeting impressions” or “actual moments as they passed […] yield their utmost” (117). A life spent in this kind of “impassioned contemplation” is said to approximate the blissful state enjoyed by those who dwell eternally in paradise:

In this way, the true aesthetic culture would be realizable as a new form of the contemplative life, founding its claim on the intrinsic ‘blessedness’ of ‘vision’—the vision of perfect men and things. One’s human nature, indeed, would fain reckon on an assured and endless future, pleasing itself with the dream of a final home, to be attained at some still remote date, yet with a conscious, delightful home-coming at last, as depicted in many an old poetic Elysium. On the other hand, the world of perfected sensation, intelligence, emotion, is so close to us, and so attractive, that the most visionary of spirits must needs represent the world unseen in colours, and under a form really borrowed from it. Let me be sure then—might he not plausibly say?—that I miss no detail of this life of realized consciousness in the present! Here at least is a vision, a theory […] which reposes on no basis of unverified hypothesis, which makes no call upon a future after all somewhat problematic[.] (118)

The narrator presumes to speak for Marius (“might he not plausibly say?”) here as he elucidates his predilection for the “present” or immediate “blessedness” of “the vision of perfect men and things” over the deferred, “unverified” and “somewhat problematic” “dream of a final home, to
be attained at some still remote date.” Marius muses that even our notion of that “final home,”
thought to be located in some “world unseen,” is derived from the “colours” and “form[s]” of
the sensuous world we have “so close to us.” The visions of the “true aesthetic culture” are
preferable to religious visions of an eternal resting place not only because of their immediacy,
but because of their concrete verifiability: the aesthetic “manner of life” is “a kind of religion”
(as the sentence immediately preceding this passage states), but one that operates
“independently of any faith, or hope” (118). It is significant to note that Marius’s point of
reference for the afterlife here is pagan (“many an old poetic Elysium”) rather than Christian,
since he has yet to meet Cornelius, the knight of the Twelfth Legion who will introduce him to
Christianity. Once he encounters this new religion, however, Marius’s predilection for it will be
marked by the same traits that characterize his attitude here: a proclivity for intense sensations,
and a general antipathy towards the idea that ‘paradise’ is a place or state irrevocably external to
the present.

In drawing this parallel between the state of beatitude achieved in the “new form of the
contemplative life” and that which perchance characterizes the soul’s eternal resting place, Pater
implicitly acknowledges the impulse towards otherworldliness that motivates “the true aesthetic
culture.” Although the plenitude experienced in the act of aesthetic contemplation occurs “in the
present” (as opposed to “at some still remote date”), the individual must (at least partially)
remove himself from worldly activity in order to maintain a contemplative state. Furthermore, it
is not the phenomenal world as it is that becomes the object of contemplation; rather, it is “the
vision of perfect men and things” (my emphasis)—in other words, the world of art, the realm of
perfected phenomena, that is being regarded. Thus, the world is rejected on two accounts: the
aesthetic contemplator must not only withdraw himself from the act of living in order to
preserve his observational stance, thereby placing himself (figuratively, if not physically) in some kind of external or “other” realm, but he must also restrict his field of vision so that it comprises only “perfect men and things,” thereby turning a blind eye to most aspects of reality. Doubly alienated from life, the follower of this “true aesthetic culture” begins to resemble the religious mystic who extricates him- or herself from worldly activity in order to commune more directly with the divine. Indeed, Pater compares Cyrenaicism, at one point, to the world-renouncing attitude espoused by certain holy men:

If [Cyrenaic theory] starts with considerations opposed to the religious temper, which the religious temper holds it a duty to repress, it is like it, nevertheless […] in its stress and earnestness, its serious application to the pursuit of a very unworldly type of perfection. The saint, and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty, it may be thought, would at least understand each other better than either would understand the mere man of the world. Carry their respective positions a point further, shift the terms a little, and they might actually touch.

(184)

The saint and the “Cyrenaic lover of beauty,” despite their initial opposition, eventually coalesce in their quest for an “unworldly type of perfection.” While the pursuit of beauty may initially prompt immersion in the sensuous realm of material forms—in precisely that which a saint or mystic strives to transcend in order to obtain unity with God—it will ultimately lead one to demand a level of aesthetic perfection that is not readily available in the world as it is; one must turn to art, then, as the distilled and arrested embodiment of beauty surpassing the imperfect material out of which reality is composed. In accordance with this newfound solidarity between the Cyrenaic aesthete and the religious saint, Pater proceeds, in the fourth part of Marius, to
offer the Christian religion in the bloom of its youth as a movement that complements and augments the nobler aspects of New Cyrenaicism.

The tension between contemplative aestheticism and Christian spirituality that formed the cornerstone of *The Renaissance* and much of Pater’s early work is resolved in Pater’s vision of the early Christian church. In keeping with his intention to write an “anti-Epicurean” novel, Pater has his protagonist reevaluate Epicureanism after being exposed to his Christian friend Cornelius’s worldview, “with its wide prospect over the human, the spiritual, horizon” (181). Whereas his previous friend Flavian, both in life and in death, had come to embody the “Cyrenaic philosophy […] in an image or person,” Cornelius will become for Marius the “sensible exponent” of the new religion of Christianity (166). The brevity and intensity of that early friendship, during which Marius developed a “feverish attachment to Flavian” and often felt “like an uneasy slave,” is juxtaposed to the constant “hopefulness of [Cornelius’s] gracious presence,” which makes the visible world take on “a new poetry, a delicate fresh bloom, and interest” (166). The contrast between these two very different individuals and their influence on Marius denotes the distinction between the Cyrenaic and Christian worldviews: the first is characterized as intense but short-lived, the latter restrained but expansive. The narrator declares that “Cyrenaicism is ever the characteristic philosophy of youth, ardent, but narrow in its survey—sincere, but apt to become one-sided, or even fanatical” (181). The one-sidedness of Cyrenaicism is identified as its exclusive focus on “the beauty of the world and the brevity of man’s life there” (181); what such theories “really need for their correction,” says the narrator, “is the complementary influence of some greater system, in which they may find their due place” (183). While Marius has yet to discover Christianity at this point (even though he is able to recognize in Cornelius the promise of a new perspective on life), he nevertheless becomes
conscious of the limitations of his worldview, detecting “Some cramping, narrowing, costly preference of one part of his own nature, and of the nature of things, to another” (185). After Cornelius brings him to the house of the widow Cecilia where he witnesses, enthralled, the worship practices of an early Christian congregation, Marius begins to wonder if he has at last stumbled upon “if not the cure, yet the solace or anodyne of his great sorrows—of that constitutional sorrowfulness [...] which had made his life certainly like one long ‘disease of the spirit’” (234).149

Considering the contrast Pater begins to construct between Cyrenaicism and Christianity in the persons of Flavian and Cornelius, one might imagine that Marius’s discovery of Christianity would result in him definitively renouncing his aesthetic approach to life. This, however, is simply not the case; even if the novel could be read as a straightforward conversion narrative (which it cannot, since Marius does not wittingly convert to Christianity before his death), the form of Christianity presented in Marius is perhaps even more aesthetic than Marius’s “New Cyrenaicism.”150 As Mary Ward observed in an early review, Pater does not so much put Christianity forward as an antidote to the aestheticizing impulse of Cyrenaicism, as emphasize Christianity’s aesthetic superiority. She imagines the novel addressing religious advocates thus:

Your facts are no facts; our sense of reality is opposed to them; but for the sake of beauty, the charm, the consolation to be got out of the intricate system you have built

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149 Thomas Wright claims that Pater’s description of this community of early Christians reproduces with exactitude “the services of St. Austin’s, which its founder, Father Nugeé, had modelled as closely as possible on those of the early Church” (II 84-5).

150 Cf. Leo Tolstoy’s Confession (1884), which rejects Epicureanism as a viable response to the meaning of life in the absence of God on moral grounds (since the ‘good life’ is not available to all), and concludes with a comparably cryptic conversion.
upon this chimerical basis, we are ready to give you all we can […] hoping thereby to cheat life of some of its pains, and to brighten some of its darkness with dreams fairer even than those which Aesculapius inspired in his votaries. (Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage 136)

It is on aesthetic grounds, then, that Pater sanctions religion in Marius; while Christianity is lauded as a more comprehensive and community-oriented worldview than Cyrenaicism, it is ultimately shown to be preferable because of its ability to extend the “beatific vision” of life beyond the boundary of individual moments (238). Pater’s presentation of Christianity quite masterfully circumvents all aspects of the religion that would make it problematic for someone whose notion of life is restricted by the “immanent frame”: the immortality of the soul, the afterlife, the supernatural resurrection of Christ—Marius’s (or Pater’s) stance on these subjects remains wholly unilluminated. What is shown unequivocally, however, is that both Marius’s attraction to Christianity and Christianity’s function in the world at the end of the second century are overwhelmingly aesthetic in nature.

Pater had gestured toward Christianity’s aestheticizing potential in “The Child in the House” (1878), a story which depicts the “gradual expansion of the soul” (173) of a young man (Florian Deleal) whose memories of childhood are vividly recalled by a chance encounter with an elderly stranger. Florian shares with Marius a “more than customary sensuousness” (181) that led him, as a child, to develop a passion for “beautiful, physical things” (186). Christianity—clearly, as in Marius, of the Catholic or High Church persuasion—is said to “condescend[d] in part to sanction this infirmity” by “translating so much of its spiritual verity into things that may be seen” (187). The Christian religion is able to partially satiate Florian’s overwhelming hunger for beauty because of the comeliness of its rituals and sacred objects: “He began to love, for their
own sakes, church lights, holy days, all that belonged to the comely order of the sanctuary, the secrets of its while linen, and holy vessels, and fonts of pure water; and its hieratic purity and simplicity became the type of something he desired always to have about him in actual life” (193). For Florian, Christianity becomes a purveyor of beauty, a force that purifies and enhances the material of “actual life.” He ascribes to religion a role that is virtually indistinguishable from that of art:

His way of conceiving religion came then to be in effect what it ever afterwards remained—a sacred history indeed, but still more a sacred ideal, a transcendent version or representation, under intenser and more expressive light and shade, of human life and its familiar or exceptional incidents, birth, death, marriage, youth, age, tears, joy, rest, sleep, waking—a mirror, towards which men might turn away their eyes from vanity and dullness, and see themselves therein as angels, with their daily meat and drink, even, become a kind of sacred transaction—a complementary strain or burden, applied to our every-day existence, whereby the stray snatches of music in it re-set themselves, and fall into the scheme of some higher and more consistent harmony. (193-4)

The “transcendent version or representation” of life provided by the Christian religion is characterized by aesthetic amelioration, both visual and audial: on human activity is conferred “more expressive light and shade,” on the quotidian a “higher and more consistent harmony.” Religion, like art, renders life somehow more than life—“intenser,” “more expressive,” more harmonious. The “vanity and dullness” of human reality is transformed into the ideal, allowing men to admire themselves metamorphosed into “angels.” In the same way that the quests of the “Cyrenaic lover of beauty” and the saint were shown to “touch,” here art and religion become
synonymous vehicles of aesthetic transfiguration, indistinguishable creators of an “unworldly type of perfection.”

In the fourth part of Marius, Christianity is depicted as an unparalleled force of beautification. Within the second-century context of the novel, the Christian church is said to be living its “minor Peace […] in distinction from the final ‘Peace of the church’, commonly so called, under Constantine” (239). During the reign of Antoninus Pius (Marcus Aurelius’s predecessor), the “earlier belief in the speedy coming of judgment and the end of the world” had begun to fade, and “Every day the contrast between the church and the world was becoming less pronounced” (240). As Christianity accustomed itself to its place in the world, it became “conformable to the original tendency of its genius” (239)—a tendency to advance a “graver and higher beauty” (239), to encourage “the adornment of life and the world” (238). This “original,” fundamentally artistic function of the church stems from “that element of profound serenity in the soul of her Founder, which reflected the eternal good will of God to man” (239). The propensity for beautification is identified as one of “two distinct ideals” that comprise Christianity—the other being the ascetic, sacrificial ideal of morality expressed in New Testament images such as “the right eye plucked out, the right hand cut off” (238). Without denying this “ascetic or militant” strain, which represents “one side only of the nature of the divine missionary of the New Testament,” Pater suggests that the opposing strain, the “function of the Good Shepherd […] a king under whom the beatific vision is realized of a reign of peace” (238), constitutes the

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151 As Moran notes, Pater’s suggestion that the early Church’s embracement of sensuous experience is in line with Christ’s character implies, by extension, that “nineteenth-century [Puritan] Christianity, with its suppression of the flesh in favour of the spirit, is untrue to Christ’s temperament and intentions” (180).

152 As DeLaura points out, these “two distinct ideals” are modeled on Arnold’s dialectic of Hellenism and Hebraism—with the important amendment that now they are both located within the Christian tradition (278).
religion’s “original tendency.” The Christianity encountered by Marius is almost wholly determined by this “influence tending to beauty” (238); “under the Antonines,” the church is said to experience a reprieve from “the days of austere ascēsis which had preceded and were to follow it” (239). Regardless of anachronism, Pater goes so far as to characterize this period of the early church as an “unimpeachable Renaissance” (243). The consonance Pater identifies here between Christianity and the Renaissance represents a significant departure from the dissonance he traced between these two tendencies in his earlier book: what he once saw embodied in the pagan celebration of sensuality, he now ascribes to Christianity in its original form.

Pater makes extended use of the biblical metaphor in which the church is figured as the bride of Christ in order to further emphasize the aestheticizing impulse of Christianity. As Marius wanders for the first time through the “various chambers, great and small” of the Christian widow Cecelia’s house, he is struck by the neat and festive beauty of the place: “There reigned throughout, an order and purity, an orderly disposition, as if by way of making ready for some gracious spousals. The place itself was like a bridge adorned for her husband” (228-229). This unmarked reference to Revelation 21.2, in which the “bride adorned for her husband” is a vision of the New Jerusalem, is repeated when Marius reflects on the Christian worship service he has just observed: “the new creation he now looked on […] had indeed all the appropriate freshness of a ‘bride adorned for her husband’” (236). The fresh, natural, and corporeal beauty of a young bride is contrasted to the “incurable insipidity” that characterizes even what is “most exquisite in the higher Roman life” (236). The celebrated “Greek ‘blitheness’, or gaiety, or grace” is shown to be lacking vigor and bloom, to pale in comparison to the effulgent joy of the budding Christian church, the “new creation” that constitutes “a picture beyond the craft of any master of
old pagan beauty” (236). The youthful, feminized body of the church of Rome—with “her full, fresh faith in the Evangele”—becomes the symbol of Christianity’s “comely order: she would be ‘brought to her king in raiment of needlework’” (242). The physicality and incipient eroticism inherent in the image of the adorned bride places the early Christian church unequivocally in the realm of sensuousness; the “aesthetic charm of the catholic church” is thus depicted as a worldly, corporeal, and ultimately human affair (242). As Hilary Fraser points out, Pater’s emphasis on the sensuous nature of Christianity was hardly unorthodox in his time: “Pater’s reliance upon sensual apprehension, upon a highly subjective response to the spiritual, was only a more extreme manifestation of a phenomenon which had altered the character of the Church of England in the nineteenth century” (216).

Marius’s attraction to this new religion is shown to be predominantly on account of its comeliness or “aesthetic charm.” Although he ponders the possibility that there may be “some credible message from beyond ‘the flaming rampart of the world’—a message of hope, regarding the place of men’s souls and their interest in the sum of things” motivating the practices of these people, it is ultimately the “wonderful spectacle” of their form of worship that continues to draw him back (246). True to his naturally Epicurean inclinations, Marius admires the sentiment and beauty of the Christian liturgy without sharing, or even fully understanding, the beliefs upon which it is grounded: “The charm of its poetry, a poetry of the affections, wonderfully fresh in the midst of a threadbare world, would have led Marius, if nothing else had done so, again and again, to Cecilia’s house” (276). He perceives, however faintly, that the rites of the Christians are founded on certain spiritual principles—for instance, the fact that they bury the bodies of their dead, as opposed to cremating them like the Roman pagans, intimates “some peculiar feeling of hope they entertained concerning the body,” a kind of “strange confidence”
that the dead “would hereafter recompose themselves once more into exulting human creatures” (230). Yet Marius cannot fully penetrate or subscribe to this mysterious “hope,” alluring as it may be; thus, he is unable to conceive of his own death as a “glorious end” in line with the “recent death of those saintly brothers” considered, by the Christians, to be martyrs (291). Although he indirectly gives his life for his friend Cornelius, contriving for Cornelius to be set free in his place as the one non-Christian mistakenly captured alongside the Christian prisoners, he dies without consciously acceding to the Christian faith. In the confused and feverish hours before his final demise, he meditates on the “great hope” he had seen embodied in Cornelius, a hope that “warm[s]” him despite the fact that it remains vague and unilluminated (295), but he takes the Eucharist unwittingly and presumably in ignorance of its significance, in the last “moments of his extreme helplessness” (296). While Marius’s death is considered by the Christians who bury him “to have been of the nature of martyrdom […] a kind of sacrament with plenary grace” (297), Pater has made it clear that Marius would have considered it no such thing.

What conclusions are we to draw about the relationship between contemplative aestheticism and Christianity in *Marius the Epicurean*? Does the novel really signify Pater’s endorsement of the Christian religion over pagan or secular aestheticism? If so, what stops Marius from fully and willingly converting to this new and unadulterated religion? While Christianity is presented in the novel as an accomplice rather than an antagonist of aestheticism, Marius’s ultimate unwillingness or inability to become Christian reveals, I think, the insuperable ambivalence of Pater’s attitude toward Christianity as a whole. While he no doubt admires the church’s “influence tending to beauty, to the adornment of life and the world,” he remains leery of the “spirit of reproach,” the “ascetic or militant character” that ineluctably counterbalances the
comely proclivity of the church and has, throughout history, often overpowered it. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that Pater clearly marks his ambivalence in regards to the transcendent nature of the “great hope” entertained by Christians, since it is only “according to their generous view in this matter” that Marius’s death is construed as a martyrdom, and it is only according to “the church” that martyrdom functions as “a kind of sacrament with plenary grace” (297 emphasis mine). Neither Marius nor his creator concedes the authority of Christianity’s “generous view” regarding the eternal destiny of the soul.

