EPICUREAN AESTHETICISM:
DE QUINCEY, PATER, WILDE, STOPPARD

by

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Abstract

This is a study of what I argue is a neglected side of Aestheticism. A standard definition of Aestheticism is that its practitioners turn away from the general current of modernity to protest its utilitarian and materialistic values, but this generalization ignores the profound influence of contemporary philosophical and scientific thought on such major figures of British Aestheticism as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. This study focuses on Aesthetes who are not in flight from modernity. I call their type of Aestheticism "Epicurean Aestheticism" and argue that since this temperament is characterized by a willingness to engage with the flux of modern times it must be distinguished from the more familiar, escapist form of Aestheticism I call "Platonic Aestheticism." I propose that Aestheticism be viewed as a spectrum with Epicurean Aestheticism on one side and the Platonic variety on the other. While Platonic Aesthetes like W. B. Yeats and Stéphane Mallarmé continue the Romantic project of trying to counter modernity with various idealist and absolutist philosophies, Epicurean Aesthetes adopt materialist and relativistic strategies in their desire to make the most of modern life. I argue that the first unmistakable signs of Epicurean Aestheticism are to be found in Thomas De Quincey, that the sensibility is fully formulated be Pater, continued by Wilde, and finds a current representative in Tom Stoppard. All Aesthetes are dedicated to the pursuit of beauty, but Platonic Aesthetes seek beauty in an eternal and transcendent realm, while Epicurean Aesthetes have given up such absolutist habits of thought. Pater writes: "Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the "relative" spirit in place of the "absolute." Epicurean Aesthetes want a new aesthetic that will parallel the paradigm shift from absolutism to relativism. While a nostalgic, quasi-religious longing for a purely ideal realm characterizes Platonic Aesthetes, Epicurean Aesthetes accept that the high, idealistic road to eternal beauty is closed. Instead of lamenting this fact, they start looking for beauty among the uncertainties
of the phenomenal world: by viewing life as an aesthetic spectacle to be observed and experimented on with playful detachment they become Epicureans of the flux of modernity.
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Introduction:

Epicureans of the Flux

"Then we will dance."

Thomasina, in Stoppard's *Arcadia*

This thesis evolves out of my interest in the various manifestations of Aestheticism in literature. The more I study the complex and interrelated movements of Pre-Raphaelitism, "art for art's sake," Decadence, and Symbolism, the more I sense the need for making distinctions between writers whose unique characteristics are blurred by critics' grouping them too closely together. For instance, a standard definition of Aestheticism is that its practitioners deliberately turn away from the general current of modern ideas to protest the utilitarian and materialistic values of their age (see, for instance, Abrams 2-3 and Whewell 6). This generalization might be expected to apply to the most influential figures of British Aestheticism, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Indeed, it is often made to do so (e.g. Showalter 170), but this generalization ignores the profound influence of contemporary philosophic and scientific thought on their writings. I have become increasingly interested in Aesthetes who are not in flight from their time. In this thesis I examine a neglected sensibility I call "Epicurean Aestheticism" and argue that since this temperament is characterized by a willingness to adapt to the flux of modernity it must be distinguished from the more familiar, escapist form of Aestheticism I call "Platonic Aestheticism." While Platonic Aesthetes continue the Romantic attempt of trying to counter modernity with a variety of idealist and absolutist philosophies, Epicurean
Aesthetes adopt materialistic and relativistic strategies in their desire to make the most of modern life.

I argue that the first unmistakable signs of Epicurean Aestheticism are to be found in the works of Thomas De Quincey, that the sensibility is fully formulated by Pater, continued by Wilde, and finds a current representative in Tom Stoppard. Before giving a brief, chapter-by-chapter overview of the thesis, I will touch on the main points of Epicurean Aestheticism, paying particular attention to Pater. As the first author to formulate this sensibility he will figure prominently in this study. Furthermore, much of my theoretical framework is derived from his work. In his collection of critical essays, Appreciations (1889), he observes:

Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the "relative" spirit in place of the "absolute." Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and the varieties of life in a classification by "kinds," or genera. To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions. The philosophical conception of the relative has been developed in modern times through the influence of the sciences of observation. (66)

Here we have a crucial feature of Epicurean Aestheticism: the view that the most important feature of modernity is a paradigm shift from absolutism to relativism, combined with an understanding of the role experimental science plays in this process. The passage comes from the essay on Coleridge, in which Pater treats the great Romantic visionary as a charming, but doomed, leader of a lost cause, representing "those older methods of philosophic inquiry, over which the empirical philosophy of our day has triumphed" (Appreciations 66).

What Pater wants is a new aesthetic that will parallel the shift from "ancient" to "modern" thought. In the opening essay of Appreciations, he writes that we live "in a
world where after all we must needs make the most of things" (5). Part of the adaptive attitude that characterizes Pater's aesthetic strategies is the way he aligns himself with the empirical sciences rather than the predominantly idealist philosophies of Romanticism. It is of crucial importance to note that for Pater science is far too complex a matter to be written off as a grubby, philistine business, as some literary types still have a tendency to do. "Scientific truth," Pater writes, "is a thing fugitive, relative, full of fine gradations. . . ." (Appreciations 72). This evocative description hints at the unusual alliance between art and science that characterizes the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament. The relativism engendered by the physical sciences is directly linked by Pater to his relativistic aesthetics. In the "Preface" to The Renaissance (1873) he writes: "Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness" (xxix). Coleridge's failure, according to Pater, is his "ancient" habit of trying to fix truth in absolute, idealist formulas (Appreciations 72).

Among the adjectives Pater uses to describe Coleridge's world view are "absolute," "spiritual," and "Platonic" (Appreciations 81). Pater's own view is relative, materialist, and Epicurean. (For examples of Pater's reliance on the terms "Epicurean" and "Epicureanism" to define his position see his novel Marius the Epicurean and his review of Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray). The basic assumptions of Epicureanism coincide with Pater's outlook: materialism (i.e. the theory that reality is reducible to matter or matter-in-motion); pleasure as the basis of ethics; and the belief that meaning lies not in a supernatural realm, but has to be found in this world and is therefore provisional and relative. The Epicurean theory that the soul is made up of atoms which will eventually be dispersed finds its parallel in Pater's description of life as "but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (The Renaissance 150). To Epicurus and Pater, life is sense-experience. Death is the cessation of sense-experience. Hence, there can be no afterlife (Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" 23).
Pater's secular, materialistic brand of Aestheticism is remarkably different from the spiritual and idealist yearnings traditionally ascribed to the movement. I propose that Aestheticism be viewed as a spectrum with Epicurean Aestheticism at one end and the Platonic variety at the other. This allows us to retain the convenient, but vague, term "Aestheticism" and make it the basis of a more precise terminology. However, before examining the distinction between the two types of Aestheticism it is worth noting the common ground between them. All forms of Aestheticism share the notion of "art for art's sake." Although the doctrine is first actively promoted in France by Théophile Gautier in the 1830s, scholars agree that the idea derives ultimately from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Kant provides the groundwork for Aestheticism by arguing that genuine aesthetic experience is characterized by the perception of an internal purposiveness; furthermore, he insists that a judgement of taste must be made independently of moral or practical standards. A hundred years after the publication of the *Critique of Judgement*, Wilde's elegant flaunting of art's non-pragmatic nature, "All art is quite useless," is simply a variation on the Kantian paradox that art has "purposiveness without purpose" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* xxiv; *Critique of Judgement* 80).

A crucial difference between Platonic and Epicurean Aesthetes lies in their relation to Romanticism. Symbolism is a prime example of Platonic Aestheticism, and those who study the movement insist rightly that it has to be approached as part of the larger whole of Romanticism (Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* 23). "We were the last romantics" is W. B. Yeats's apt epitaph for a heritage of which he himself is such a splendid specimen ("Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" 41). In the essay on Coleridge, Pater separates himself from the eminently nostalgic lineage, stretching from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Symbolists, which continues Coleridge's fight against modernity. The fact that a classic study like Graham Hough's *The Last Romantics* (1947) should place Pater in this context is precisely why I argue that it is necessary to examine Pater's brand of Aestheticism more carefully. Although much of the recent critical work on Pater and Wilde challenges the stereotypes
that have hampered an understanding of these authors\(^1\), they are still too often seen as part of a wholesale rejection of social, philosophical, and scientific developments. What distinguishes Epicurean Aesthetes from the "last romantics" is an acceptance of the relativistic, materialistic aspects of modernity, combined with a determination to keep their composure in the face of its unsettling implications.