Furthermore, despite Pater’s overwhelmingly positive depiction of the early Christian church in the novel, his assessment and appreciation of Christianity rarely exceed the bounds of the aesthetic. Not only is Pater unwilling or unable to permit Marius to abandon the role of passive observer and become an active member of this new and appealing devotional community, but the narrator’s appraisal of Christianity concentrates almost entirely on the religion’s “influence tending to beauty.” As such, the image of Christianity presented in Marius remains as “one-sided” and “narrow in its survey” as the Cyrenaicism that the novel purportedly dismisses as “ever the characteristic philosophy of youth.” Surely the “great hope” of life after death embodied in the figure of the resurrected Christ cannot be relegated unproblematically to the margins of the Christian religion as a vague and subordinate concern, while “the adornment of life and the world” takes centre stage as “the original tendency of [Christianity’s] genius”? The version of Christianity admired by Marius works to reinforce rather than undermine the aesthetic evaluation of life that the novel ostensibly criticizes. Ever the passive observer, ever the skeptical outsider, Marius is incapable of actively adopting the faith that would make him a legitimate member of the Christian community. Up until his last moments, he continues to admire Christianity as one would admire a work of art: with fascination, with respect, but also,
ultimately, with detachment. As such, Christianity in Marius the Epicurean becomes a cover for Marius’s—and arguably his author’s—irremediable aestheticism, as opposed to its antidote. That contemplative aestheticism here merges so seamlessly with its one-time antagonist, the Christian religion, leads one to question whether the foundational principles underlying the two worldviews are as divergent as Pater originally made them out to be.

The Asceticism of Style

Marius the Epicurean is illustrative of the way in which Pater, after the flurry of criticism aroused by The Renaissance, increasingly downplayed the counter-religious element of his aesthetic worldview. As his editorial decisions and the subject matter of his post-Renaissance work attest, he never again pleaded in such unequivocal terms for the preeminence of sensuous delight, and chose instead to emphasize how aestheticism functions in ways homologous to religion. As we have seen, Marius not only distinguished contemplative aestheticism from the unbridled pursuit of pleasure, but also drew a parallel between the desire for beauty and the “original tendency” of the Christian church. In his later writings, Pater focused more and more

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153 I have already mentioned the fact that the second edition of The Renaissance suppressed the Conclusion, and that the edited version Pater chose to reinsert in the third and fourth editions subdued the antagonism between his aesthetic philosophy of life and the principles of Christian morality. Pater edited, or suppressed altogether, many early works that may have provoked the same criticisms as The Renaissance; for instance, the version of the essay on Coleridge that appeared in Appreciations (1889)—an amalgamation of “Coleridge’s Writings” (1866) and the biographical introduction on Coleridge Pater had contributed to T.H. Ward’s anthology of English poetry in 1883— was excised of its more anti-Christian passages, and the essay “Aesthetic Poetry” (a revised version of “Poems by William Morris,” 1868) was omitted from the second (1890) and all subsequent editions of Appreciations. Laurel Brake has suggested that Pater’s decision to cancel the publication of Dionysus and Other Studies in late November of 1878 may have been in response to the “vituperative and widely reported debate about aestheticism and criticism at the libel trial of Whistler v. Ruskin which took place on 25 and 26 November” (Walter Pater 38-9). Kate Hext has also speculated that Pater’s decision to pull the (never-finished) novel Gaston de Latour from serial publication mid-run in 1888 was motivated by fear that this exploration into the violent extremities of sensuousness would intensify the already negative attention he was receiving in the press (102).
on the ascetic process of self-discipline and renunciation that he came to see as essential to artistic creation and reception. Pater’s aestheticism thus begins to resemble less a means of celebrating worldly existence than a method of transcending or secluding oneself from the imperfection and vulgarity of the world. His famous essay “Style” (first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, 1888, then included the following year in *Appreciations*) exemplifies the impulse to renounce the world that, as I am arguing here, has been part and parcel of Paterian aestheticism since its early articulation in the essays of the 1860s.

Though “Style” is often taken to be Pater’s explication of his own methodology as a writer, his personal stylistic credo, it is also, as he himself writes, an attempt to identify “certain qualities of all literature as a fine art” (8). Pater’s account of artistic creation here closely resembles his former account of the critic’s task, with the only significant difference being that the artist hones his unique impression of the world, whereas the critic hones his unique impression of a work of art. The critic, as we saw in the Preface to *The Renaissance*, strives to “know one’s own impression [of an aesthetic object] as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly”; in “Style,” the literary artist is said to devote himself to “the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of [the writer’s] sense of it” (9-10 emphasis mine). While the scholarly or scientific writer is reluctant to admit, or perhaps ignorant of the fact, that even in his line of

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154 In his later writings on ancient Greece, Pater identifies this ascetic aspect of art with the Doric or centripetal influence in Greek culture (which he posits as operating in opposition to the Ionic or centrifugal influence). In “The Marbles of Aegina,” The Dorian temper, with “its love of order, of that severe *composition* everywhere, of which the Dorian style of architecture is, as it were, a material symbol” (253), is said to temper, throughout Greek history, “the centrifugal, the Ionian, the Asiatic tendency, flying from the centre, working with little forethought straight before it, in the development of every thought and fancy” (252). In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater indicates that the “centripetal Dorian ideal” can be “seen best at Lacedaemon” (238), and aligns the “Doric […] lineage” in art with “Platonic aesthetics,” which he claims are “ever in close connexion with Plato’s ethics” (282). By all appearances, Pater here endorses Plato’s stipulation that in the ideal Republic “the only kind of music, of art and poetry, we shall permit ourselves, our citizens, will be of a very austere character, under of sort of ‘self-denying ordinance.’ We shall be a fervently aesthetic community, if you will; but therewith also very fervent ‘renunciants,’ or ascetics” (271).
work “the writer’s sense of fact […] will still take the place of fact” (9 emphasis mine), the
writer of literature consciously strives both to determine the precise nature of his sense of things
and to transpose this sense into the particular words and compositional structure that most
fittingly convey it. “Truth” and “beauty” in literature are said to derive from a writer’s ability to
select a vehicle of expression that superlatively communicates his personal sense of the world:
“[A]ll beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth [“truth of his presentment of that sense”],
or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within” (10). Pater
maintains that his explanation of the mechanics of good literature is applicable to “all art which
is in any way imitative or reproductive of fact—form, or colour, or incident” (10). Represen
tational or mimetic art—a category that potentially encompasses all forms of art, with
the possible exception of music (as I will discuss below)—is thus defined as “the representation
of such fact as connected with soul” (10); “soul-fact” becomes a synonym for the individual
“sense” of the world that, according to Pater, it is art’s imperative to express.

Putting aside, for the moment, the equivocal ontology of the “soul” Pater invokes here, I would
like to highlight the rigorous asceticism of the process by which the artist is said to generate an
adequate means of expression for his “soul-facts.” Far from earlier, more organic conceptions of
the poetic process, such as Wordsworth’s romantic vision of poetry as “the spontaneous
overflow of powerful feelings […] recollected in tranquillity” (Preface to Lyrical Ballads),
Pater’s “literary artist” resembles “a scholar” in both the scrupulous examination of his sense of
things and his punctilious use of language (12). The poet’s material—language, the multivalent
“[p]roduct of a myriad various minds and contending tongues” (12)—must be painstakingly
sifted, “winnowed and searched through” (15) in order to arrive at the terms and phrases that
correspond entirely to the artist’s idiosyncratic “soul-fact”; since the majority of words
(unrefined, imprecise, overused) will need to be conscientiously and patiently discarded, a keen “sense of self-restraint and renunciation” is required (13-14). The artist-scholar creates, then, through rejection: it is by assiduously casting aside inadequate or unsuitable material that the writer realizes his work. This is why, for Pater, sculpture provides the exemplary analogue for the artistic process: “For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michelangelo’s fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone” (19-20). The metaphor of sculpture—and gem cutting, a miniature form of sculpture—appends a visual and physical element to Pater’s previous discussion of the more abstract linguistic labour undertaken by the literary artist. The entirety of language, like the “rough-hewn block of stone,” must be pared down, little by little, until it is made to resemble the “finished work” that the writer has divined in advance.

Though Pater is more explicit here than he was in the past in highlighting the “skilful economy of means, ascēsis” that produce a work of fine art (17), the above reference to the “gem-engraver” cannot but call to mind the “hard, gem-like flame” that we were urged to cultivate in the Conclusion to The Renaissance. Even through those controversial final paragraphs, which were so often criticized for endorsing a form of unbridled hedonism, runs the thread of asceticism or restraint that becomes one of the central concerns of “Style.” The flickering “flame” of experience, in order to be fully enjoyed by the “finest senses,” cannot be left to blaze uncontrollably; it must, rather, be harnessed, honed, and formed by the individual. Pater will later even more explicitly tie an attitude of “temperance” to the task of gem-cutting: in his essay “Plato’s Aesthetics,” he outlines (and endorses) “Plato’s own native preference” for the “temperances of the youthful Charmides, super-induced on a nature originally rich and
impassioned,” and offers the following analogy: “The diamond, we are told, if it be a fine one, may gain in value by what is cut away” (Plato and Platonism 281-82). All three of these evocations of gem-cutting speak to the element of disciplined formation that Pater sees as essential to the work of art and to the artistically sculpted life.

Another way in which the conspicuous asceticism of “Style” is subtly prefigured in The Renaissance involves Pater’s repeated recourse to music as the ideal art form. In “The School of Giorgione,” first published in 1877 and reprinted in the third (1888) edition of The Renaissance, Pater had famously pronounced that “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it” (86). “Style” restates this notion that the absolute synthesis of form and content, achieved effortlessly by music (presumably because music is not “in any way imitative or reproductive of fact” and thus does not differentiate between form and matter), is what all the other arts must tenaciously strive for:

If music be the ideal of all art whatever, precisely because in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression, then, literature, by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import, will be but fulfilling the condition of all artistic quality in things everywhere, of all good art. (37-8)\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{155} In “On Pater’s Late Style,” Carolyn Williams reads this “musical model” of art as a “secondary and competing model in the essay,” one that is at odds with the “neo-Platonic or residually Christian” model according to which the artist’s ‘mind’ and ‘soul’ are embodied in aesthetic form. In my reading, the musical model does not so much “compete” with as \textit{typify} the conceptual model of correspondence: since music, for Pater, manifests the absolute fusion of form and matter, it serves as the ideal type to which all the other arts aspire.
Literature, like all other art forms, obeys the imperative to seek “the absolute correspondence” of its means of expression to its “soul-fact.” The attainment of this holistic fusion, however, is far from painless, since the term that “absolute[ly] correspond[s …] to its import” is neither self-evident nor instinctually apprehensible. The indistinguishable blending of form and content of which music is exemplary can only be achieved by the non-musical arts through an extremely laborious procedure involving, as we have seen, continuous “self-restraint and renunciation.”

For “every lineament of the vision within,” for each element of the artist’s personal sense of something or each individual “soul-fact,” there is only “one word, the one acceptable word” that expresses it fully (34). Behind each seemingly fortuitous meeting of meaning and expression in art lies a gruelling process of rejection and refinement.

That good literature achieves or approximates this near-impossible coalescence of form (language, in the case of literature) and content (soul-facts) accounts, according to Pater, for the “religious influence” of certain “profane writers” (26). The work of such writers, despite the fact that their subject matter is not theological in any traditional sense, exudes a kind of spiritual authority as a result of the “‘electric affinity’” forged between the artist’s “wholly personal and peculiar sense” of things and the work’s “peculiar form.” Literary artists capable of generating this kind of “immediate sympathetic contact” with the reader approximate “‘prophets’” (26); they are anointed with the power to transmit, through language, the inner workings of the soul, “that plenary substance of which there is only one phase or facet in what is there expressed” (27). Their work realizes the harmonization or integration of inner and outer, of subject and object, which is perceived to be lacking in everyday life. The spiritual quality of this type of “profane” work is the result of its ability to transcend the disjointed conditions of our world, to realize the “absolute correspondence” of form and matter that appears to be possible only within
the realm of art. This formulation of the wholeness or plenitude of the work of art recalls Pater’s early description of the Venus de Milo, in which “sensuous form” and “spiritual motive” were said to merge indivisibly, as well as his declaration that Leonardo da Vinci’s “painting pleases the eye while it satisfies the soul.”

In “Style,” Pater dubs Gustave Flaubert “the martyr of literary style” (27) on account of his indefatigable search after le mot juste—the “one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do” (29). The published record of Flaubert’s correspondence provides a testimony to the “tardy and painful […] procedure” behind the “absolute success of the result” (32), revealing how Flaubert devoted himself tirelessly to the pursuit of “the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song” that would correspond entirely to “the single mental presentation or vision within” (29). Pater quotes extensively from Flaubert’s correspondence in order to highlight the uncompromising and sacrificial character of his artistic process. The antipathy towards mundane experience inherent in this ascetic approach to aesthetics becomes conspicuously apparent in a passage in which Flaubert chastises his correspondent (Madame X) for “the small concern, namely, [she shows] for art”; he continues:

156 In his essay “Eliot and Pater: Criticism in Transition,” John Conlon makes a persuasive case for Pater’s discussion of the Flaubertian mot juste—specifically the passage in which he speculates about “some pre-existent adaptation, between a relative, somewhere in the world of thought, and its correlative, somewhere in the world of language” (“Style” 30)—as “not only the source for the psychological mechanism, but also […] the proximate source for both the phrase and its definition” of T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative” (171).

157 Gosse, who knew Pater personally, suggests that Pater’s own writing practice was similarly grueling: “I recollect the writing of the opening chapters of Marius, and the stress that attended it—the intolerable languor and fatigue, the fevers and the cold fits, the grey hours of lassitude and insomnia, the toil as at a deep petroleum well when the oil refuses to flow” (262).
‘As regards glory be it so: there, I approve. But for art!—the one thing in life that is good and real—can you compare with it an earthly love?—prefer the adoration of a relative beauty to the cultus of true beauty? Well! I tell you the truth. That is the one good thing in me: the one thing I have, to me estimable. For yourself, you blend with the beautiful a heap of alien things, the useful, the agreeable, what not?—

The only way not to be unhappy is to shut yourself up in art, and count everything else as nothing.’ (28)

While Flaubert first identifies art as “the one thing in life that is good and real,” his subsequent characterization of art marks it as other to or beyond life, as the ideal against which life is contrasted and consistently diminished. If one chooses to devote oneself to “earthly love,” one is limited to the worship of “a relative beauty”; the lover of art, in contrast, is able to worship at the altar of “true beauty.” Unhappiness can only be avoided by “shut[ting one]self up in art,” by rejecting all that is not art—that is, by renouncing all mundane activity. Once art is recognized as the realization of everything we desire, “everything else” begins to count “as nothing.” Pater’s assertion that fine art provides “a refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain vulgarity in the actual world” (18) demonstrates his agreement with Flaubert in regards to the superiority of art to life.\(^\text{158}\) When juxtaposed to the otherworldly perfection, the trans-empirical harmony, of the work of art, the insufficiency, paucity and dissonance of worldly experience is magnified. Faced with such a stark disparity, Pater clearly chooses, along with Flaubert (as Pater

\[^{158}\text{Pater had previously expressed a version of this sentiment in his 1886 essay “Feuillet’s ‘La Morte’” (published in the second edition of }\textit{Appreciations}, \textit{1890): “The proper function of fictitious literature [is to afford] us a refuge into a world slightly better—better conceived, or better finished—than the real one” (219).}\]
understands him)\textsuperscript{159} and other “martyr[s] of literary style,” to forsake allegiance to the world and seek refuge in the idyllic realm of art.

Returning to the ambivalent ontology of the “soul” that Pater sees expressed in art, the question of whether or not it is endowed with metaphysical or theological properties becomes of subsidiary concern once we recognize the ineluctably transcendent or extramundane nature of the aesthetic realm that Pater is advocating. Kate Hext has argued that Pater was “unable ever to fully give up the Abrahamic conception of an individualised, divine, metaphysical soul” (66), and that the appearance of God in “Style” “as a deus ex machina to justify the inexplicable soul” manifests his failure as an atheist (79). While the perfect unity achieved in art may indeed be modeled on a theological understanding of the correspondence between the individual’s soul, God, and the world as His creation, what I find to be of more crucial import here (given Pater’s call to “treat life in the spirit of art”) is the fact that, in Pater’s view, this perfect state remains unachievable in life, that it is only achievable in art. The absolute singularity of the correspondence between form and content achieved in art marks it as contrary to the predominantly recalcitrant conditions of our world: the linguistic and material matter of which reality is comprised does not, generally speaking, cohere with our ‘souls’ or inner vision in this way. Thus, art realizes the fulfillment of a wholeness or unity that would otherwise evade us. Within the aesthetic realm, reconciliation between personal subjectivity (the individual’s “soul”) and the external world is attained; the sense of estrangement—the sense that the things and

\textsuperscript{159} As Wolfgang Iser points out, Pater’s interpretation of \textit{le mot juste} differs significantly from Flaubert’s original intent: “Pater demands from his writer ‘a vocabulary faithful to the colouring of his own spirit’, whereas Flaubert sought a passionless reproduction of the facts. Pater exclaims: ‘Well! all language involves translation from inward to outward’, while for Flaubert the inward process of observation was for the most part excluded as he wished to confine his observations to the pure phenomenality of the world” (48). Flaubert’s conception of art, in other words, is not nearly as spiritual or ‘soulful’ as Pater’s.
people surrounding us are alien to or disconnected from our inner thoughts, feelings and desires—that generally characterizes our experience of the world is overcome. In striving towards aesthetic perfection, in seeking out the absolute synthesis of form and matter, the artist, the critic, and the aesthete must continuously reject the imperfect, vulgar, and relative aspects of the actual world. They must turn their backs on life—“shut [themselves] up in art”—in order to bathe in the glory of the aesthetic ideal. Pater’s ascetic devotion to beauty has led him to endorse an absolute doctrine of aestheticism that potentially disparages worldly experience even more than the religion he had originally set out to negate.

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We have seen, then, how Pater’s aestheticism has evolved from an ostensible weapon with which to battle Christian otherworldliness to an avowed purveyor of otherworldly ideals. While The Renaissance and other early essays pitted the appreciation of art (delight in the beauty of sensuous forms) against a medieval form of Christianity (and, in the “Winckelmann” essay, against a “crabbed Protestantism”) devoted to extramundane purity, Marius, “Style” and other works that I have not addressed here attempt to render congruous the pursuit of beauty with religious ideals and practices such as fullness, beatitude and asceticism. That Pater, after the outcry following the publication of The Renaissance, took great pains to never again provoke

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160 I have chosen to focus my analysis on Marius and “Style” because I find them to be the most explicit examples of Pater’s effort to highlight the compatibility of religion and aestheticism. Other texts that represent a similar attempt to reconcile art with religion, or to align aesthetics with ethics, include Pater’s two unfinished and somewhat incoherent essays “Art & religion” (c. 1886-8) and “The aesthetic life” (c. 1893), which Kate Hext characterizes as illustrations of Pater’s “creative and intellectual failure” to resolve the ethical and spiritual quandaries that his aesthetic philosophy engenders (18); the essays collected in the volume Greek Studies, most of which are concerned with revealing the religious significance of Hellenic art; the imaginary portrait “Emerald Uthwart” (1892) which, like “The Child in the House” (1878), harks back to Pater’s boyhood fascination with ecclesiastic rituals; and Plato and Platonism—in particular the essay “Plato’s aesthetics,” in which Pater emphasizes the moral import Plato attributes to aesthetic education.
Ireland is indubitable; however, the desire to appease his critics cannot account entirely for the radical reformulation of the relationship between aestheticism and Christianity that characterizes his later work. Nor, I think, can we credit this reformulation solely to Pater’s renewed openness towards the Christian faith in the 1880s, which has been documented by biographers and made much of by critics. Rather, what I have been trying to show is that the reconciliation between Pater’s contemplative aestheticism and its one-time enemy, Christian spirituality, was bound to occur because of the otherworldly standards upon which this aestheticism has always been, albeit covertly and possibly unconsciously, predicated.