All Aesthetes are dedicated to the pursuit of beauty, but the difference between Platonic and Epicurean Aesthetes becomes evident in the type of beauty they seek. In a classic Platonic Aesthetic document, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Arthur Symons writes that with Symbolism "art returns to the one true pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty" (4). A nostalgic, quasi-religious tone and a longing for a timeless, purely ideal realm are the defining features of Platonic Aestheticism. For the high priest of French Symbolism, Stéphane Mallarmé, the "Book" is a "spiritual instrument," the written word the "ideal in noiseless flight from earth" ("The Book" 690; "Mystery in Literature" 694). In 1867, he writes to a friend: "... I am impersonal now: not the Stéphane you once knew, but one of the ways the Spiritual Universe has found to see Itself, unfold Itself through what used to be me" (Selected Poetry and Prose 87; qtd. in Chadwick 35). Such yearnings for the supernatural are shared by Yeats, who consistently presents himself and Mallarmé as members of the same ancient, spiritual dynasty. Although Pater is often made to fit into this tradition, the essay on Coleridge shows how critical he is of such idealistic pleading for things "behind the veil" (*Appreciations* 82). While the Epicurean Aesthete Pater finds transcendent yearnings old-fashioned, the Platonic Aesthete Yeats still longs for the eternal beauty, a longing illustrated by the title of his autobiography which deals with the fin de siècle, *The Trembling of the Veil*. In it he writes: "Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said,

\(^1\) For examples of recent essays that recognize the importance of contemporary thought, especially scientific discourse, on Pater and Wilde, see Benson, "'Catching Light': Physics and Art in Walter Pater's Cultural Context" and Foster, "Against Nature? Science and Oscar Wilde."
by 'the trembling of the veil of the Temple', or that 'our whole age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book'" (Autobiographies 315). For Epicurean Aesthetes, the high, idealistic road to the eternal beauty is closed. The fact that they accept this and start looking for beauty in the phenomenal world crystallizes the difference between them and their Platonic colleagues.

Much of the confusion between the Platonic and Epicurean branches of Aestheticism can be traced to Yeats. His comment that he was "in all things Pre-Raphaelite" is perfectly just, for it affirms his place in the "ancient" lineage of Platonic Aestheticism (Autobiographies 114). However, his statement that he and the other members of the Rhymers' Club looked consciously to Pater for their philosophy is extremely misleading (Autobiographies 302). There is no question that Pater influenced Yeats and his fellow Rhymers, but the association of Pater with Platonic strivings completely misrepresents Pater's Epicurean sensibility. While dissatisfaction with materialism is at the root of Pre-Raphaelitism and Symbolism (Milner 7), this is not true of Epicurean Aestheticism. Nevertheless, many scholars continue to group writers like Pater and Wilde with their more discontented, anti-materialist contemporaries (cf. Engstrom and Scott 275).

Epicurean Aestheticism is characterized, first, by an acknowledgement that ancient absolutes have been replaced by modern uncertainties and, second, by a search for an aesthetic response to this potentially bleak situation. Built into the relativistic strategies of this sensibility is a resistance to any conceptual schema that is overly rigid. Hence, the biggest challenge in writing about it is to combine careful analysis with a sensitivity to its fluid nature. The following passage from the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance gives a good indication of the intricate, elastic quality of the Epicurean Aesthetic attitude:

> What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as
points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. (152-53)

It is with these words in mind that I use my term Epicurean Aestheticism, for I hope that it will help bring attention to and clarify important strands in Aestheticism that may otherwise continue to go unnoticed. The following four chapters will show the emergence and development of Epicurean Aestheticism.

In chapter one, "Thomas De Quincey: Opium, Murder, and Metaphysics," I argue that his writings mark a transition from Romanticism to Epicurean Aestheticism. De Quincey witnesses the transformation of British society in less than a lifetime. Writing in 1845, he lists some of the changes: steam in all its applications, daguerreotypes, educational reforms, and advances in the production of everything from newspapers to weapons of mass destruction. The outcome, he argues, can only be general disorientation (Suspiria de Profundis 87). In De Quincey's view, the only possibility of slowing down the colossal pace of modernization lies in its forces being met by counter-forces, either of religion or philosophy. This type of "energy imagery" indicates his aesthetic interest in power in all its manifestations, whether it be of opium, murder, or metaphysics. As his faith in transcendent values weakens, experience appears to turn into a chaos of clashing powers. Art itself becomes purely a matter of force, as is demonstrated by his well-known distinction between the "literature of power" and the "literature of knowledge." He writes: "All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge" (10: 48). The function of the first is to move; the function of the second is to teach. Neither religion nor philosophy can save De Quincey—he survives by taking up an aesthetic attitude towards the spectacular flux of modernity.