Pater’s call to “treat life in the spirit of art” was an attempt to re-conceptualize temporal experience in terms of its immediate rather than future (either worldly or otherworldly) significance. The appreciation of each moment “for its own sake,” analogized to the “ beholding for the joy of beholding” enabled by aesthetic contemplation, was meant to free immediate experience from its bondage to external (both instrumental and religious) forms of fulfillment. In aligning life and art as analogous objects of contemplation, however, the stark discrepancy between the two is brought to light: whereas art achieves (or comes close to achieving), according to Pater’s circumscribed view of art, the total fusion of “sensuous form” and “spiritual motive” (“Winckelmann”), “the vision of perfect men and things” (Marius), or “the absolute correspondence of the term to its import” (“Style”), life, quite conspicuously, fails to realize any comparable synthesis, perfection, or coherence. As such, when evaluated according to these restrictive aesthetic criteria, life will always come up short against the supramundane accomplishments of art. Furthermore, because Pater advocates the “impassioned contemplation” of the world rather than artistic intervention in the world, those who adhere to the principles of his aestheticism will be drawn to objects that already possess these exceptional qualities, rather
than to objects that have yet to be refined in this way; in other words, they will be drawn directly
to art, and might even reject life in favour of art, to the extent that this is possible. Art, not life,
becomes the preferred object of visual consumption. And since even the generation of a work of
art, if we remember Pater’s account of it in “Style,” relies more on subtraction than
transfiguration, the artist himself must also renounce (most aspects of) the world in order to
‘create.’ Pater’s avowal that art functions as “a refuge, a sort of cloistral refuge, from a certain
vulgarity in the actual world” is the inevitable outcome of his attempt to “treat life in the spirit
of art”: when the criterion set for an affinity between art and life is aesthetic competency, art
will always be deemed superior.

When art is narrowly conceptualized as the height of perfect and harmonious beauty, then, it
becomes a specious means with which to counter religious otherworldliness: art thus conceived
always and already has ‘one foot out the door’ of the actual world, so to speak. If we return to
Bosch’s painting The Garden of Earthly Delights, which I briefly introduced at the beginning of
this chapter, we can now see how Pater’s ostensibly this-worldly valuation of life—which I
aligned with some modern interpretations of the painting—is undermined by the all-embracing
nature of his aestheticism. If we take the painting to be representative of the medieval Christian
view of the cosmos, we see how one’s decision whether or not to indulge in ‘the garden of
earthly delights’ would have been conditioned by one’s faith in God and fear of the eternal
consequences of one’s actions. Our world and the way in which we choose to spend our time
here (the space-time depicted in the central panel) are qualified and marginalized in relation to
the metaphysical beyond (the image to the right depicting the eternal punishment of sinners); the
message, it seems, would be that it is better to live your brief life on earth in austere obedience
to God so that you will be spared eternal damnation in the afterlife. Removing or disregarding
the frame, however, allows the central panel to be evaluated on its own terms—in which case
the ‘earthly delights’ being indulged in need not be viewed pejoratively. I have tried to show
that Pater’s early work exhibits a comparable understanding of transient, sensuous experience as
something that takes on new and profound significance when it is no longer judged in relation to
the otherworldly standards of Christian morality. Pater proposes, instead, that we judge the
value of human life and experience by aesthetic standards—an evaluative shift that appears to
transform our phenomenal world into a virtual ‘garden of earthly delights.’ While Pater’s
aestheticism may indeed counteract Christianity’s temporal depreciation of worldly existence
(that is, the way in which our brief time on earth is devalued when considered in relation to an
eternal afterlife), I maintain that it has done little to counteract, and may in fact have even
furthered, the sensuous depreciation of life. This is because the imperative to pursue beauty at
all costs ultimately privileges the encounter with art—sensuous form infused with ‘soul’ or
‘spirit’—over and above direct interaction with the people and things of this world.

What I am arguing, essentially, is that Pater has replaced the divide between our earthly life and
the afterlife, or the mortal realm and God’s immortal realm, with a divide between the realm of
life and the realm of art. Although it does not exist physically above or beyond the confines of
the world, the aesthetic realm, as posited by Pater, nevertheless distinguishes and delineates
itself from the actual world by the unearthly unity of its composition. Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s
characterization of the “aesthetic perfection” of Pater’s ekphrastic prose in The Renaissance as a
“lost fragment from a strange, harmonious world,” comparable to “meteoric stones that have
somehow fallen into the earth’s path,”\textsuperscript{161} clearly captures the otherworldly quality of Pater’s aesthetic: the harmonious perfection of the work of art marks it as patently foreign to the actual world. While the aesthetic ‘absolute’ that is thus created is manifold as opposed to singular—since every unique impression or “soul-fact” corresponds to its own unique form of expression—it will always exist beyond the world in the sense that the absolute unity of form and matter is only attainable within art’s measured parameters. One might reformulate Pater’s distinction between sensuous particulars and Platonic Ideas in “Coleridge” to highlight the disparity between artistic and worldly sense-objects: the “colour or curve of a rose-leaf” in art will always, because of its ‘soulful’ plenitude, be preferable to the ‘soulless’ rose-leaf in nature. It is my contention, in other words, that the Paterian aesthete would invariably choose Bosch’s \textit{The Garden of Earthly Delights} over our actual ‘garden of earthly delights’—that is, over the world itself. What Linda Dowling has called Pater’s “central and lifelong enterprise” to “reconcile himself and his readers emotionally to their new home in and of the earth” (“Walter Pater and Archaeology: The Reconciliation with Earth” 211, 221) is ultimately subverted by Pater’s own devotion to an unearthly ideal of beauty.

Pater’s ascent, descent or crossover (depending on its spatial conceptualization) into the otherworld of art is not necessarily the result of a religious change of heart, since art always has the capacity to realize, within its confines, what is yearned for but impossible to achieve under mundane circumstances. The more idealistic one’s conception of art becomes—the more art is thought to accomplish feats of unity, harmony and perfection that are impossible in life—the

\textsuperscript{161} “Jedes solche Vollkommene, das wir auf unserem Wege liegen finden, ist ein verirrtes Bruchstück aus einer harmonischen fremden Welt, wie Meteorolithen, die irgendwie auf die Wege unserer Erde herabgefallen sind” (“Walter Pater” 305; the English is my translation).
more art aligns itself with utopian or otherworldly notions of fulfillment, such as religious salvation. The eventual merger of the aesthetic and religious worldviews in Pater’s work is less the consequence of a radical shift in Pater’s personal belief system than the logical culmination of his aesthetic theory, which conceptualized art, from the beginning, as a space of *exalted* sensuousness, a space in which sensuous matter reaches the pinnacle of beauty by blending seamlessly with the “spiritual motive.” Indeed, a formulation (excised during an 1880 edit) expressed in Pater’s first published essay, “Coleridge’s Writings” (*Westminster Review*, January 1866), prefigures the conspicuous unearthliness of his late aesthetics:

> There are aspects of the religious character which have an artistic worth distinct from their religious import. Longing, a chastened temper, spiritual joy, are precious states of mind, not because they are part of man’s duty or because God has commanded them, still less because they are means of obtaining a reward, but because like culture itself they are remote, refined, intense, existing only in the triumph of a few over a dead world of routine in which there is no lifting of the soul at all. *If there is no other world, art in its own interest must cherish such characteristics as beautiful spectacles.* Stephen’s face, ‘like the face of an angel,’ has a worth of its own, even if the opened heaven is but a dream. (126 my emphasis)

In Pater’s view, once faith in the metaphysical “other world” has been extinguished, art should take on the task of preserving the “sacred perfume” (127) of religious belief in the form of “beautiful spectacles.” The contemplation of such elevated art, despite Pater’s professed intention to deliver the modern world from over-spiritualization, inevitably draws the viewer out of his/her earthly surroundings (the “dead world of routine”) far more than it revitalizes or returns him/her to them. The shift toward evaluating life in accordance with aesthetic (as
opposed to religio-moral) criteria, therefore, does not necessarily abolish the religious prioritization of an otherworld over the world of the ‘here and now’; in Pater’s case, it has merely resulted in the substitution of aesthetic for divine sovereignty. That Pater’s aestheticism culminates in the propagation of otherworldliness alerts us to the latent hostility towards life that art is always potentially harbouring, since art only comes into existence by distinguishing itself from life, by becoming, sometimes congenially but more often, perhaps, adversarially, life’s other.
Oscar Wilde is one of many writers of the 1890s (famously dubbed “The Tragic Generation” by W. B. Yeats) who were drawn in by Pater’s vision of an aesthetic otherworld. Pater’s spiritually circumscribed view of art unmistakably informs Gilbert’s declaration in “The Critic as Artist” that we must go “to Art for everything” because life “is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament” (173). In his Autobiography, Yeats pondered whether it was not in fact Pater’s “philosophy,” which “taught us to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air,” that ultimately “caused the disaster of [his] friends” (201); no writer of the 1890s met with “disaster” more notoriously than Wilde. His highly publicized trial and incarceration for gross indecency in 1895 are generally taken to mark the end of the Nineties, a decade that “without Wilde […] could not have found its character” (Ellmann 287). Yet despite his clear intellectual debt to Pater, Wilde’s famed wit and personality, the impression he gave of being “essentially a man of action” and only “a writer by perversity and accident” (Yeats 189), seem to fly in the face of Pater’s nonparticipative doctrine of aesthetic contemplation. And the fact that Wilde often told his stories aloud to friends and acquaintances before writing them down suggests that even Wilde’s art arose (and possibly

162 Holbrook Jackson, whose book The Eighteen Nineties (1913) was one of the first studies of the fin de siècle period in English literature, characterized Wilde as “the playboy of the Nineties” (87) who “strutted through the first half [of the decade] and staggered through the last” (89).
reached its highest point of expression) through direct interaction with others.\textsuperscript{163} The popular image of Oscar Wilde has been that of a frivolous poseur or dandy, a spokesperson of the aesthetic movement who “never ceased discoursing on the supremacy of art over life” (San Juan 8).\textsuperscript{164} It has proven difficult for critics to take Wilde seriously as a philosopher of art, no doubt because of the playful and seemingly flippant style in which he couches his ideas. As I will show here, however, it is precisely the facetious and hyperbolic nature of his espousal of Paterian aestheticism that leads Wilde to formulate a counter-philosophy, an aesthetic worldview which collapses the hierarchical and impermeable boundary between art and life that Pater had (unwittingly) established.

There is a long-standing critical tendency to view Wilde as the heir of Pater’s aestheticism, and scholars who stress the disparities between the “sage” (Yeats 202) and his most famous disciple often underestimate the extent of Pater’s influence.\textsuperscript{165} Wilde routinely paraphrased Pater (and others) without citing his sources—one such instance being his remark in a letter (undated, but presumed to be from 1890) that “the Saint and the artistic hedonist certainly meet—touch in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{163} In Chapters 3 (“The Fatal Book”) and 4 (“Disembodied Voices”) of Language and Decadence, Linda Dowling contrasts Pater’s ideal of autonomous writing with Wilde’s desire to reincarnate language in the person (voice) of the artist. She lists W. B. Yeats, Robert Ross and André Gide as among those who, “entranced, moved to tears, have testified to the extraordinary power and beauty of Wilde’s talk” (Dowling Language and Decadence 186).
\item \textsuperscript{164} Up until the 1970s, even scholarly work tended to perpetuate this image of Wilde. See Ian Small’s Oscar Wilde Revalued (1993) and Oscar Wilde: Recent Research (2000) for a survey of late twentieth-century trends in Wilde scholarship.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Julia Prewitt Brown, for instance, has argued that unjustified scholarly attention to Pater’s influence on Wilde has obscured Wilde’s rightful place in “a European tradition of thought that stretches from Kant and Schiller, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to the preeminent cosmopolitan artist-critics of this century, Benjamin and Adorno” (xviii). While her repositioning of Wilde alongside continental “cosmopolitan artist-critics” is both refreshing and warranted, I find her dismissal of Pater problematic, since it is predicated upon the assumption that the brief “Conclusion” to The Renaissance constitutes Pater’s definitive and univocal formulation of his aesthetic creed. Thus Prewitt Brown fails to recognize that Wilde’s complaint about the lack of correspondence between “form and spirit” in life is indicative of his indebtedness to rather than divergence from Pater, whom she mistakenly regards as a theorist who “could look at art only from the perspective of the disintegrating physical forces of life” (53).
\end{itemize}
many points” (*Complete Letters* 437), which echoes (almost word for word) Pater’s assertion in *Marius the Epicurean* that “The saint, and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty […] might actually touch” (184). For Pater, if we remember, the saint and the Cyrenaic coalesce in their “pursuit of a very unworldly type of perfection” (184), which is precisely why (I argued) Pater’s aestheticism fails to provide a secular basis for the valorization of life on earth. But Wilde’s veneration of unearthly ideals in art is far more ambivalent. There is a tension between transcendence and immanence running through Wilde’s articulation of what artistic ‘perfection’ is; he oscillates between the suggestion that art makes us godlike and therefore superior to the conditions of this world, and the idea that art enriches or ennobles our common humanity.167

Despite the Paterian (world-slander) sentiment behind many of his well-known aphorisms on art—such as “Life is terribly deficient in form” (“Critic as Artist” 166) or “It is through Art, and through Art only […] that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence” (173)—a world-embracing counter-current can be detected in his concern for the social relevance of the arts (which he inherits from Ruskin, Morris and Arnold)168 and his late reflections on the centrality of suffering to art in *De Profundis*. In contradistinction to Pater’s increasing emphasis on art’s “unworldly type of perfection,” Wilde’s notion of aesthetic

166 In *Art and Christhood: The Aesthetics of Oscar Wilde*, Guy Willoughby takes this formulation (that the saint and the aesthetic hedonist meet) to epitomize “the thematic and structural crux” (76) of much of Wilde’s work without recognizing that Wilde has in fact appropriated it from Pater.

167 The issue of contradiction or paradox in Wilde’s oeuvre has been central to Wilde scholarship since George Woodcock’s influential study *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (1949), in which Woodcock identifies and strives to synthesize, by way of a “dialectical method,” Wilde’s “split personality,” the “very deep cleft in his mental process” (3-4). To the best of my knowledge, no study to date has directly addressed the tension between immanence and transcendence, or the human and the divine, that pervades Wilde’s writings on aestheticism. On the prominence of paradox in fin de siècle literature and criticism generally, see J.E. Chamberlin’s *Ripe was the Drowsy Hour: The Age of Oscar Wilde* 141-152.

168 Wilde makes his case for the social relevance of the arts most conspicuously in the public lectures he delivered in America in 1882 as a spokesperson for (and artifact of) the Aesthetic Movement. See Ellmann (144-200) and volume 11 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (1923), in particular the lecture “Decorative Arts” (which draws heavily on Ruskin and Morris).
perfection eventually comes to rest in the realm of the human, as a personal ideal that has the potential to be realized by each individual in the world.

My last chapter exposed the (initially obscured) compatibility between Pater’s contemplative aestheticism and the saintly way of life; here, I explore how Wilde adopts and adapts Pater’s formula, and argue, ultimately, that Wilde overcomes the otherworldliness of Pater’s aestheticism in a somewhat surprising manner: by grounding his aestheticism in a fully human version of Jesus Christ. Paradoxically, it is Wilde’s adoption of a nominally ‘Christian’\(^\text{169}\) aesthetics of incarnation—an understanding of Jesus as the living embodiment of his own imaginative ideal—that enables him to resolve the antagonism between the godlike and the human in his aesthetic theory.\(^\text{170}\)

\textbf{Wilde’s Garden of Aesthetic Delights}

The transcendent impulse in Wilde’s aestheticism is most explicitly articulated in his essays “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” both of which utilize the rhetorical structure of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item As I will show in the third section of this chapter, Wilde’s final formulation of his aesthetic worldview, despite having Jesus as its central figure, is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity since it disregards the transcendent dimension (the immaculate conception, resurrection, ascension, and promise to return) accorded to Jesus Christ in the Christian narrative.
\item As in my previous study of Pater’s aestheticism, I am less concerned here with specifying the nature of Wilde’s religious beliefs than I am with identifying world-affirming and world-denying strains in his aesthetic theory. In principle, Wilde was (like Pater) a Protestant who felt drawn to the aesthetic trappings of Catholicism. As Hilary Fraser puts it, “Wilde’s adult life was a prolonged flirtation with the Roman Catholic Church”—one that ended with a deathbed conversion (206). See Ellmann’s biography for a detailed account of Wilde’s protean attitude towards religion and his lifelong fascination with Roman Catholicism, as well as Chapter 4 (“The Temptation of Saint Oscar”) of Ellis Hanson’s \textit{Decadence and Catholicism} (especially pages 257-263) and Chapter 5 (“Oscar Wilde as Queer Theologian”) in Frederick Roden’s \textit{Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Socratic dialogue to present a doctrine of radical aestheticism.\textsuperscript{171} These essays, which (alongside “The Truth of Masks” and “Pen, Pencil, and Poison”) Wilde selected for republication in \textit{Intentions} (1891),\textsuperscript{172} clearly draw on the main principles of Pater’s contemplative aestheticism; however, because Wilde’s dialogic mouthpieces (namely Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” and Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”) push Pater’s principles to the extreme, they render explicit the implicit hostility to the world that I exposed in my reading of Pater in the preceding chapter. Whereas Pater, in \textit{The Renaissance}, had (sincerely, if unsuccessfully) called upon art to aid us in re-valorizing temporal life without recourse to divine criteria, here Wilde overtly derides life for being “terribly deficient in form” (“Critic” 166) and boasts of art’s (and the artist-aesthete’s) godlike superiority to life and nature. Pater had urged us to maximize our appreciation of the ‘garden of earthly delights’ by cultivating our “finest senses” in aesthetic contemplation; Wilde, extending Pater’s doctrine to its logical limits, exhorts us outright to reject the earthly garden in favour of an aesthetic (that is, artificial) one.\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{171} That Wilde’s two most famous critical works are written in dialogue form underlines the centrality of masks, ambivalence and playfulness to Wilde’s expressive style. Wilde abhorred simplistic or dogmatic approaches to truth; as Gilbert says in Part II of “The Critic as Artist”: “It is Criticism that, recognizing no position as final, and refusing to bind itself by the shallow shibboleths of any sect or school, creates that serene philosophic temper which loves truth for its own sake” (203–4). The juxtaposition and exaggeration of competing ideas in the dialogues reveals Wilde’s awareness of the profound complexity of the subjects he engages with. I argue, in fact, that it is Wilde’s playful exaggeration of Pater’s aesthetic doctrine (through the mouths of Vivian and Gilbert) that exposes its covert hostility to life.

\textsuperscript{172} “The Decay of Lying” was first published in the \textit{Nineteenth Century} in January 1889; “The True Function and Value of Criticism” (renamed “The Critic as Artist” in \textit{Intentions}) appeared in July (Part I) and September (Part II) of 1890 in the \textit{Nineteenth Century}. For a detailed account of the changes Wilde made to the essays for their publication in \textit{Intentions} (1891), see Josephine Guy’s “Introduction” to Volume IV of the OET \textit{Complete Works}. As Guy outlines there, the essays chosen for \textit{Intentions}, alongside Wilde’s prize-winning undergraduate essay \textit{Historical Criticism} and \textit{The Soul of Man}, are the works “Wilde himself singled out as the most representative of the kind of critic he wished himself to be” by publishing them in book form (or, in the case of \textit{Historical Criticism}, in fair-copy quarto notebooks) (xix).

\textsuperscript{173} Philip K. Cohen has suggested that Wilde’s tendency to exaggerate or extend Pater’s claims about the superiority of art to life is a consequence of his far more extroverted (and imprudent) personality: “Art satisfies Pater because it is art. It draws Wilde because it offers an escape from action, and hence from damnation” (\textit{The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde} 111).
Thus no adroit sleuthing is required to uncover the life-denying undercurrent of Wilde’s aesthetic theory: what was latent in Pater becomes manifest in Wilde, and Wilde’s aestheticism (as it is articulated in these essays) unmistakably exemplifies the religio-moral pessimism that Nietzsche decried in Wagner, Schopenhauer and Christianity alike.\(^\text{174}\)

To recall, Nietzsche used the term \textit{religio-moral pessimism} to describe the attitude of those who can only endure life by having recourse to analgesic illusions. I identified Nietzsche’s own youthful vision of redemption through Apollonian illusion in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} as exemplary of this attitude, and the central thesis of “The Decay of Lying” is, in fact, strikingly similar to Nietzsche’s argument in that early work. Nietzsche had maintained that “art’s seductive veil of beauty” (Apollonian \textit{Schein}) performed the vital function of obscuring “the eternal wound of existence” (section 18, 109), thereby perpetuating and quickening one’s desire to live. In “The Decay of Lying,” artistic deception and beauty are similarly aligned and opposed to uncomely truth. According to Vivian (the Socratic figure of the dialogue, who protests against the “decay of lying” in contemporary art), “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (103). Writers such as Guy de Maupassant who insist upon “strip[ping] life of the few poor rags that still cover her, and show[ing] us foul sore and festering wound” (78) therefore sin

\(^{174}\) Despite the fact that Nietzsche and Wilde appear to have been unaware of one another’s work, there is considerable overlap in their views on morality and art. Max Nordau brought the two men together in his now infamous study on \textit{Degeneration} (1892) in fin de siècle art and thought. André Gide and Thomas Mann were among the first to note similarities between the two thinkers (see Gide’s \textit{Oscar Wilde}, 15, and 157-158 and 172 of Mann’s “Nietzsche’s Philosophy in the Light of Recent History” in \textit{Last Essays}); George Bernard Shaw also quipped that Oscar Wilde was Sir William Wilde’s “Nietzschean son […] beyond Good and Evil” (“My Memories of Oscar Wilde” 388). More extensive comparisons of Nietzsche and Wilde include Kate Hext’s “Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘Rebels in the name of beauty’” (2011), Louise Mabille’s \textit{The rage of Caliban: Nietzsche and Wilde: contra modernity} (2006), Chapter 9 (“Masked Men: Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde”) of Patrick Bridgwater’s \textit{Ango-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s} (1999), and Chapters 3 and 4 of Julia Prewitt Brown’s \textit{Cosmopolitan Criticism. Oscar Wilde’s Philosophy of Art} (1997). Recently, Adam Phillips has brought the two thinkers together in \textit{Unforbidden Pleasures} (2015), arguing that Nietzsche’s and Wilde’s efforts to develop new moral vocabularies were motivated by a shared desire to defend “the possibility that one could love being alive” (19).
against art’s fundamental premise. While Wilde is clearly invoking an empirical or factual notion of truth here (in contrast to Nietzsche’s metaphysical one), his equation of art with untruth, or beauty with illusion, still renders art (as did Nietzsche’s Apollonian principle) a means of circumventing intolerable suffering (the “wound” of life). For Wilde, art is a wholly Apollonian affair, tasked with dissembling as opposed to revealing, with dressing truth up in more comely clothing rather than exposing her bare flesh. As Vivian says: “She is a veil, rather than a mirror” (89-90). That modern novelists go “directly to life for everything” (76) instead of cultivating “distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power” (79) is therefore of great concern, since it signals that art, in the modern world, has lost sight of her raison d’être. Vivian bemoans: “We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the hillside with Apollo” (82-3). The proper domain of art is not the “sordid,” “hideous” and “vile” topography of our modern metropolises, but rather the idyllic dreamscapes of Apollo. Beauty and truth, like art and life, are antipodes, and “those who do not love Beauty more than Truth [will] never know the inmost shrine of Art” (101).

“The Critic as Artist” takes Wilde’s argument about the superiority of art to life one step further than “The Decay of Lying” by suggesting that criticism reaches a higher form of perfection than art because it is less contaminated by the world. In an extension of Pater’s proposition in The Renaissance that the critic’s task is to “know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly” (xviv), Gilbert (the dialogue’s Socrates) reasons that

175 Rodney Shewan sums up the redemptive function ascribed to (Apollonian) art in “Decay” thus: “Vivian dexterously shows ‘Truth’ to be what is—anything susceptible to the ‘scientific’ method; while Lying is what should be—answerable only to the imagination. […] While Realism panders to the unregenerate imagination, Romance redeems it by freeing it from what is” (98).
criticism surpasses art in terms of purity and creativity: “I would say that the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal expression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself, an end” (154). Criticism reaches a level of autonomy that art (which deals directly with “the visible world of form and colour” [153]) can only dream of; at its best, it becomes the absolute and perfect expression of oneself, the “only civilized form of autobiography” (154). Once one has developed the critic’s “fine sense of distinction and sure instinct of delicate refinement,” one will naturally renounce “the chaos and clamour of actual existence” in favour of the “silver mirror” or “woven veil” of art (155).

The man of refined tastes finds “actual existence” unpalatable for a number of reasons: it is “terribly deficient in form” (166), “incoherent in its utterance,” and lacking in “that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament” (173). From “an artistic point of view,” in other words, life is undoubtedly a “failure” (167). If life is a poorly realized work of art, then art is a perfected version of life: art transforms the “chaos” of life into “a new world that [is] more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon” (152). Without the aid of art, life is incapable of achieving such a feat; as Wilde (Vivian) argued in “The Decay of Lying,” life and nature suffer from a lack of ideas, and it is only by imitating art that they succeed in partially mitigating this defect. If the very “basis of life,” as Wilde (Vivian) suggests, is “the desire for expression,” then art in a sense completes life by “presenting various forms through which this

176 An exception to this real-world dependence, of course, would be ekphrastic literature, which Wilde holds in high esteem: “The conception of making a prose-poem out of paint is excellent. Much of the best modern literature springs from the same aim. In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other” (“Pen Pencil and Poison. A study in green” 113).
expression can be attained” (“Decay” 94). It is in this sense that literature, in “The Critic as Artist,” is declared “the perfect expression of life” (137 emphasis mine). Literature is said to surpass all other arts because language “most fully mirrors man in all his infinite variety” (137); the visual arts, by contrast, achieve a lower level of perfection because they cannot represent “growth or change,” and their immortality is therefore gained at the expense of a more total vision of existence: “If they know nothing of death, it is because they know little of life” (152).

The human individual, not just abstract “life” or “nature,” is also said to reach his highest point of expression in the sphere of art. In the world, we are subject to a multitude of factors beyond our control that prohibit us from fully shaping ourselves in accordance with our will. It is thus “through Art, and through Art only”—and specifically through criticism, that form of art which “is concerned simply with oneself” (154)—“that we can realize our perfection” (173).

Another aspect of art that makes it superior to life is that art invariably accommodates our desires and caprices. Art accords us absolute freedom in choosing what emotions we would like to experience and what situations we would like to live through (and when). Life may, at times, concede to give us “pleasure” when we ask for it, but “bitterness and disappointment” are always sure to follow (167). Art, on the other hand, never denies or modulates our request, congenially allowing us to “settle beforehand what our experiences are going to be” (167-8). We can even indulge in the purgation of tragic emotions without enduring true suffering because art engenders “exquisite sterile emotions […] We weep, but we are not wounded. We grieve, but our grief is not bitter” (173). Whereas suffering in life entails “a passage to a lesser perfection,” the emotional catharsis generated by tragic art “both purifies and initiates” us (173). The “sterile” nature of aesthetically-induced emotions, which served as the inspiration for Pater’s “treat life in the spirit of art” philosophy, becomes for Wilde the explicit—and arguably the
foremost—rationale for choosing art over life: It is because “Art does not hurt us” that we should go “to Art for everything” (173). While it is only through art that, as I discussed previously, “we can realize our perfection,” it is also and perhaps even more significantly “through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence” (173). Since there are no consequences for the actions and emotions we encounter in art, art allows us to experience all that life has to offer in a way that is both more refined (more pleasing to our aesthetic judgment) and free from risk. The buffered realm of art envelops the artist-critic and marks an impenetrable border between him and the pain of the world: “From the high tower of Thought we can look out at the world. Calm, and self-centred, and complete, the aesthetic critic contemplates life, and no arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the joints of his harness. He at least is safe. He has discovered how to live” (178). To “live” by not living, to so completely transcend the human condition that one becomes immune to human suffering—this is the ultimate goal of Wilde’s aestheticism. One would be hard-pressed to find—even in the work of the arch-decadents Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche’s sworn “antipodes”—a vision of otherworldly redemption more antipathetic, more slanderous to life, than this.

Unlike Pater, whose aestheticism originally stemmed from the intention to ‘redeem’ worldly experience from its religious devaluation, Wilde (in these dialogic essays) has no qualms about openly disparaging the world and proposing art as the new ‘otherworld,’ the profane successor to the no longer accessible (or never-existent) divine realm. In “The Critic as Artist,” Gilbert declares that, for the sceptical and highly cultured fin de siècle man, religious faith is a near impossibility: “To us the citta divina is colourless, and the fruitio Dei without meaning. […] It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-fallacy of the species” (175).
The visions of heaven that sustained not only their fathers but also the “saint” and the “mystic” for centuries have lost their lustre, and even the philosopher’s ostensibly “ideal world” is now revealed to be “simply a world of abstract ideas,” a world whose lifelessness “starve[s]” and “chill[s]” the fin de siècle sensation seeker (175). No, religious and philosophical visions will no longer do: a new object of contemplation is needed, one that will satisfy modern man’s desire for “exquisite pleasures” and “the concrete” (175). Wilde proffers both life and art as more suitable objects to behold for (as Pater would say) “the mere joy of beholding,” but art is clearly presented as the worthier of the two.

It is worth pausing for a moment here to examine the way in which Wilde ventriloquizes Pater in this section of “The Critic as Artist,” since his juxtaposition of Paterian formulas from several different texts actually brings to the fore the central contradiction of Pater’s aesthetic philosophy of life. Wilde’s first reference to Pater in this section comes when he notes that, “as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere,” the modern man would not trade “the curve of a single rose-leaf” for access to Plato’s realm of Being (175). This life-affirming formulation from the “Coleridge” essay about the modern penchant for sensuous particulars is meant to reinforce Wilde’s argument that we are no longer awed by religious or philosophical visions (175). However, as we have already seen, while life is certainly more suited to the modern taste for physical forms than are heavenly or abstract visions, life does not meet the artist-critic’s criteria for coherence or correspondence of form and matter. This is why, very soon after paraphrasing from the essay on “Coleridge,” Wilde classifies art as a higher-order object of contemplation than the natural world, since “Art is mind expressing itself under the conditions of matter, and thus, even in the lowliest of her manifestations, she speaks to both sense and soul alike” (175). Although Wilde does not tie this idea explicitly to Pater, the Hegelian-inspired notion of “soul and sense”
merging in art is, as I discussed in my last chapter, a foundational tenet of Pater’s aesthetic theory, one that is expressed in a number of his texts (to take one example, in the description of the Venus of Melos in the “Winckelmann” essay, where the “spiritual motive” is said to blend inextricably with the “sensuous form”). What is made clear in this passage from “Critic,” then, is precisely that which needed to be carefully parsed from Pater’s work, namely the fact that while an aesthete may not be willing to exchange a rose-leaf for Plato’s realm of Forms, he would gladly exchange a rose-leaf for a work of art. Despite dismissing philosophy and religion as not “concrete” enough, as too far removed from the life of the senses to interest the fin de siècle man, Gilbert-Wilde does not enjoin his listener-readers to turn their gaze fully and unconditionally to the world; rather, he recommends that art—an otherworld populated by sense objects, but an otherworld nonetheless—take the place of these other, outmoded objects of contemplation.

The hostility towards life espoused in this essay ends up far exceeding that which underlay Pater’s aestheticism: not only does Gilbert-Wilde more directly state what Pater merely implied—that art is a higher-order object of contemplation than life—but the mode of perfection and invulnerability that the “aesthetic critic” is encouraged to aspire to is clearly modeled on a godlike or superhuman notion of being. The artist-critic may resemble the saint or mystic in his contemplative stance, but his ultimate goal is to emulate not holy men but the gods themselves, who look down on a world of their own creation from their place on high:

Yes, Ernest: the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming—that is what the critical spirit can give us. The gods live thus: either brooding over their own perfection, as Aristotle tells us, or, as Epicurus fancied, watching with the calm eyes of the spectator the tragi-comedy of the world that
they have made. We, too, might live like them, and set ourselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature afford. We might make ourselves spiritual by detaching ourselves from action, and become perfect by the rejection of energy. (178-9)

Unlike the saint or the mystic, whose contemplative gaze is directed upwards to the god he serves, a god, who serves no one, looks down on all he has created, on all that exists to serve him. The radical autonomy to which the artist-critic aspires thus parallels the absolute sovereignty of the divine, a being perfect in itself and subject to no law apart from its own will. Such an extreme degree of detachment would enable the aesthete to exercise unmitigated control over the conditions of his existence, rendering him impermeable to pain and suffering inflicted by outside forces. Modeled as it is on total transcendence of the earthly realm, this godlike existence has little to do with the possibilities of human life. Wilde’s vision of aesthetic sovereignty is conceptualized as a victory over the human condition, an act of divinization. In fact, as Gilbert-Wilde states near the end of the essay, the ultimate goal of the artist-critic is to cast off his human status altogether, to transform himself into a god: “He will look out upon the world and know its secret. By contact with divine things, he will become divine. His will be the perfect life, and his only” (204).

Internal and External Transcendence in The Soul of Man and The Picture of Dorian Gray

In order to help clarify the distinction between the supernatural or otherworldly kind of aesthetic perfection that Wilde champions in the essays I have been discussing, and the more human or worldly notion of aesthetic perfection that he will develop in De Profundis, I would like to turn
once again to the set of terms that Nussbaum expounds in her essay “Transcending Humanity” (which I introduced in Chapter 1). Nussbaum, to recall, distinguishes between two forms of transcendence: “extrahuman” or “external” transcendence, which aspires to entirely overcome human weakness and attain a godlike existence (immortal, infallible, invulnerable), and “internal” or “human” transcendence, which works within the precarious and transient conditions of human life towards immanent goals that contribute to human flourishing. The vision of aesthetic sovereignty that Wilde espouses in “The Critic as Artist” is clearly “extrahuman” in its aspirations: it is a wish to become something other than human, to discard one’s human life in exchange for the “life of another sort of being.” But Wilde—perhaps unsurprisingly, considering his oft-quoted maxim that “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (“The Truth of Masks” 228)—does not consistently endorse this superhuman vision of aesthetic transcendence. Both The Soul of Man and The Picture of Dorian Gray (written in the same two-year period as “Decay” and “Critic”)\(^\text{177}\) raise doubts about the value of attempting to transcend the human through art, and De Profundis will reject this aspiration altogether. In the third part of this chapter, I will argue that Wilde’s post-trial aestheticism corresponds, in virtually every respect, to the kind of internal or human transcendence that Nussbaum encourages us to adopt (and that might provide us with a non-theological way of understanding the role art plays in aesthetic philosophies of life). Here, I would like to highlight the ways in which The Soul of Man and The Picture of Dorian Gray

\(^{177}\) According to Guys, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” was most likely written in late 1890 and revised in January 1891, during which time Wilde was also revising the essays for Intentions (lxx). Wilde had delivered the finished draft of the first version of The Picture of Dorian Gray to J. Marshall Stoddart at Lippincott’s Magazine in March of 1890; the revised and extended version of the novel was published in April of 1891 (xliv). Given that these works were being written and revised concurrently, one cannot speak of a progression or a ‘turn’ in Wilde’s thought when addressing the discrepancies between them; what these discrepancies reveal, rather, is that Wilde was not nearly as convinced about the coherence of the views presented in Intentions as many of his readers have believed.
complicate (but do not wholly overcome) the world-renouncing doctrine of aestheticism championed in the *Intentions* essays.

Significantly, both Wilde (in “Critic”) and Nussbaum (in her discussion of extrahuman transcendence) have in mind the gods of the ancient Greek Pantheon in their discussion of divinity. The Greek gods were famously callous; they lacked, as Nussbaum observes (following Aristotle), what we as humans would consider ethical virtues (374). Because they require nothing to subsist, because they are not susceptible to suffering or death, the gods are incapable of or simply do not see the point in behaving courageously (nothing is risky to them), selflessly (they have nothing to sacrifice), and compassionately (mortal pain is foreign to them). The god of the Christian tradition, Nussbaum notes, differs from the Hellenic gods in an important respect: he knows what it is like to be human. Unlike the Greek gods, who live under conditions entirely different from ours, the Christian god is “a god who is human as well as divine, a god who has actually lived out the nontranscendent life and understands it in the only way it can be understood, by suffering and death” (375). The Christian god descended from his transcendent heights—and not just fleetingly, as the Greek gods did to dally with beautiful humans or meddle in their affairs—in order to experience the full life cycle of a human being. The Christian god, therefore, can at least empathize with our plight, since his form of being is not wholly foreign to ours.