De Quincey's most famous work, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (1821), ends with an image of Adam and Eve looking back on the paradise to which they can never return. The impossibility of returning to a blissful state of innocence will be a
recurring theme in this thesis. Although De Quincey has great admiration for Wordsworth and Coleridge, his writings betray a sense that he is born too late to participate in the great Romantic project of a joyful union between the self and the universe. De Quincey is haunted by scepticism and relativism, perturbed by the lack of a central principle holding the particles of experience together in a single, coherent whole. Here we can locate the beginnings of the Epicurean Aesthetic break with Romanticism. In his diagnosis of Romantic theory, Pater criticizes Coleridge for striving for fixed principles and essences where all is moving, for his refusal "to see the parts as parts only" (Appreciations 103). Try as he might, De Quincey seems unable to see the whole and starts to deal with the parts as parts only.

The atomization of life is a bad matter, but what distinguishes De Quincey from Coleridge is that rather than try to escape it he responds in an aesthetic way, which involves treating even the most dreadful aspects of life with playful detachment. In "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1854), he writes that if a murder has taken place, and our attempts to apprehend the killer have come to nothing that is not the end of the matter: "A sad thing it was, no doubt, very sad; but we can't mend it. Therefore let us make the best of a bad matter; and, as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically, and see if it will turn to account in that way" (13: 16). Making the best of a bad matter, and Pater's related phrase about living in a world where we must make the most of things, may stand as the mottoes of Epicurean Aestheticism. In De Quincey's essay the aestheticization of experience is applied to other bad matters as well--fires, for instance: "If you are summoned to the spectacle of a great fire, undoubtedly the first impulse is--to assist in putting it out" (13: 72). But when that has been done, and we have "paid our tribute of regret to the affair considered as a calamity, inevitably, and without restraint, we go on to consider it as a stage spectacle" (13: 72). "Spectacle" will become a key word in the Epicurean Aesthetic discourse.
De Quincey's sensitivity to the relativistic force of modern thought weakens the idealist impulse that characterizes genuine Romantics. That the world may be governed by blind material forces rather than benign spiritual ones, that it may be a heap of fragments rather than an organic unity, fills De Quincey with dread. But by viewing experience as an aesthetic spectacle he manages to deal gracefully with flux and uncertainty. This makes him the precursor of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility.

In chapter two, "Walter Pater: The Art of Alienation," I show how this sensibility becomes full-fledged. The relativism and materialism that trouble De Quincey are simply accepted by Pater as central features of modern thinking. By consciously fusing relativism and materialism with the principle of "art for art's sake" Pater formulates Epicurean Aestheticism. A fruitful interaction with science is one of the distinguishing features of this temperament. For instance, Pater's preoccupation with change and uncertainty stems from the impact of evolutionary theory on his thought. By supplanting the idea of permanence by the idea of relativity Darwinism ushers in an age of flux (Stevenson 513). Elaborating on this view, John Dewey writes that the very combination of the words origin and species embodies an intellectual revolt and introduces a new intellectual temper:

The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defects and unreality. In laying hands upon the sacred arc of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the "Origin of Species" introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion. ("The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" 305)
That Pater is very much in tune with this new intellectual temper is clear from his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*: "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes of fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought" (150). Acting in accordance with the Epicurean Aesthetic maxim that we live in a world where we must make the most of things, Pater sets about making aesthetic adjustments in response to the unsettling claims of evolutionary theory.

One of the aspects of modernization in the nineteenth century is the increased rate of specialization. Influential scholars like Richard D. Altick see Aestheticism as part of this process. As "specialists" in their own field the Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1880s and 1890s are portrayed as retreating from society, thus creating a schism between the world of art and the world of everyday life: "Now the artist was truly alienated," as Altick dramatically puts it (295; see also Buckley 207-8). It is beyond dispute that this generalization applies to many Aesthetes, but it does not accurately account for Pater's Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility.