The flawed moral nature of the Greek gods has often been invoked to prove precisely the opposite of what Nussbaum contends here—namely, as proof that the Greek gods, with all their flaws, are *far more human* than the wholly good Judeo-Christian god. This (to recall) is Nietzsche’s point in “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” when he compares his anti-Christian artist-god in *The Birth of Tragedy* to the Greek gods in whom “all things, whether good or evil, are
deified” (section 3, 41). While Nussbaum’s failure to comment directly on how the absolute goodness of the Christian god might render him just as if not more ‘extrahuman’ than the Greek gods is an oversight that attenuates her distinction between Christian and Greek notions of divinity, she is clearly not suggesting that Christianity, as a whole, endorses a fully internal or human form of transcendence. Despite the human dimension of the Christian religion, Nussbaum notes that, historically, “forms of the aspiration to extrahuman transcendence” within Christianity “have indeed, as Marx and Nietzsche both in different ways saw, undermined people’s love of and commitment to [human or worldly] struggles against limit” (380). Nussbaum concurs with Nietzsche—who “did have a real point,” she insists against Charles Taylor, even though he may have made it “too simply against the Christians”—that “If one thinks that the really important thing is to get over to a different sort of life altogether, then this may well make one work less hard on this one” (380). The promise of another world and eternal life inevitably, on some level, diminishes the significance of the temporal realm. In order to eradicate the “external” or “extrahuman” element of transcendence in Christianity, one would have to strip Jesus of his divine status, to situate his redemptive message (and its provenance) entirely within what Taylor calls the “immanent frame.” Wilde’s discussion of Jesus in The Soul of Man and De Profundis does precisely this, by treating him (as did other nineteenth-century treatises, such as Renan’s Vie de Jésus) as a human being rather than the human incarnation of god.
In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde modeled his image of the artist-critic’s godlike existence on a Hellenic notion of divinity; in *The Soul of Man*, Wilde begins to formulate an alternate vision of aesthetic existence grounded in the figure of Jesus Christ. In this essay, Wilde advances what is in some ways a more worldly theory of aesthetic perfection, one based not on emulation of a transcendent divinity but on the cultivation and externalization of one’s own personality. In heterodox (or even entirely pagan) fashion, Wilde declares that Jesus Christ was an emissary not of God, but of Individualism. Christ’s simple and central message to mankind, Wilde insists, was nothing other than “‘Be thyself’” (240). All of Christ’s teachings—imbued with artistic rather than divine authority—are said to stem from his belief that man can perfect himself through developing his personality. Wilde (liberally) paraphrases Jesus thus: “He said to man, ‘You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. […] Your perfection is inside of you. […] In the treasury-house of your soul, there are infinitely precious things, that may not be taken from you. And so, try to so shape your life that external things will not harm you’” (240-1). While individual autonomy and self-protection are as central to this passage as they were to the godlike description of the aesthete in “Critic,” these goals are pursued here not through divine imitation but through self-development. Any act of imitation, in fact, is said to hinder the evolution of one’s personality: the man today who, in imitation of Christ, “carries a wooden cross on his shoulders,” merely symbolizes “the lives that are marred by imitation” (243). Rather, we should admire Jesus as the exemplar of an artistically formed individual, as a man “who is perfectly and

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178 The “Soul of Man Under Socialism” first appeared in Frank Harris’s *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891. When Wilde republished the essay in book format in 1895 (after his public fall from grace), he dropped “Under Socialism” from the title, perhaps (as Guy surmises) in order to “emphasize the spiritual as opposed to political elements of the argument” (lxxix).
absolutely himself,” who has “realize[d] the perfection of the soul that is within him” (243). Wilde urges us to realize the same task for ourselves, on our own terms.

Despite the homage he pays to Jesus for seeking “to intensify [the true personality of man]” (239-40), Wilde is critical of his chosen method of self-formation. Wilde rejects the soteriological narrative of Jesus sacrificing himself to redeem humanity’s sins in the eyes of God; Jesus’s suffering, the fact that the Individualism he espoused “could be realized only through pain or in solitude” (265), is taken to be a defect in his teaching. Since the world he lived in was horribly unjust yet he “made no attempt to reconstruct society” (265), Jesus was forced to “realiz[e] his perfection through pain” (266). Medieval depictions of Jesus as “one maimed and marred” thus embody “the real Christ,” whereas Renaissance depictions of him “as a little boy […] lying back in his mother’s arms” or “as a wonderful figure rising in a sort of ecstasy from death to life” either obscure or gloss over the uncomely truth of his suffering. The medieval period, “with its saints and martyrs, its love of self-torture, its wild passion for wounding itself,” therefore epitomizes “real Christianity” (265), while the Christian “worship of pain” remains anathema to the Renaissance “ideals of the beauty of life and the joy of living” (265). In order for Jesus’s Individualism to become synonymous with the “new Hellenism” (268), then, it will need to replace pain with joy as its chief mode of realization. Wilde optimistically declares (in this essay intended to promote the cause of socialism) that the world is progressing towards a future in which suffering and injustice will be altogether eradicated: “Pain is not the ultimate mode of perfection. It is merely provisional and a protest. It has reference to wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings. When the wrong, and the disease, and the injustice are removed, it will have no further place” (267). With the help of science and socialism, the new Individualism will make joy (and beauty, because “Beauty is a joy” [266])
the ideal mode of realization for all humanity. When poverty and sickness are eliminated, every person on the planet will be free to live “intensely, fully, perfectly […] in harmony with himself and his environment” (267).

While Wilde’s adoption of the human Jesus (as opposed to the gods of ancient Greece) in The Soul of Man as the ideal artistic type goes a long way towards bringing his aesthetic doctrine ‘down to earth,’ his repudiation of suffering betrays a lingering hostility towards the conditions of life. In “Decay” and “Critic,” Wilde had suggested that pain has no place in the perfect realm of art; the Apollonian beauty of art was contrasted to the sordid reality of life, and aesthetic contemplation was championed as a means of preserving oneself from earthly suffering. Wilde’s later prose poem “The Artist” (1894) reinforces the idea that pleasure rather than pain is the proper subject of art: the artist chooses to immortalize in bronze “an image of The Pleasure that abideth for a Moment,” even though this requires that he melt down the bronze he had fashioned into “the image of The Sorrow that endureth for Ever” to mark the grave of “the one thing he had loved in life” (OET Complete Works, vol. 1, 174-5). In a similar vein, Wilde envisions in The Soul of Man a socialist-utopian future in which the world itself has become as perfect and harmonious as a work of art and from which suffering, consequently, has been expunged. Life will thus become what art was said to be: wholly joyful, wholly beautiful, and wholly pleasurable. The realm of art and the realm of life will merge in such a way that life will be entirely supplanted by art; the aesthete’s paradise will descend to earth, and there will no longer be any need to seek refuge in the otherworld of art because the aesthetic otherworld will have abolished the actual world. It is no longer a matter of choosing art over life, of renouncing the pain of the world in favour of the pleasure of art, because life will have become art and pain will no longer exist. While this radically utopian vision may appear to affirm the worthiness of
temporal life through its commitment to improving worldly conditions, it actually denies that which, as Nussbaum points out, most clearly differentiates us from the divine: our mortal susceptibility to suffering. Where does death fit into Wilde’s aesthetic utopia? The work of art may be (in a certain sense) immortal, but the human body—regardless of the advances of socialism and science—is not. Wilde’s aesthetic utopia, in fact, bears a distinct resemblance to the vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, where “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (King James Version, Rev. 21.4). The mode of aesthetic transcendence espoused in The Soul of Man, then, is still invested in an extrahuman ideal, one that repudiates death (and the pain of knowing that we will die).

To return to Nussbaum’s argument, this kind of visionary eradication of the “general conditions of human existence” fails to acknowledge that such conditions inform, in a fundamental way, “the values that we know, love, and appropriately pursue” (379). Nussbaum granted superiority to the Christian god over the Greek gods because of his experiential knowledge of mortal suffering, yet Wilde brushes off this aspect of Jesus’s personality as “merely provisional and a protest,” as something that socialism and science will ultimately render obsolete. In a sense, Wilde actually faults Jesus for being too human, too mired in the pain of the world to be able to fulfil his ideal of aesthetic perfection. Despite his interest in transforming (as opposed to fleeing) the world in The Soul of Man, Wilde remains committed to an aesthetic ideal that repudiates mortality, the most fundamental aspect of our earthly condition. It is not until De

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179 In the twenty-first century, we appear more determined than ever to make our dreams of immortality and freedom from suffering a reality; as Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari explores in his new book Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow, technological advances may actually be leading us towards a future in which we (or our data systems) become as all-knowing and ageless as the gods we once worshipped.
Profundis that he will fully overcome the underlying resentment towards the world that he has adopted, and augmented, from Pater’s aestheticism.

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Wilde arguably recognized the incoherence inherent in his desire to transcend human suffering through art long before the events of his own life exposed the inadequacy of his aesthetic philosophy. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the first version of which was published before Wilde had even begun writing *The Soul of Man*, takes the contrast between art’s ageless and immortal status and our aging and mortal bodies as its subject. This notoriously ambiguous novel has generated a sizable amount of secondary literature, as critics have been left with the task of accounting for the glaring contradiction between the assertion in the “Preface” that “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (3) and the book’s clearly moral message—which Wilde, in a letter to the editor of the *St. James’s Gazette* (June 26 1890), defined as “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (*Norton Critical Edition* 358). (Not to mention the fact that, within the narrative itself, a certain yellow book proves to be “poisonous” to Dorian’s moral development.) As Richard Ellmann puts it, the

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180 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first published in July 1890 in *Lippincott’s Monthly* as a narrative of thirteen chapters. Wilde revised and greatly expanded his text into a twenty-chapter novel, which he published with Ward, Lock & Co. in April 1891. For a detailed discussion of the changes Wilde made to the narrative and the role played by publishers, editors and critics in the text’s construction, see Joseph Bristow’s “Introduction” to Volume III of the OET Complete Works. I am working from the 1891 version in my analysis here, since it represents the final state in which the author left his text (Wilde did not revise his novel subsequently). Page numbers refer to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is the most widely available variorum edition of the narrative.

181 The “Preface” was first published in *The Fortnightly Review* in March 1891, and forms part of the public war of words between Wilde and the viciously hostile critics of the *Lippincott’s edition of Dorian Gray*. In response to those who censured his story on moral grounds, Wilde put forth twenty-three aphorisms (twenty-five would appear the following month in the “Preface” published with the novel) in defiance and self-defence, championing the autonomy and amorality of art. For an excellent account of the social and material conditions that led to Wilde’s writing of the “Preface,” see Regenia Gagnier’s *Idylls of the Marketplace* 56-62.
“Preface” “flaunted the aestheticism that the book would indict,” thereby rendering *Dorian Gray* “reflexive in the most cunning way, like its central image. […] Wilde the preface-writer and Wilde the novelist deconstruct each other” (297). Contradiction, in Wilde’s oeuvre, is certainly not unique to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; as I have already mentioned, the notion that “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” is one of the overarching principles of Wildean aesthetics. Wilde revelled in paradox, and studies that strive to entirely resolve the disparity between text and paratext (such as, for instance, John G. Peters’ “Style and Art in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Form and Content”) ultimately end up simplifying or disregarding key aspects of the novel in order to prove their point. My purpose here is not to elaborate an all-encompassing explanation of the novel that reconciles its many disparate elements. Rather, I would like to highlight the tension between human and extrahuman aspirations that runs through the narrative, and to suggest that this tension symptomatizes Wilde’s underlying ambivalence towards the aesthetic doctrine he advances, to all intents and purposes, in the “Preface” and *Intentions*.

Frederick Roden has argued that the novel punishes Dorian for his “failure to realize spiritual transcendence” (140); I find it significant, however, that Dorian actually *does* achieve a kind of transcendence in the narrative, albeit a bodily or formal one: he is granted the ability to transcend transience. Dorian makes a Faustian pact with an unspecified supernatural force so that he can take on the eternal and unchanging form of a work of art and thereby preserve his

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182 We might underscore the transcendent nature of Dorian’s request further by recalling that Goethe’s Faust makes his pact with Mephistopheles *not* for the sake of diabolical transcendence (for the eternal perpetuation of his physical form), but rather to experience just one moment of bliss: “Werd ich zum Augenblicke sagen: Verweile doch! Du bist so schön! Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen, Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn! [If to the moment I should say: Abide, you are so fair—Put me in fetters on that day, I wish to perish then, I swear]” (184-5). Faust’s wish, unlike Dorian’s, is entirely compatible with the conditions of earthly life.
beauty from being tarnished by experience and the passage of time. Although the type of transcendence Dorian desires (and acquires) is clearly of the “extrahuman” variety, the prototype that Dorian aspires to become like is not a divine being, but rather a portrait of himself. The aesthetic immortality that Dorian is granted ends up engendering a hell rather than a heaven for him and those around him; what initially appears to be a blessing—the opportunity to experience the godlike existence of the artist-critic that Wilde commends in the _Intensions_ essays—becomes a catalyst for damnation. In this way, the novel casts doubt upon the aspiration to achieve aesthetic ‘divinity,’ suggesting that such an existence would ultimately be unfulfilling to a human being. The novel also, as I will show, departs significantly from the definition of art as pleasurable illusion that Wilde espouses in “Decay” and “Critic,” since Dorian’s portrait refuses to ‘lie,’ to serve as a “woven veil” (Critic 155), and instead insists on revealing to him the “festering wound” (“Decay” 78) of his own soul.

The young, beautiful, and kind-hearted Dorian becomes an object of intense interest to both the painter Basil Hallward and the aesthete Lord Henry Wotton, and it is the combined influence of both men that precipitates his tragic end. Basil sees Dorian as the human embodiment of his aesthetic ideal; as he says to Lord Henry: “Unconsciously [Dorian] defines for me the lines of a fresh school, a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body—how much that is!” (13). Basil views Dorian’s beautiful body as the perfect formal correlative of his beautiful soul, a fact that

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183 In his biography, Ellmann notes that Wilde himself possessed “a childlike faith in physiognomy” which evinces itself in the letters he wrote about a visit to the Lincoln penitentiary in Nebraska during his North America tour: “On being shown photographs of some of the convicts, he commented, ‘O, what a dreadful face. And what did he do?’ Warden Nobes did not hesitate to tell of the criminals in the most graphic manner. ‘Oh, here’s a beast, an animal,’ exclaimed Wilde of one picture, ‘nothing of the man left.’ He would write Helena Sickert afterwards, ‘They were all mean looking, which consoled me, for I should hate to see a criminal with a noble face’ (191).
renders the boy a living work of art (if we recall Pater’s definition of art as the absolute correspondence between form and spirit). Basil paints a portrait of Dorian that captures the boy’s harmonious state, and although he considers it to be “the finest piece of work [he has] ever done” (26), he fears that the painting reveals “the secret of [his] own soul” and decides never to exhibit it (9). The portrait, infused as it is with Basil’s “curious artistic idolatry” (14), thoroughly enchants the two men (besides the artist) who are granted permission to view it: Henry declares the painting to be “one of the greatest things in modern art” and worth acquiring at any price (25), while Dorian’s “cheeks flus[h] for a moment with pleasure” upon viewing it, as it reveals to him the power of “his own beauty” (25).

When Lord Henry meets the model behind the portrait that “fascinates [him]” (7), he declares Dorian to be the “visible symbol” of the “new Hedonism” (23)—the philosophy of life he espouses (but does not necessarily abide by), and that bears a stark resemblance to the aestheticism formulated in *Intentions*. Henry encourages Dorian to take hold of his youthful beauty, which time will inevitably deprive him of. He tells Dorian: “You have only a few years in which to live really, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you [. . .] Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing” (22-23). Wotton’s “new Hedonism” exemplifies the morally

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184 Several passages alluding to the sexual nature of Basil’s feelings for Dorian in Wilde’s manuscript were revised or excised by the editor of *Lippincott’s Magazine* (Stoddart), and Wilde himself omitted a number of homoerotic references from the 1891 edition (see Bristow xxxix-liii). Nevertheless, enough material remained in the published editions to be used as evidence against Wilde by defense attorney Edward Carson in the libel suit that Wilde brought against the Marquess of Queensberry in March 1895 (see *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, edited by H. Montgomery Hyde). Patrick O’Malley has suggested that Carson’s (and, later on, a number of critics’) construal of *Dorian Gray* as a confessional text is telling of the “rhetorical slippage between Catholicism and sexual deviance” that occurred in nineteenth-century Gothic literature (192).
dubious misinterpretation of the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* that Pater had tried to counteract by omitting the “Conclusion” from the book’s second edition and more fully explaining his aesthetic worldview in the “New Cyrenaicism” chapter of *Marius*. As Pater himself noted in a review of Wilde’s novel, whereas “A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man’s entire organism,” Dorian is led to “pass from a higher to a lower degree of development” as a result of Lord Henry’s teachings (“A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde” 84). Significantly, Wotton himself does not even live by this creed: despite his advice to Dorian to go out and seek “new sensations” wherever they are to be found (following the logic that “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it” [19-20]), Henry leads the buffered existence of an aesthete. Rather than expose himself directly to life’s risks, he prefers to observe the theatre of the world from the darkness of the auditorium. Terrified by death (“‘Death is the only thing that ever terrifies me,’” he confesses to Dorian [175]) and repulsed by suffering (“‘I can sympathize with everything, except suffering. […] It is too ugly, too horrible, too distressing,’” [37]), Henry limits himself to the pursuit of *benign* sensations.\(^{185}\) By persuading his protégé to “Be always searching for new sensations” and “Be afraid of nothing,” Henry procures for himself the opportunity to live vicariously through Dorian’s experiences without subjecting himself to the consequences that such an extravagant or reckless life inevitably entails.\(^ {186}\)

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\(^{185}\) As Bristow notes in his “Introduction,” Wilde excised from Chapter XVIII of the typescript a passage that further highlighted Lord Henry’s detached approach to life: “I [Henry] have always been too much of a critic. I have been afraid of things wounding me, and have looked on” (xxxviii). Wilde may have chosen to do so out of concern that the moral message of his tale (which he described, as I have already noted, as “All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment”) was becoming too prominent.