An examination that resists the stereotypical view of Aestheticism reveals that far from withdrawing from modern life, Pater's Aestheticism is characterized by an engagement with and adaptation to the profound changes brought about by what is arguably the defining feature of modernity: science. The mingling of Epicureanism with the view that art has "purposiveness without purpose" must count as an appropriate response to the non-teleological world of flux proposed by Darwinism. Philip Appleman writes: "Natural selection pictured the world in a constant process of change, but without any apparent prior intention of going anywhere in particular or of becoming anything in particular" ("Darwin: On Changing the Mind" 537). Pater fully acknowledges the potentially alienating effect of the scientific outlook, but he sees no point in trying to deny that we are all caught in the intricate web of physical forces. "Natural laws we shall never modify," he writes, "embarrass us as they may; but there is still something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch their fatal combinations" (*The Renaissance* 149).
Taking up an attitude towards the spectacle of the world and oneself becomes the purposeless purpose of the subtle art of Epicurean Aestheticism. Pater's success lies in turning alienation into an art.

Pater's most spectacular follower is the subject of chapter three, "Oscar Wilde: Strange Perspectives." I argue that Wilde's career demonstrates a move from "ancient" absolutism to "modern" relativism. His early work is characterized by a somewhat confused, but predominantly Platonic, Aestheticism. Around 1889, however, I locate a shift to Epicurean Aestheticism.

Dandyism is inseparable from Wilde's aesthetics. Through an analysis of the difference between the Platonic and Epicurean versions of dandyism I demonstrate what separates the two temperaments. I select Charles Baudelaire as an example of a dandy on the Platonic Aesthetic pattern. While Baudelaire longs wistfully for a past which he believes is superior to the present, Wilde's dandies claim that they are on excellent terms with the world. While Platonic Aesthetes dream of transcendence, Wilde states bluntly that the gates to heaven are guarded by ignorance ("The Critic as Artist" 382). Baudelaire is proudly ancient in his disdain of the materialistic aspects of modern times. For him, dandyism is an idealist protest in a fallen age: "Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 421-22). In a transient, contingent world Baudelaire yearns endlessly for the eternal and immovable. Wilde, however, sees no point in resisting the flux, and by shifting his allegiance from idealist immobility to materialist contingency he illustrates the move from Platonic to Epicurean Aestheticism.

Wilde fully acknowledges that modern life is terribly deficient in form, but he will not let that get in the way of his enjoyment of life. In order to keep his composure when faced with endless indeterminacy, he continues Pater's explorations of the parallels between Aestheticism and science. One of the things that appeals to Wilde is that in both
spheres moral approval or disapproval is held at bay. He criticizes his age for vulgarity, but he also sees it as providing intriguing intellectual and aesthetic adventures. He adopts Pater's strategy of never acquiescing in any orthodoxy, not even his own. Wilde demonstrates this most forcefully by turning on himself in the concluding paragraph of one of his critical essays:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. (Intentions 432)

Taking up an elegantly playful attitude towards everything, including oneself, is a central feature of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament. With their paradoxical "commitment to noncommitment," Epicurean Aesthetes are able to deal with the flux and uncertainty of modern experience. The driving force of Wilde's texts becomes the Epicurean delight he takes in a continual movement from one strange perspective to another.

The sense of belatedness that can be detected in De Quincey is pronounced in Wilde's fin-de-siècle texts: "[W]e who are born at the close of this wonderful age, are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life for life itself" ("The Critic as Artist" 381). For Wilde, ponderous metaphysics and religious ecstasy are simply out of date—the ancient mystic has been replaced by the modern critic ("The Critic as Artist" 381). Rather than lament his belatedness he celebrates it as a vantage point from which to view the strange spectacle of history. With Wilde an Epicurean Aesthetic tradition becomes established, as can be seen from his essay "Pen Pencil and Poison" (1889), where he deals with the man-of-letters, painter, and poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright in a manner that is clearly a homage to De Quincey's "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts."
In this chapter I also trace Wilde's search for a form that can adequately express his Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility. While it is formulated in his critical dialogues "The Decay of Lying" (1889) and "The Critic as Artist" (1890), it takes him some time to develop it in other genres. An example is his experiments with the fairy-tale form. While he tries to make them convey his relativism he cannot get rid of absolutist aspects of the genre, such as simple, sentimental binaries. Later, however, he finds a solution to his stylistic problems by subverting an absolutist genre, the religious parable, and turning it to his own relativistic ends in his "Poems in Prose." He goes through a similar process with his four social comedies. While the first three suffer from a tension between relativistic elements and old-fashioned stage conventions, in the last one his experiments result in a new genre. In the relativistic farce The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) everything has become a matter of style: "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces," laments the laughable Lady Bracknell (3:164-65). "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing," observes her stylish daughter, Gwendolen (3:28-29). Wilde's flippancy and paradoxes are a way of keeping the audience's thoughts in constant motion, thereby creating in their minds the Epicurean Aesthetic sensation that everything can be treated as an open question.

In the final chapter of the thesis, "Enter Stoppard--The Last Act?", I speculate about the fate of Epicurean Aestheticism. I argue that the sensibility does not survive in Wilde after his disastrous action against the Marquess of Queensberry. What becomes of Epicurean Aestheticism? Is it simply subsumed by Modernism, like many of the aesthetic developments of the late nineteenth century? Although the temperament does have obvious aspects in common with Modernism, like the dedication to art for art's sake, for instance, I come to the conclusion that it has more in common with certain trends within Postmodernism. While the Modernists tend to be anti-scientific and hence "ancient," to use Pater's terminology, we have seen how Epicurean Aesthetes are more modern in their
openness to and aesthetic appropriation of scientific discourse. When it comes to science the Modernists simply continue the idealist lamentation against the scientific outlook which, for Epicurean Aesthetes, was already out of date in Coleridge's time. For Epicurean Aesthetes, science may, or may not, be a bad matter, but they are determined to make the most of it.

I present Tom Stoppard as the late twentieth-century heir of Epicurean Aestheticism. He has strong thematic links with De Quincey, Pater, and Wilde: running through his work is the central Epicurean Aesthetic issue of the rise of relativism at the expense of absolutism. This can be seen, for instance, from A. J. Ayer's comments on Stoppard's play, *Jumpers* (1972):

> The argument is between those who believe in absolute values, for which they seek a religious sanction, and those, more frequently to be found among contemporary philosophers, who are subjectivist or relativist in morals, utilitarians in politics, and atheists or at least agnostics ("Love Among the Logical Positivists" 16; qtd. in Cahn 118)

Stoppard proves himself to be an heir of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament not only by judging the shift from absolutism to relativism to be of major importance, but also by the manner in which he reacts to this unsettling change. Like his Epicurean Aesthetic forerunners he lives in a world where everything can be treated as an open question and no one has the last word. In Stoppard's world, characters play ping-pong with various intellectual arguments. The fact that he conducts this infinite debate with delightful style rather than dour angst confirms his Epicurean Aesthetic credentials.

Wilde is the main link between Stoppard and the lineage of Epicurean Aesthetes. The affinities between the two writers are evident from Stoppard's Wildean love of wit and paradox: "... I think that in the future I must stop compromising my plays with this whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness. I should have the courage of my lack of convictions" (Hayman, "First Interview with
Stoppard 2). Travesties, which features James Joyce staging Wilde's The Importance of
Being Earnest in Zurich during World War I, is the perfect place to start the discussion.
Stoppard uses the relativistic structures of The Importance of Being Earnest to build his
own huge artifice of a play. What drives Stoppard's aesthetics is an unabashed dedication
to pleasure: "I like theatre, I like showbiz, and that's what I'm true to" ("First Interview"
8). His love of play and commitment to noncommitment detaches him from any single
point of view. Instead, he orchestrates a spectacle of various conflicting viewpoints for the
audience's intellectual and aesthetic enjoyment: the Epicurean relativism theorized by Pater
and put into dramatic form by Wilde is continued by Stoppard in a late twentieth-century
context.

Stoppard's fruitful interaction with science is another crucial link with the
Epicurean Aesthetic lineage. I conclude the thesis with a look at Stoppard's stylish use of
the concepts of entropy, quantum physics, and chaos theory. His play, Arcadia (1993) is a
late twentieth-century variation on Pater's theme of the shift from absolutist to relativistic
thought. The drama starts in 1809 in a neo-classical manor in a perfect English garden.
Newton's absolutist physics rules and all seems right with the world. But this Edenic calm
is about to be disturbed by an influx of relativism and uncertainty, symbolized by the
transformation of the neat symmetries of the garden into a wilderness of irregular forms
and the speculations of a young doubter named Thomasina, whose mercurial mind has
intimations of entropy and chaos.