\(^{186}\) Epifanio San Juan has formulated this aspect of the relationship between Dorian and Lord Henry in a particularly evocative way: “From an allegorical standpoint, Dorian represents the experiencing self while Lord Henry represents the rationalizing self. Dorian acts, Lord Henry abstracts. It is possible also to discern in Lord Henry the intelligence of Wilde, in Dorian, his sensibility” (*The Art of Oscar Wilde* 64). On the subject of Wilde’s
The combined effect of seeing Basil’s painting, which overwhelms Dorian with “the sense of his own beauty […] like a revelation” (25), and hearing Lord Henry’s “strange panegyric on youth” (25), is that Dorian apprehends, for the first time, the power and the fleetingness of his bodily perfection. Immediately thereafter, he curses the constraints of human existence and wishes to be rid of them:

‘How sad it is!’ murmured Dorian Gray, with his eyes still fixed upon his own portrait. ‘How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. . . . If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that—I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that!’ (25)

Suddenly aware of both the magnitude of his beauty and its tragic brevity, Dorian entreats the universe to bestow upon him the timeless beauty of the painting. And Wilde, the author, grants his wish: from this point on, Dorian’s body and visage remain unmarked by the passage of time and the accretion of lived experience, while the portrait begins to show signs of physical and moral decay. Significantly, Wilde transfers to the painting not only the transience to which the human body is subjected, but also Dorian’s “soul” (which he swore he would give up in order to remain eternally youthful); the portrait visually registers the changes, increasingly degrading ones, that Dorian’s “soul” undergoes. No matter what he does or how much time passes, the

identification with his characters, critics have often referred to Wilde’s statement in a letter to Ralph Payne postmarked February 12, 1894: “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps” (Complete Letters 585).
human Dorian appears the same, as spotless and as youthful as the day on which the portrait was painted, while the painted Dorian grows older, uglier, disfigured.  

At the novel’s commencement, Dorian is described as an innocent young man with a “simple and beautiful nature” (16). His face is said to emit “all youth’s passionate purity,” and the impression that “he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (17). Once he utters his plea to transcend his human limitations, however, his behaviour changes: little by little, Dorian’s moral integrity deteriorates. He commits his first significant moral offence in his heartless treatment of the young actress Sibyl Vane, whom he promises to marry and then mercilessly discards when she loses her ability to act as a result of the real-life love she feels for him. It is after this scene, which results in Sibyl’s suicide, that Dorian notices the first change in his portrait: he observes “a touch of cruelty in the mouth” (77). The portrait, from this point on, becomes “to him the visible emblem of conscience” (78); instead of encouraging him to “resist temptation” (78) and behave virtuously, as he originally hopes, the painting emboldens him to behave more and more recklessly, since the sins of his soul now appear to be divorced from and external to his own person.

Dorian’s descent into criminality can be understood as a consequence of his newfound (and supernaturally bestowed) ability to transcend human limitations. Set free from the visual markings that time and experience imprint upon us, Dorian loses his sense of compassion and

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187 Jarlath Killeen has noted that, despite the common perception of Wilde as a “worshipper of youthful beauty,” the tragic outcome of Dorian’s experiment in “remain[ing] young forever” renders the novel an “indictment of the cult of youth rather than a celebration of it” (Gothic Literature 76).

188 My reading goes against Christopher Nassaar’s influential assertion that Dorian’s moral disintegration stems from his decision to “sell[ ] his soul in a fit of rebellion against the laws of God and nature” and to begin conscientiously cultivating the “evil” within himself (38). For Nassaar, this makes Dorian a quintessential devotee of what he calls Wilde’s “religion of evil,” in which “evil beauty” becomes the object of “unholy worship” (xii).
becomes increasingly indifferent to how his actions affect those around him. He seeks deeper and ever more degraded forms of pleasure in life, shielded by the mask of virtue that his beautiful face provides him with. He begins to derive “real pleasure in watching” the changing portrait, as its decay highlights his unchanging beauty:

When the blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood. Not one blossom of his loveliness would ever fade. Not one pulse of his life would ever weaken. Like the gods of the Greeks, he would be strong, and fleet, and joyous. What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything. (89)

That Dorian compares himself here to the Greek gods is telling. The Greek gods were famously callous, incapable of behaving in a truly ethical manner because they were entirely divorced from the realities of human suffering. In their transcendent state, the gods look down on our suffering but remain unmoved by it because they are immune to it themselves. As one who has transcended the human affliction of ageing by taking on the extrahuman attributes of an artwork, Dorian becomes similarly defective as a moral being. And like the gods of Greek mythology who, as Nussbaum reminds us, are actually not supremely and eternally satisfied (contrary to what we might have imagined), but who instead fall in love with mortals and meddle in the mortal realm in an attempt to escape the monotony of their own limitless existence (377), Dorian also finds that he is not exceptionally happy or satisfied with his unchanging state.

189 Although he does not frame it in these terms, Michael Patrick Gillespie has made a similar point about the increasingly negative social repercussions of what I have been calling the ‘transcendent’ power granted to Dorian in the text: “In the narrative, power affirms individuality, denying any meliorating impulse towards the common good. Thus, the more Dorian exercises power, the more tyrannical and ruthless his attitude toward society inevitably becomes” (“From Romanticism to Fascism” 94).
Instead of being eternally grateful to Basil, the artist who painted the portrait, Dorian comes to loathe him “more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything” (132), and he murders Basil one night when “an uncontrollable feeling of hatred” (132) comes over him. While Dorian has already ruined countless men and woman by his influence, this murder of an old friend, of the man who worshipped him and who made him aware of his own beauty, reveals to just what extent Dorian has lost both his moral sense and his self-control. It is thus not “an absence of spirituality, of faith” that makes a “monster” of Dorian, as John Allen Quintus has argued (563), but rather his acquirement of extrahuman or godlike attributes that gives rise to his moral dissolution.

In his struggle to justify his criminality to himself, Dorian blames the portrait for corrupting his soul: that the portrait bore “the burden of his days” while he kept “the unsullied splendour of eternal youth” (181) is declared to be the cause of “All his failure” (181). He recants his youthful wish to trade places with the portrait, and now wishes, in vain, that “each sin of his life had brought its sure, swift penalty along with it” (181). Ironically, it is precisely Dorian’s miraculous ability to indulge in every impulse without appearing to have endured the smallest amount of suffering that Lord Henry eulogizes near the novel’s end. As he tells Dorian in their final meeting: “Ah, Dorian, how happy you are! What an exquisite life you have had! You have drunk deeply of everything. [...] And it has all been to you no more than the sound of music. It has not marred you” (178). Henry marvels at and is envious of the way in which Dorian has (ostensibly) succeeded in making his life as beautiful and pleasurable as a work of art: “I wish I could change places with you, Dorian. [...] Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets” (179). Dorian appears to have realized the aesthete’s ideal of godlike autonomy and invulnerability that Wilde outlines in “Critic”: he appears to have
transcended the pain of life by becoming a kind of living artwork. To Henry, who (to recall) abhors suffering and profoundly fears death (yet professes to endure “sorrows […] that even [Dorian] know[s] nothing of” [178]), this is a truly wondrous, truly admirable, feat. While Lord Henry views Dorian as ‘proof’ that art can indeed save one from the “sordid perils of actual existence” (“Critic” 173), Dorian and the reader of *Dorian Gray* (and, of course, its author) are cognizant of the dramatic depth of his error. By the novel’s conclusion, Dorian has become so distraught at the disconnect between his beautiful body and his “hideous” soul that he stabs the painting which has become a visual repository of his inner strife; instead of destroying the image, however, the image returns to its original, immaculate state, and Dorian himself is killed, stabbed in the heart, his dead body “withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (184).

Henry’s rejection of suffering and pain in art—and his attempt to dispel these unpleasant truths from life as well—correspond to the wholly Apollonian definition of art that Wilde puts forth in *Intentions*, yet the actual work of art depicted in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contradicts it. While Dorian’s portrait originally manifests an idealized (and idolized) image of its subject, the painting ultimately displays the unvarnished decay of body and spirit, exposing both “the signs of age” and “the signs of sin” (106). In a reversal of Wilde’s dictum in “Decay” that art is a “veil, rather than a mirror,” here it is art that reflects the truthful image of Dorian’s “evil and aging face,” while the mirror reflects the external (but fundamentally deceitful) image of a visage “unspotted from the world” (106). Dorian’s love of mirrors distinguishes him from the main character of the “poisonous book”190 (104) that Lord Henry gives to him, the “wonderful

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190 The “poisonous book” given to Dorian by Lord Henry is modeled in many ways on Joris-Karl Huysmans’ 1884 decadent classic *À Rebours*, which depicts a young and frail aristocrat seeking refuge from the vulgarity of modern cosmopolitan life in the pleasures of art and artifice. The “dread of mirrors” Wilde attributes to Huysmans’ protagonist, however, is not in fact exhibited by Des Esseintes; Wilde presumably added this detail to emphasize
young Parisian” who in other ways serves as a “prefiguring type of himself” (105): whereas the book’s protagonist develops a “grotesque dread of mirrors” because they reveal to him “the sudden decay of a beauty that had once, apparently, been so remarkable” (105), Dorian delights in the contrast between “the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass” and the “evil and aging face on the canvas” (106). He reads with “cruel joy” about the protagonist’s despair at losing his beauty (that which “in others, and the world, he had most dearly valued” [105]), since he himself has been liberated from the affliction of aging. It is his portrait, rather than his mirror image, that Dorian comes to dread, so much so that he has it moved to a locked room on the top floor of his house (although he cannot keep from venturing up there, “Often,” to witness the progressive perversion of the image [106]). Despite the many ways in which the “Preface” Wilde added to the novel in 1891 appears to be at odds with the message of the narrative, the assertion there that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors” (4) seems to speak directly to Dorian’s case: Dorian sees his true self, the “mirror of his soul” (183), reflected in the portrait, and it is abhorrence of this unsightly truth that precipitates his iconoclastic act—an act that inadvertently results in his own destruction.

The reversal of the roles prescribed to art and life in *Dorian Gray*—the fact that life masks an uncomely truth which art proceeds to lay bare—challenges not only the definition of art as beautiful, pleasure-giving untruth from “Decay” but also the legitimacy of the endeavour to transcend human limitations through art advanced in “Critic.” From the moment he makes the

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his own protagonist’s ageless beauty. In the manuscript, Wilde had titled the book *Le Secret de Raoul*—an oblique reference to the protagonist of another 1884 decadent novel, Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*—but Stoddart censored it, most likely because he did not want his readers connecting the “poisonous book” to the deviant sexuality portrayed in Rachilde’s novel.
wish to remain eternally beautiful until the moment he destroys the portrait, Dorian is granted the ability to transfer his human attributes (his inner strife, his aging body) to the portrait and, in exchange, assume extrahuman attributes (the harmonic, static beauty of a work of art). To transcend nature in this way is, of course, sheer fantasy, but *Dorian Gray* sheds light on the extrahuman element of the aestheticism Wilde adopted and extended from Pater in the *Intentions* essays. Art that strives to create enduring, eternally beautiful forms is fundamentally antithetical to the human body (a living, evolving, and mortal entity), and the aesthete’s endeavour to transform life into a work of art is motivated by denial or resentment of our inability to fully emulate art’s superhuman qualities. The tragic case of Dorian Gray reveals how the aesthetic doctrine espoused in *Intentions*, which champions art over life and attempts to transcend humanity by rectifying our limitations through artifice, parallels certain religious principles (such as the worship of superhuman beings or the anticipation of a paradisal afterlife) that may impair our ability to cherish or strive towards bettering the conditions of earthly existence.

“*The Other Half of the Garden*”

While both *The Soul of Man* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shed light on the potential defects of the theory of aesthetic divinization espoused in the *Intentions* essays, it is Wilde’s own life experience that definitively debunks his assertion in “Critic” that the aesthete is truly “safe” from “the sordid perils of actual existence” (173). The immense suffering Wilde endured as a result of his trial and incarceration has been widely documented, and what little Wilde wrote during and after his imprisonment evinces a man deeply and indelibly marked by trauma. In the
long letter to Lord Alfred Douglas (known as De Profundis\textsuperscript{191}) composed during his time at Reading Gaol, Wilde undertakes a sustained, intimate, and poignant appraisal of his life and career, one that culminates in the formulation of a Jesus-centred yet wholly immanent aesthetics. As Wilde wrote to Robert Ross, parts of the letter “deal with [his] mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place” (Complete Letters 780-81). De Profundis is often read—and rightly so, I believe—as the apotheosis of Wilde’s aesthetic theory, for it rectifies many of the inadequacies inherent in the aesthetic doctrine he had espoused in earlier works such as “The Critic as Artist.” What has yet to be sufficiently emphasized in the secondary literature, however, is the fact that Wilde retracts his previous theory of aesthetic divinization in order to propose, in its stead, a fundamentally different type of aestheticism, one committed to deepening, as opposed to transcending, human life through art.

As we have seen, Wilde extended the otherworldliness of Pater’s aestheticism in “The Critic as Artist” by depicting the artist-critic as a godlike being who inhabits the otherworld of art and looks down on mortal suffering therefrom. In “The Decay of Lying,” he banished pain and suffering from the realm of art (which was to be populated, exclusively, by beauty and pleasure), and in The Soul of Man he envisioned a utopian future in which the world itself would become as perfect and harmonious as a work of art. The Picture of Dorian Gray offered its protagonist the opportunity to exchange his ephemeral and immutable human form for the

\textsuperscript{191} For a detailed account of the complicated textual and publication history of De Profundis, see Ian Small’s “Introduction” to volume 2 of the OET Complete Works. Small makes a strong case for regarding Vyvyan Holland’s 1949 text—rather than Wilde’s manuscript or Robert Ross’s 1905 or 1908 publications of De Profundis—as the fullest representation of Wilde’s intentions to rework the manuscript letter into a literary work, and I therefore quote from Holland’s text, which Small uses as copy-text for his edition. See Chapter 5 of Gagnier’s Idylls of the Marketplace for an insightful look at the ways in which Wilde’s physical condition (imprisonment) and very specific projected readership (namely, Lord Alfred Douglas) shaped the form and style of the text.
ageless and permanent beauty of a painting. The ideal of aesthetic perfection that Wilde invokes in all of these works is decidedly unworldly: it is as incompatible with the conditions of human life as was the “very unworldly type of perfection” that both the saint and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty were said to pursue in Pater’s *Marius. De Profundis*, however, registers a profound change in Wilde’s understanding of the relationship between art and life: no longer a sanctuary from suffering, no longer a visionary realm in which the sorrows and imperfections of life are transcended, art becomes a mode of creative self-transformation, a means of developing and perfecting one’s personality in consonance with, rather than in isolation from, worldly conditions. The worldly conditions that Wilde’s new aestheticism takes into account include not only the insuperable boundaries of the human body, but also the communal reality of earthly existence, the fact that we share our world with others.

Wilde reflects, in *De Profundis*, on how he had in the past restricted himself to the “sunlit side of the garden [of the world], and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom” (108). He had looked upon “suffering and sorrow” as “modes of imperfection” anathema to his life and philosophy, and striven to live “entirely for pleasure” (104). Art had aided him in this endeavour by serving as a delightful veil, a beautiful screen masking the pain of the world and bestowing upon life the form of a “brilliant comedy” (64). Since beauty and suffering were placed in opposition to one another, art was free (or, in a sense, obliged) to realize its perfection through joy; it was said to actually “intensify the sum of joy in the world” (*The Soul of Man* 265). Now, however, in his present state of “horrible disgrace” (96), life’s “raiment of comedy” has fallen away, unveiling a “tragedy […] hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style,” one that refuses even to don “purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow” (127). The analgesic illusions of art no longer comfort him, and neither “religion, morality, nor reason” helps him cope with his despair (98).
Suffering, which Wilde had shunned in the past as a lesser form of perfection, is now proclaimed to be both “the supreme emotion of which man is capable” and “the type and test of all great art” (105). This is the secret that the “other half of the garden” had in store for him, the secret that his “limiting” mode of life had concealed for so many years (109). Far from the hideous aberration, the “provisional [...] protest” against “wrong, unhealthy, unjust surroundings” that it was once characterized as (Soul of Man 267), suffering is now viewed as an ennobling and essential truth. And art, no longer the realm of “beautiful, untrue things” (“Decay” 103), becomes the quintessential vehicle of expression for this newfound “secret of life” (106):

Behind joy and laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard, and callous. But behind sorrow there is always sorrow. Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask. Truth in art is not any correspondence between the essential idea and the accidental existence; it is not the resemblance of shape to shadow, or of the form mirrored in the crystal to the form itself. Truth in art is the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward: the soul made incarnate: the body instinct with spirit. For this reason there is no truth comparable to sorrow. (105-6)

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192 Despite his late admittance to the “other half of the garden” of life, Wilde writes that a number of his previous works (such as Dorian Gray, Salome, and the fairy-tales “The Happy Prince” and “The Young King”) “foreshadowed and prefigured” the suffering that was to come (108). In particular, the fairy-tales collected in The Happy Prince and Other Tales (1888) and The House of Pomegranates (1891) reveal a deep preoccupation with death and an awareness that the love of beauty does little to remedy true suffering. Several of the tales directly invoke the Christian salvation narrative in order to resolve an otherwise tragic ending—such as “The Happy Prince,” where the dead bird and prince are taken to the “garden of Paradise” to “sing” and “praise [God]” evermore (Complete Shorter Fiction 103), and “The Selfish Giant,” where the Christ child says to the giant at the moment of his death: “You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise” (114). In De Profundis, however, the Christian story of life after death provides no such relief for Wilde. For an excellent study of the thread of sorrow running through Wilde’s earlier works, see Willoughby’s Art and Christhood (in particular Chapters 1, 2 and 6).
Aesthetic truth is not mimetic (a copy of a worldly or otherworldly thing), or allegorical (representative of an abstract idea), but expressive: it is spirit manifesting itself in matter, or form merging seamlessly with content. If sorrow is the elemental truth of life, then it is the ideal subject for art to treat, since it alone “wears no mask” and can fuse wholly and transparently with its sensuous vehicle of expression.

Although Wilde’s new aesthetic formula may appear to demand an “unworldly type of perfection” comparable to that which Pater envisioned in the “absolute correspondence” of form and content in art, Wilde circumvents the unworldly aspect of the equation, I argue, by having recourse to an earthbound version of the Christian doctrine of incarnation.193 As will become clear, the criteria according to which Wilde appraises Jesus are secularly and not theologically aesthetic: where a Christian aesthetics would consider Jesus “the Word, the Image, the Expression and the Exegesis of God” (von Balthasar 29), Wilde regards (and reveres) Jesus as an individual who fashioned himself in accordance with his own imaginative ideal. Jesus is not, for Wilde, a creation and expression of the divine father, but rather an artist who has transformed his life into a work of art, an autonomous creator whose creation is himself. Wholly absent from Wilde’s aesthetic assessment of Jesus is any mention of his cosmic role within the Christian salvation narrative—as the Son of God whose death, resurrection, and ascension reconcile humanity with the divine creator and bring the promise of eternal life. While

193 Critics generally agree that Wilde’s portrait of Jesus is secular (see, for instance, Cohen 236, Ellmann 483, Fraser 230, Hext 202, Kohl 284, Prewitt Brown 96, Willoughby 15), although Ellis Hanson has complicated this view by suggesting that Wilde depicts “divinity [as] realized through perfection of form” (238-39). Frederick Roden, in an extension of Hanson’s reading, has argued that Wilde’s portrait of Jesus reveals “the flesh’s mystical connection with Divine Presence” (150), thereby confirming “Wilde’s importance as a theologian who brings together body and spirit” (155). Roden goes too far, I think, in claiming that “Divine Presence” is inherent in Wilde’s Jesus; he does not acknowledge how careful Wilde is to extricate Jesus from all that marks him as more than human in the Bible. Hanson’s reading is far subtler in this regard, since he emphasizes the fact that Jesus’s perfection (which he terms “divinity”) is equated with “its performance, its sensuous existence” (239).
it is certainly possible to inscribe theological significance onto Wilde’s portrayal of Jesus in *De Profundis*, that it is equally possible *not* to do so is of the utmost importance, since it is this fact that enables Wilde to overcome the otherworldly residue of his earlier (Paterian) aestheticism.

Although much that Wilde writes about Jesus in *De Profundis* may cohere with theological interpretations of the gospels, Wilde is extremely careful to account for Jesus’s origins, acts and influence in purely human terms. His reading of the New Testament deliberately excludes references to the virgin birth, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Christ. Long before he begins to explain Jesus’s relevance to his new understanding of art, Wilde ruminates on his own inability to believe in anything beyond the ‘immanent frame’: “Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at” (98). He imagines founding a religion for those who, like himself, “*cannot* believe,” who might form a “Confraternity of the Faithless” and elaborate a set of agnostic rituals (98). Wilde sees himself as one who has “placed [his] heaven in this earth,” and it is therefore “within the circle of actual experience” that his “creed” must be “made perfect and complete” (98). Influenced by Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*—which he calls “that gracious fifth gospel, the gospel according to St Thomas” (112)—Wilde portrays Jesus as human and not divine (as opposed to human *and* divine, as he is according to Christian doctrine). “Life itself from its lowliest and most humble sphere” is said to have “produced” the Galilean (115), and Jesus’s gospel of “God’s Kingdom”

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194 Hanson offers an alternative interpretation of this passage, claiming that it is in fact “one of [Wilde’s] more paradoxical and Christian statements”: “In this passage Wilde demonstrates a wistful doubt that is more commonplace in decadent literature, a melancholic aspiration toward a faith that is always already in decay, imperiled, and improbable” (230).

195 As Small outlines, Wilde’s manuscript actually reads “Confraternity of the Fatherless,” but Ross rendered this “Confraternity of the Faithless” in his 1905 edition of *De Profundis*; he later returned the phrase to “Fatherless” in the 1908 edition (19).
is stripped of its eschatological element and rendered a synonym for “man’s soul” (113). Jesus’s “miracles” are explained as the natural effect of his charisma; Wilde “see[s] no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of His personality that His mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish” (112). While there are certainly moments in the text in which Wilde expresses a desire to believe in something beyond the “circle of actual experience” (and he explicitly acknowledges the letter’s “changing uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realise those aspirations” [152]), the aestheticism formulated around the figure of Jesus remains invariably within the bounds of this world.

Before Wilde expounds his Jesus-centred aesthetic theory, he articulates his main objection to Pater’s attempt to fuse religion and art in terms of spectacle (as parallel modes of contemplation). Just as many critics read _Dorian Gray_ as a case study demonstrating the inadequacies of Wilde’s hedonistic aestheticism, Wilde reads _Marius_ as evincing the failure of Pater’s contemplative aestheticism. _Marius the Epicurean_ strove to “reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion” by replacing the divine object of contemplation in ascetic or mystical reverie with the sense objects of life and art (109). But this experiment did little to facilitate the personal growth of the novel’s protagonist: Marius remains, throughout the narrative, trapped in the role of the “ideal spectator,” able “to contemplate the spectacle of life with appropriate emotions” but unable to immerse himself in the world (109). Marius’s “merely” contemplative stance predisposes him to privilege the spectacular or formal elements of things over their substance (he is “a little too much occupied with the comeliness of the benches of the sanctuary to notice that it is the sanctuary of sorrow that he is gazing at”); it also, partly as a result of this predisposition, precludes him from pursuing what Wilde considers to be the central aim of the “artistic life”: “self-development” (109). That Marius evades suffering through positioning
himself as “little more than a spectator” of life is problematic for Wilde because Wilde now views suffering as an essential ingredient in the soul’s quest to “reach the full stature of its perfection” (107). In Wilde’s new worldview, pain is valued not as an end in itself, but as a means to the most highly valued end. If one evades sorrow, one deprives oneself of the “revelation,” the “perfect clearness of vision and absolute intensity of apprehension” that only sorrow can impart (105). Seen not as an affliction to be avoided but as a “fresh mode of self-realization” (97), suffering becomes a crucial aspect of the aesthetic way of life, one that Wilde hopes will lead him to a “Vita Nuova” (96-7).

Wilde suggests a “more intimate and immediate” means of connecting the religious and the artistic modes of life than Pater’s contemplative approach. He identifies a series of profound affinities between “the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist” (109), stressing first and foremost that Jesus possessed an artist’s “intense and flamelike imagination” (Pater’s “gem-like flame” is palpable here), from which “His whole conception of Humanity” emanated (110). Wilde recalls with “keen pleasure” (109) the fact that he had once before taken Christ as the prototype of the artistically formed individual (in Soul of Man); this time, however, he views Jesus’s mode of self-realization (suffering) as equivalent to, rather than incompatible with, the artist’s pursuit of perfection. Far from his earlier claim that beauty and suffering were contraries (“beauty is a joy” at variance with the “maimed and marred” Christ [Soul of Man 266]), Wilde now sees “the whole life of Christ” as demonstrative of how “sorrow and beauty [can] be made

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196 As many scholars have noted, Wilde draws parallels in De Profundis between not only Jesus and the artist, but between Christ’s Passion and his own suffering. Bridgwater observes that this self-identification with Jesus is something Wilde shares with Nietzsche: “it was Nietzsche who signed himself ‘The Crucified One’, Wilde who deliberately allowed himself to be crucified by the philistines greedy to avenge his contempt” (“Masked Men” 250). For a comparison of Wilde’s and Nietzsche’s (in some ways strikingly similar) portrayals of Jesus Christ in De Profundis and The Antichrist, see Prewitt Brown’s Cosmopolitan Criticism 97-106 and Hext’s “Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche” 205-11.
one in their meaning and manifestation” (112). Jesus’s “artistic nature” enables him to employ “suffering and sorrow” as “modes through which [to realise] his conception of the beautiful,” and his ability to form himself in accordance with this conception, to actually “ma[ke] of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows,” is the reason he has “fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing” (115). Jesus inspires and compels because he was able to make his life correspond absolutely to his imaginative ideal; in this way, he bears a striking resemblance to the Baudelairean dandy who cultivates his body and mind in order “to create a personal form of originality” (“The Painter of Modern Life” 421). Jesus’s overwhelming influence on the history of western civilization is attributed to the “young Galilean peasant[’s]” artistic nature, to his ability to so vividly “imagin[e] that he could bear on his shoulders the burden of the entire world” that he ended up “actually achieving it” (111).

The artistic way of life that Jesus exemplifies encompasses not only the corporeal dimension (pain and suffering), but also the social dimension of human life. Unlike the solitary and autonomous artist-critic who “look[s] out at the world” from “the high tower of Thought” (“Critic” 178), Jesus “realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation” (110). Since the world itself is the realm in which Jesus carries out his creative work, the “imaginative sympathy” of the artist becomes his guiding principle for the treatment of others, a means of “conceiv[ing] the divided races as a unity” (110). Wilde’s statement that Jesus’s “morality is all sympathy” (120) echoes word for word Pater’s characterization of Botticelli as an artist who refrained from passing moral judgment on his artistic subjects (Renaissance 36). Whereas Pater took Botticelli’s portrayal of “the middle world” of ordinary men and women as emblematic of the way in which art “does its more sincere and surest work” when “undisturbed by any moral ambition” (Renaissance 36),
Wilde conceptualizes the refusal to pass judgment on others as a principle of morality equally applicable to art and life. Both the artist and Jesus are said to view Philistinism—“that side of man’s nature that is not illumined by the imagination” (122)—as their greatest enemy; they stand united against those who worship “dull respectability,” “tedious orthodoxy,” “vulgar success” and “the gross materialistic side of life” (121). For Jesus, the imagination becomes “simply a form of love” (119), since it dissolves the boundaries between the self and others. Wilde had already reached the conclusion, earlier on in his letter, that love is “the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world” (107); Jesus’s “creed,” therefore, is not “To live for others as a definite self-conscious aim,” but rather to recognize that there is “no difference at all between the lives of others and one’s own life” (114). When the morality of sympathy practiced by the artist is applied to the “sphere of human relations,” one discovers that “whatever happens to another happens to oneself” (110).

In Wilde’s final poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol (published February 1898), it is this Christ-like capacity to experience another’s suffering as one’s own that is proffered as the only possible (albeit insufficient) source of consolation for the horrors of prison life. The prisoners in the poem, including the speaker, are united in imaginative sympathy for the man condemned to hang for killing “the thing he loved;” they experience his suffering as their own: “For he who lives more lives than one / More deaths than one must die” (OET Complete Works vol. 1, 207). While The Ballad makes no mention of—and therefore ostensibly abandons—the aesthetic creed expounded in De Profundis, the affinity between Christ’s message of love and the artist’s imaginative sympathy remains implicit. In De Profundis, it is this accord between Jesus’s and the artist’s “imaginative sympathy” that enables Wilde to develop an aesthetic attitude towards the world that breaks through the solipsism of Paterian aestheticism and embraces the
communal dimension of earthly life. It also, in a sense, corroborates Pater’s own assertion that Wilde’s criticism “carries on, more perhaps than any other writer, the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold” (“A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde” 83).197

Disregarding entirely the doctrine of atonement (according to which Christ’s sacrificial death expiated the sins of humankind), Wilde foregrounds the aesthetic nature of the significance he accords to Jesus. Wilde’s Jesus ‘redeems’ not by atoning for our transgressions against divine law, but rather by demonstrating how suffering can be transformed into something beautiful. Even those individuals whom he “saved from their sins” in the gospels are said to have been “saved simply for beautiful moments in their lives” (122). Jesus’s power over others is explained in explicitly aesthetic terms, as analogous to the transformative impact a work of art has on its viewers, readers, or listeners: “[H]e is just like a work of art. He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought in his presence one becomes something” (123). Wilde lauds the Church, “from the point of view of art alone,” for preserving the traditions of tragic drama down to the chorus, “lost elsewhere to art” but surviving “in the servitor answering the priest at Mass” (112). Even Jesus’s life story (recorded in the scriptures) is declared “the most wonderful of poems,” superior in cathartic effect to “the entire cycle of Greek tragedy” and proof that Aristotle erred in his claim that the tragic hero cannot be “one blameless in pain” (111). In this aesthetic evaluation of scripture, Wilde is expressly at odds with theological interpretations of the Bible. Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the most prominent figures in modern theological

197 Another way in which Wilde grew to resemble Arnold (although Pater may not have anticipated this when he wrote his review of Dorian Gray in 1891) can be seen in his rejection, in De Profundis, of a philosophy of pleasure in favour of a worldview that embraces sorrow as an integral part of human experience. See Arnold’s essay “Pagan and Mediaeval Religious Sentiment” in Essays in Criticism (1865), in which he expounds the “vast advantage” that a “religion of sorrow” has over a “religion of pleasure,” since life is “full of hardship” for the vast majority of mankind (160).
aesthetics, defines Greek tragedy as “the cry of transient existence as it came up against” the limits of the mortal realm, a form of expression entirely incompatible with the gospels, which bring the “promise of human wholeness beyond life on earth” (21). For David Bentley Hart, tragedy and the Bible have diametrically opposed views on the nature of evil: whereas Attic tragedy depicts evil as “a force innate to the cosmos itself,” the Christian narrative “‘historiciz[es]’ evil, treating it as the superscribed text of palimpsest, obscuring the aboriginal goodness of creation” (384). Even Kierkegaard, in Part I of Either/Or, speaks to the irreconcilability of Greek tragedy and the gospels, stating that “esthetic categories” cannot account for the “identity of an absolute action and an absolute suffering” that renders the life of Jesus a “metaphysical” rather than “aesthetic” matter (“The Tragic in Ancient Drama” 150). In his characterization of the story of Jesus as a work of art, Wilde is clearly writing against the theological tradition.

Perhaps the most compelling component of Wilde’s defense of Jesus as an exceptionally artistic human rather than an incarnation of the divine is his use of aesthetic figuralism to explain biblical prophecy; I will briefly turn to Erich Auerbach’s and Hayden White’s writings on figural interpretation in order to elucidate this point.198 In the Christian theological tradition of typological or figural interpretation, aspects of the Old Testament are construed as types prefiguring New Testament anti-types; Old Testament prophesies are seen as fulfilled in the New Testament, and thus the veracity of both texts as documents of divine revelation is

198 My intention here is not to hold up the typological as representative of ‘orthodox’ methods of scriptural exegesis, but rather to illustrate how Wilde’s manipulation of this particular form of Christian interpretation opens up the possibility of a secular typology of the Bible via the aesthetic. See George P. Landow’s Victorian Types Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought for an overview of the widespread influence of topology on Victorian “reading and interpretative habits” (15). On the relationship between literature and Christian typology in general, see Northrop Frye’s The Great Code: The Bible and Literature and David Lyle Jeffrey’s People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture.
confirmed. In his influential essay “Figura,” Auerbach traces this interpretative method back to “certain passages in early Christian writings, mostly from the Pauline Epistles” (49), emphasizing the way in which the events of the Old and New Testaments not only prefigure and fulfill one another, but also point towards (prefigure or prophesy) the future and final event of history: Christ’s second coming and the last judgment (58). What Auerbach (as a literary scholar interested in the history of realist representation) finds most significant about figural interpretation is the fact that it does not diminish or deny the historical status of the events narrated in the Bible; rather than viewing the scriptures as allegories, as stories containing only spiritual truth, figural interpretation must “preserve the full historicity of the Scriptures along with the deeper meaning” in order to maintain the providential authority of the Christian salvation narrative (36). That God’s promises or plans are fulfilled historically confirms, according to figural interpretation, that God’s ultimate promise of “the end of time and the true kingdom of God” will also be fulfilled (58). Thus history is viewed as containing both material and spiritual truth: each historical event points forward in time to the concrete event of the second coming, yet this final event is itself “eternal and timeless [...] at all times present, fulfilled in God’s providence, which knows no difference of time” (59). Auerbach famously applied the figural method of interpretation to Dante’s Divina Commedia, revealing how Dante’s characters posses both of a figural (historical) and a fulfilled (extra-temporal) significance—their earthly lives serve as the figura, or umbra, of their predestined place in God’s “eternal plan of salvation” (71).

In “Auerbach’s Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” Hayden White argues that Auerbach’s Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature unfolds according to the logic of “figural causation,” a secular and explicitly aesthetic version of the
Christian figural method. Whereas theological figuralism conceives of “the relation between the earlier and the later events as genetic and causal, as willed by God and therefore providential,” Auerbach’s aesthetic figuralism “places the principal weight of meaning on the act of retrospective appropriation of an earlier event by the treatment of it as a figure of a later one” (90). Rather than viewing the figure-fulfillment relationship between historical events (specifically, in the case of Mimesis, between modes of representing reality) as divinely determined, Auerbach treats it as the result of a number of individual interpretative decisions: it is only when “the agents responsible for the occurrence of the later event link it ‘genealogically’ to the earlier one” that the figure-fulfillment constellation of history comes into being (89). The linkage between, for instance, the Italian Renaissance and classical Greek-Latin culture, is of “purely retrospective” origin and significance, an invention of “historical agents” who “cho[se] to regard themselves and their cultural endowment as if they had actually descended from an earlier prototype” (89). To view oneself, one’s work or one’s time as the fulfillment of a promise ‘made by’ (latent within) an earlier person, work or time is thus a subjective and “specifically aesthetic” act (90), since it involves creatively reconfiguring or appropriating history in accordance with one’s own idea or project. Auerbach’s figural approach to literary history culminates, White argues, in a vision of modernism as that which “image[s] a historical reality purged of the myths of such ‘grand narratives’ as fate, providence, Geist, progress, the dialectic, and even the myth of the final realization of realism itself” (100). White views the myth-purging representational strategies of modernism as analogous to Auerbach’s own interpretative method, which seeks to disentangle literary criticism from transcendental modes of assessment such as “Platonic archetype[s] of literature or art or beauty” or “any changeless canon of classics which putatively incarnate[s] the essence of literarity” (97).
The description of Jesus in *De Profundis* as an individual who “made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows” (115 emphasis mine) corresponds to the aesthetic model of figuralism employed by Auerbach and elucidated by White. Wilde is careful to stress that Jesus’s remarkable personality is the result not of divine providence, but of aesthetic self-fashioning. It is Jesus’s “artistic nature” that inclines him to feel “an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image,” and he finds the “idea” that he desires to embody in the songs of Isaiah:

The song of Isaiah, ‘He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him,’ had seemed to him to prefigure himself, and in him the prophecy was fulfilled. We must not be afraid of such a phrase. Every single work of art is the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image. Every single human being should be the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every human being should be the realization of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man. Christ found the type and fixed it, and the dream of a Virgilian poet, either at Jerusalem or at Babylon, became in the long progress of the centuries incarnate in him for whom the world was ‘waiting.’ (115-16)

Inspired by “the dream of a Virgilian poet,” Wilde takes it upon himself to realize Isaiah’s vision in his own person. His embodiment of the song of Isaiah parallels an artist’s materialization of an idea in a work of art.

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199 As Robert Hollander notes in his Introduction to Dante’s *Inferno*, a particular “tradition of Christian reception” maintained that Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue* “actually foretold the coming of Christ” (xxxiv); Wilde may have had this interpretative tradition in mind when he characterized the prophet Isaiah here as “Virgilian.” Dante, incidentally, made it clear in his *Commedia* that he “did not consider the Roman poet a Christian avant-la-latte,” a fact that has rendered his choice of the pagan poet as his guide to the Christian afterlife the subject of much debate (xxxiv).
Frederick Roden has argued that Wilde “takes the trope of artistic creation and theologizes it,” rendering art “a metaphor for the Incarnation” and infusing “material creation” with “Divinity” (149). What I am arguing here is precisely the opposite, that Wilde takes the religious doctrine of incarnation and secularizes it by rendering it a metaphor for artistic creation and for an artistic way of life that imbues the world with the beauty of the human imagination. That which is ‘incarnate’ in the person of Jesus is not divinity, but rather a poetic image, the “man of sorrows” that “had seemed to him to prefigure himself.” Jesus is thus the “fulfillment” of Isaiah’s “prophesy” in an entirely aesthetic sense: he is (to quote White) an “historical agent” who, through a “purely retrospective” act, has “cho[sen] to regard [himself …] as if [he] had actually descended from the earlier prototype.” The figure-fulfillment relationship between the song of Isaiah and Jesus’s life is determined by an act of imaginative appropriation, not providential prefiguration; as Wilde writes: “[O]ut of his own imagination entirely did Jesus of Nazareth create himself. The cry of Isaiah had really no more to do with his coming than the sound of the nightingale has to do with the rising of the moon” (117). Jesus’s prodigious imagination, out of which sprang not only his immensely influential personality but also his “whole conception of Humanity […] as a unity” (111), renders him “the precursor of the romantic movement in life” (119), and it is as both a romantic artist and a romantic work of art that he is revered in De Profundis.

Above all, Jesus is significant for Wilde because he achieves, in his own person, the aim of every work of art—“the conversion of an idea to an image.” Both the human being and the work of art, Wilde believes, should be consciously and punctiliously fashioned in relation to “some ideal.” Although Wilde implies that it does not matter much whether the “ideal” is realized in “the mind of God or in the mind of man,” that the ideal be reconcilable with the boundaries of
human life matters intensely. Otherwise, the demand for “truth in art”—which, if we remember, is “the unity of a thing with itself: the outward rendered expressive of the inward”—cannot be met. If art and the artistically formed individual are to be “true,” they must embody the fulfillment of a promise in themselves, rather than prefigure or be the harbinger of a promise that is to be definitively fulfilled in some utopian or apocalyptic future. The futurity with which Jesus is invested in theological figuralism is therefore entirely, and necessarily, absent from Wilde’s aesthetic valuation of him. It is because Jesus perfectly and completely (and “within the circle of actual experience”) incarnated suffering—which is both the “secret of life” and “the type and test of all great art”—that Wilde makes him the central figure of his revised, this-worldly aestheticism.

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Perhaps it is because Wilde first pushes Pater’s aestheticism to the extreme that he is later able to rectify its very problematic attitude towards life. Whereas Pater eventually came to see the saint and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty as converging in their shared devotion to otherworldly ideals (one divine, the other aesthetic), Wilde ultimately brings them to touch on this-worldly grounds through his portrait of Jesus Christ as an artist who realized his creative vision in his own person. That Wilde equates the human figure of Jesus directly and unconditionally with a work of art in De Profundis reveals the extent to which his aestheticism has renounced its earlier otherworldly aspirations. His statement that Jesus (“just like a work of art”) “does not really teach one anything, but by being brought in his presence one becomes something” (123) resembles previous descriptions of the artist-critic and “the true personality of man,” but with a significant difference. In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde had asserted that the critic’s influence “will be the mere fact of his own existence. He will represent the flawless type” (196).
Similarly, in *The Soul of Man*, he had declared that “the true personality of man […] will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is” (239). While all three of these figures have the capacity to transform others by their mere presence, only Jesus is said to do so without denying or transcending the here and now: the artist-critic and the “true personality of man” were predicated upon superiority to and eradication of suffering (respectively), but Jesus’s aesthetic ‘perfection’ is realized within the painful conditions of life. Furthermore, Wilde (in *De Profundis*) directly criticizes the Greek gods—who had served as the prototypes for the form of aesthetic transcendence espoused in *Intentions* and put to the test in *Dorian Gray*—for their inhumanity: he finds fault with Apollo’s treatment of Marsyas and Niobe, with Athena’s lack of pity, with Hera’s merely superficial (“pomp and peacocks”) nobility, and with the fact that Zeus, king of the gods, was “too fond of the daughters of men” (115). The contrast Wilde draws between the gods’ lack of empathy and Jesus’s compassion for human suffering is consistent with the shift I have been tracing from Wilde’s earlier, world-renouncing aestheticism to the world-embracing aestheticism of *De Profundis*. Where Wilde had originally divinized the artist-critic as a transcendent being immune to earthly suffering, he ends by humanizing the divine—by portraying Jesus as an artist who made of his life a work of art and, in doing so, personified the transformative impact that art can, and should, have on the world.

Wilde’s post-trial, human-centered aestheticism comes exceptionally close to what Nussbaum, to return to her essay “Transcending Humanity,” designates “internal transcendence.” As an alternative to external or extrahuman notions of transcendence—which, as we have seen, disdain human limitations and aspire to a godlike existence—Nussbaum proposes that we aspire to “an *internal* and human sort of transcendence,” which takes “the artist’s fine-tuned attention and responsiveness to human life [as] paradigmatic of a kind of precision of feeling and thought that
a human being can cultivate, though most do not” (379). Nussbaum visualizes “internal transcendence,” in contradistinction to religious images of ascension into heaven, as a downward movement, a “transcending by descent, delving more deeply into oneself and one’s humanity, and becoming deeper and more spacious as a result” (379). In De Profundis, Wilde professes to have become “a deeper man” as a result of the suffering he has experienced (126), and his reformulated aestheticism certainly supports this claim. No longer a lover of beautiful veils that mask a vulgar and incoherent world, Wilde struggles to embrace all that has come his way, to “accep[t] it as an inevitable part of the evolution of [his] life and character: by bowing [his] head to everything that [he] ha[s] suffered” (155). In this affirmation of the past, Wilde comes remarkably close to Nietzsche’s notion of “amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it” (Ecce Homo “Why I am so Clever” 10). Far from the (extrahuman) creed of Dorian Gray’s Lord Henry, which claimed that “To become the spectator of one’s own life […] is to escape the suffering of life” (92), Wilde’s new aestheticism views Jesus’s ability to unite “sorrow and beauty” as emblematic of an aesthetic existence that accepts and works within worldly conditions, that makes us (to quote Nussbaum again) “deeper and more spacious,” and fosters “a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world” (379). While the works he is most famous for express an exaggerated hostility towards life and propose art as a cure for all life’s ills, Wilde’s portrait of Jesus-as-artist in De Profundis typifies an aesthetic approach to life that intensifies our attachment and commitment to this-worldly concerns. As such, I propose that we reevaluate our common perception of Wilde as an aesthete who tirelessly asserted the superiority of art to life, and regard him instead as a writer who
exemplifies how we can do meaningful work on ourselves and our world without disparaging, resenting or seeking deliverance from that which makes us human.
Coda

This project has examined attempts made by prominent fin de siècle figures to bring about an aesthetic ‘revaluation of values.’ It has argued—in contradistinction to both the long-standing convention of reading fin de siècle literature as rife with nostalgia for a lost religious certitude as well as newer studies that stress the continuing importance of religious beliefs and practices in this period—that the aesthetic theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde were engaged in a conscious effort to undermine Christian thought patterns seen as prejudicial to our experience of the mundane. Nietzsche, Pater and Wilde sought to ‘save’ the temporal sphere (and its human inhabitants) from doctrines that disparage transience and the sensuous by stressing the pleasing immediacy of art. Alongside my examination of the secularizing impetus that drives these theories, I have also paid careful attention to the ways in which they periodically (re)produce hierarchal divisions that prove to be equally antipathetic to the things and concerns of this world. Whether aesthetic philosophies of life end up contesting or recapitulating hostile attitudes towards the temporal world hinges, I have suggested, on the species of transcendence they endorse. The more these theories view art as possessing or having access to external or extrahuman forms of transcendence (such as eternity, ultimate truth, and perfection), the greater their propensity for becoming redemptive modes of flight from earthbound hardship. Whereas Nietzsche and Wilde (despite their many differences) come to formulate aesthetic theories of life that remain within the “immanent frame” and refrain from invoking externally transcendent principles, Pater’s contemplative aestheticism is predicated upon an extramundane ideal of absolute beauty that compels him, ultimately, to reject the here and now in favour of an aesthetic analogue of the religious ‘beyond.’
More remains to be said to reconcile the aesthetic worldviews of Nietzsche and Wilde, which manifest a comparable repudiation of supernatural forms of transcendence and redemption yet reach opposing conclusions on the subject of Christian morality. Significantly, both writers affirm suffering as a foundational principle of life, rejecting the Christian explanation of pain, transitoriness, and mortality as a punishment for man’s disobedience to God—an explanation that potentially fosters, as Nietzsche makes clear, a number of life-negating doctrines aimed at justifying and resolving the ‘problem’ of suffering (such as sin, repentance, and redemption). Rather than adjudging suffering to be a historical consequence of humankind’s transgression of divine law, Wilde and Nietzsche consider it to be a necessary condition of all creation, whether cosmic or human. In Wilde’s words: “at the birth of a child or a star there is pain […] For the secret of life is suffering” (*De Profundis* 106); in Nietzsche’s: “the pangs of the woman giving birth hallow all pain: all becoming and growing—all that guarantees a future, involves pain” (*Twilight*, “What I Owe to The Ancients,” section 4, 562). Since suffering is considered indispensable to the creative or procreative process, it is awarded a central position in the aestheticism of both Nietzsche and Wilde. For Wilde, suffering provides “a fresh mode of self-realization” (*De Profundis* 97) through which the “soul of man” can reach “the full stature of its perfection” (107); Wilde reveres Jesus precisely because he (according to Wilde) “regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves holy things and modes of perfection” (122). Nietzsche, similarly, views suffering as an invitation for healthy individuals to exercise their creative powers; in the face of suffering, Dionysian or tragic artists “create the beautiful,” they “let a harmony sound forth from every conflict” and “bestow upon things their own power and self-

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200 “Die ‘Wehen der Gebärerin’ heiligen den Schmerz überhaupt, — alles Werden und Wachsen, alles Zukunft-Verbürgende b e d i n g t den Schmerz.”
redemption” (*The Will to Power*, section 852, 451). Central to Wilde’s and Nietzsche’s understanding of the relation of suffering to life is that the *meaning of suffering* must be generated by the one who suffers; any appeal to external sources of value, religious or otherwise, is declared null. Wilde, for instance, while grappling to find meaning in his past, present (as a prisoner in Reading Gaol), and future, writes: “I have to get it all out of myself. Neither religion, morality, nor reason can help me at all” (98). And Nietzsche’s Zarathustra declares: “Willing no more and esteeming no more and creating no more—oh, that this great weariness might always remain far from me! […] Away from God and gods this will has lured me; what could one create if gods existed?” (II: “Upon the Blessed Isles” 199). It is the figure of the autonomous artist—the individual who *creates values* by continually transforming what is inside and outside of himself—that exemplifies, for both Wilde and Nietzsche, the way in which we should approach a godless world, a world whose meaning can no longer be ascertained in relation to transcendent principles.

But what about the suffering of *others*? On this point, Nietzsche and Wilde diverge. Although many of their pronouncements about art, life and morality are in striking accordance, Wilde’s final articulation of aestheticism in *De Profundis* is at odds with Nietzsche’s aesthetic worldview in one important respect: it embraces compassion. Nietzsche’s view on Christian *Mitleid* (pity or compassion) is unwaveringly antagonistic. He cautions time and again against the dangers of pity, arguing that the misery of the “sick” and the “lowest” can, if ‘we’ are not

201 “Nicht-mehr-wollen und Nicht-mehr-schätzen und Nicht-mehr-schaffen! ach, dass diese grosse Müdigkeit mir stets ferne bleibe! […] Hinweg von Gott und Götttern lockte mich dieser Wille; was wäre denn zu schaffen, wenn Götter — da wären!”

202 Or, as Ellis Hanson phrases it, a world in which God is “*undead*” (*Decadence and Catholicism* 8). Nietzsche’s point, ultimately, is that we have not yet registered the death of god, that he continues to haunt most if not all of the supposedly ‘secular’ systems of value that have arisen in his wake.
vigilant enough, corrupt our own healthy constitutions by “poison[ing] most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves” (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” section 14, 122).\textsuperscript{203} Nietzsche does not deny that the strong suffer, but suggests rather that there are two fundamental types of sufferers: the healthy or strong individuals who “suffer from the overfullness of life” and are driven to exert their creative powers whenever they confront the terrible, and the sick or weak (majority) who “suffer from the impoverishment of life” and seek ways to anaesthetize their pain (Nietzsche Contra Wagner “We Antopides” 669). When the strong spirits sympathize with or attempt to aid the suffering of the “men of ressentiment,” they risk becoming infected by the sick men’s hatred of the world (Genealogy, “Third Essay,” section 14, 124). If Nietzsche had been given the opportunity to read Wilde’s prison letter, he would almost certainly have regarded it as evidence of Wilde’s weak constitution, of his inability to endure the pain of imprisonment without falling back on the Christian valorization of compassion.

But De Profundis, I would argue, represents far more than an instance of religious backsliding. Not only does it affirm the past, present and future in a manner that approximates Nietzsche’s notion of amor fati, but the fact that it accepts human weakness while rejecting supernatural sources of aid renders it a direct refutation of one of the most basic premises of Christian theology (that is, that redemption is a gift from God). Wilde’s endorsement of compassion in De Profundis, which stems from a recognition of the universal nature of suffering (the fundamental equivalence, rather than disparity, between his own suffering and the suffering of others), does not lead him to collapse out of weariness or to renounce the world in Schopenhauerian (and, Nietzsche would argue, Christian) fashion. Far from it. As a corollary of artistic creation,

\textsuperscript{203} See also the chapter “On the Pitying” from Part Two and all of Part Four of Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
Wilde’s “imaginative sympathy” is not a self-sacrificial or altruistic principle, nor is it a fixed moral law; it is, simply, an acknowledgement of the social nature of human life, of the fact that the way in which we transform the world will inexorably affect (and be affected by) others. It seems to me that Nietzsche, in his relentless struggle to overthrow Christianity as the dominant purveyor of values, may have come down too harshly on this one aspect of Christian morality. (Although Christianity, certainly, does not ‘own’ compassion, any more than compassion necessarily culminates in weariness or in the negation of life, as Nietzsche assumes.)

Wilde’s “imaginative sympathy” is also a recognition of the fact that the “death of God” does not entail the divinization of the individual, since the self can never attain the absolute autonomy, authority and invulnerability that have historically been attributed to the divine. Although Nietzsche’s doctrine of the Übermensch is an attempt to redirect human thought patterns away from “otherworldly hopes [‘überirdischen Hoffnungen’]” towards “the earth” (Zarathustra, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 3, 125), we might, in this regard, identify a faint ‘world-slanderousness’ lurking beneath his unwavering valorization of strength and autonomy. Nietzsche’s vision of the Dionysian artist who can autonomously redeem himself, of the Übermensch who “overcomes” man yet “remain[s] faithful [‘treu’] to the earth” (“Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 3, 125), tends to disregard the importance (or even the existence) of others, to overlook the way in which even ‘strong’ human beings, unlike the impervious and self-contained gods, both shape and are shaped by other people. It also fails to delimit where the boundaries of one’s artistic output could or should be drawn, as well as how the exertion of one individual’s “swollen and over-charged” could possibly avoid impinging on and subjugating another’s. The notion of shaping life—which consists of bodies, not just one’s own but other bodies, as well as things—to conform to one’s personal vision of harmony or beauty may
ultimately lead to acts of aggression aimed at smoothing out the rough edges of life, and to the suppression or even annihilation of that which does not fit into the aesthetic whole. It is this sinister prospect—alongside its passive correlative, the ability to contemplate mass destruction with disinterested delight—that led Walter Benjamin to declare that the doctrine of art for art’s sake culminates in fascism, in the aestheticization of politics and the transformation of war into an aesthetic pleasure (“Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 242).

While it would be misleading to suggest that compassion is central to Wilde’s literary project as a whole, I nevertheless believe that the inclusion of “imaginative sympathy” within his aesthetic theory of life goes a long way towards refuting what has subsequently been seen as the proto-fascist impetus behind nineteenth-century aestheticism. (And even Nietzsche can largely be exonerated from such accusations when one considers the fact that his philosophy was never intended to be taken as a pragmatic or political program.204 It is, as Thomas Mann reminds us, “out of love for mankind” that Nietzsche pronounced the death of god [“Nietzsche’s Philosophy” 176], out of love for the world that he fought so vehemently against all systems of value that assess and consequentially disparage life on the basis of external principles.) At this current historical moment in which extremist and neo-fascist ideologies are on the rise, I feel that it is particularly important to emphasize the ethical potential of Wilde’s aestheticism. If on the centenary of Weber’s delivery of “Science as a Vocation” we still find ourselves living in a world in which “many old gods ascend from their graves” (From Max Weber 149)—that is, in a pluralistic society in which “the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and

204 Walter Kaufmann points to a significant note from 1888 in which Nietzsche drafts a preface for Will to Power (his sister conveniently left this one out from the notes she selected for publication): “The Will to Power. A book for thinking, nothing else. That it is written in German is untimely, to say the least: I wish I had written it in French so that it might not appear as a confirmation of any reichsdeutschen aspirations” (qtd. in Kaufmann 247-8).
hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion” (152)—I certainly do not intend, with this project, to serve any figurative ‘god’ whose teachings breed intolerance, injustice, and cruelty. My examination of fin de siècle aestheticism here has been guided not only by a scholarly interest in engaging with current debates about the religion of art in the wake of the widespread reappraisal of the ‘secularization thesis.’ It has also been guided by a deep personal belief in the existential and social value of the arts, a belief that is reflected (magnified, in fact, and in spite of l’art pour l’art’s claim that art is purposeless) in fin de siècle attempts to revalue life in aesthetic terms. Despite the shortcomings and potentially dangerous corollaries of their aesthetic worldviews, Nietzsche and Wilde saw artistic creation and contemplation as a means of affirming and enriching human life, of working within the boundaries of our world to create instances of harmony and plenitude, states of being which have so often been placed beyond the world’s limits. There remains, of course, the temptation to exploit art as a substitute for the transcendent fullness that religion locates in the divine and/or the afterlife; this is the temptation that Pater’s aestheticism eventually gives into, and that Wilde initially adopts. But if art refuses to idealize and insulate itself, if it refuses to set itself on ‘higher ground’ than that which it reflects and transforms, then perhaps it can serve as a meaningful, ethical, and fully human form of engaging with our world without availing ourselves of external authorities that, by the mere fact of their (postulated) existence, devalue who and where we are.
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