In his dramatization of the fall from absolutist order, Stoppard shows himself to be
a true heir of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility by managing to find beauty in the
fragments that still remain. By presenting characters caught in the web of natural laws,
such as the second law of thermodynamics, he puts on stage Pater's view of life as a flame-
like concurrence of forces that will sooner or later part. For Epicurean Aesthetes, success
in life is to burn with a hard, gem-like flame--until entropy catches up with them. In a
dramatic demonstration of the "heat death" predicted by the principle of entropy she
herself has discovered, Thomasina is consumed in a fire the night before her sixteenth birthday, but not before she has learned how to waltz. Thomasina's tutor and friend is filled with melancholy by the implications of his pupil's discoveries. "When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore," he tells her. "Then we will dance," she responds cheerfully (Arcadia 94). For Epicurean Aesthetes, the end of an ancient, absolutist Eden is the beginning of a modern, relativistic dance.
Chapter I

Thomas De Quincey:
Opium, Murder, and Metaphysics

i. Out of the Garden

"For a mild-mannered little man who declared himself 'incapable of cruelty,' De Quincey was curiously fascinated by murder," remarks John E. Jordan in an introduction to a collection of the Opium-Eater's essays (vii). De Quincey remains an enigmatic and paradoxical figure in English literature. Although he is grouped with the Romantics, a brief look at chronology shows that in this, as in so many other respects, he is at odds with them. Born in 1785, he is younger than the "first generation" of Romantics, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, and older than the "second generation," Byron, Shelley, and Keats. De Quincey's literary career begins in 1818 and continues until his death in 1859—that is, well into the Victorian period. When compared with his fellow essayists, William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, with whom he is sometimes grouped, the strangeness and complexity of his work becomes even more noticeable. I will argue that, although De Quincey can in some ways be said to be a Romantic author, he diverges from the main currents of the period in significant ways. This divergence signals a transition from Romanticism to the post-Romantic sensibility of Epicurean Aestheticism.

To call De Quincey a Romantic is justified up to a degree. The poetry of Wordsworth plays a major role in his life and he prides himself on having been one of the first to appreciate and champion his work. Also, in De Quincey's own writings the frequent apostrophizing and emphasis on powerful emotion in passages of what he calls
"impassioned prose" are typically Romantic. Overall, however, the tone of his work is different from the confidence and optimism of such key Romantic texts as Wordsworth's "Prospectus to The Recluse," where the poet celebrates the joyous union of the Romantic self and the external world:

How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted:--and how exquisitely, too--
Theme this but little heard of among men--
The external World is fitted to the Mind;
And the creation (by no lower name
Can it be called) which they with blended might
Accomplish:--this is our high argument. (5: 63-71)

De Quincey is much more sceptical than Wordsworth of the possibility of an authentic synthesis of subject and object. Yet to express occasional scepticism about the power of the imagination to unite world and self does not constitute a departure from Romantic practice. Doubts of that sort appear frequently in works of the period, for example, in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," where the speaker states that he "may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within," for "we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live . . ." (45-48). These lines suggest that the creation of experience through the cooperation of world and mind, which is at the centre of the Romantic project, is not as natural and spontaneous as it should be. Coleridge's poem can be seen as hinting that this is a partnership that can only work as long as the mind does all the work--a process that must lead to a draining of the mind's energies and result in a state of dejected exhaustion. However, scepticism of this sort is held at bay in Coleridge's scheme of things by his belief in the power of the imagination. He grants that the world can at times be cold and overwhelming, but we
should not pay too much attention to this because he claims that "objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (1: 304). We should not let the physical world get in the way of what is superior to them, namely "the infinite I AM," or the mysterious creative force behind the world of phenomena. With the help of our imagination we can bypass the physical world and get in touch with the true nature of the universe. This is possible, in Coleridge's opinion, because he holds the imagination to be "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (1: 304). The relationship between the two planes of existence--i.e. the material world and the vital power transcending it--and the mystical frame of mind that is needed to reach the higher plane is conveyed by the enigmatic ending of the Biographia Literaria:

It is Night, sacred Night! the upraised Eye views only the starry Heaven which manifests itself alone: and the outward Beholding is fixed on the sparks twinkling in the aweful depth, though Suns of other Worlds, only to preserve the Soul steady and collected in its pure Act of inward Adoration to the great I AM, and to the filial WORD that re-affirmeth it from Eternity to Eternity, whose choral Echo is the Universe. (2: 247-48)

In Romantic thought the drive is always towards unity and wholeness. De Quincey was strongly effected by Coleridge's and Wordsworth's gospel of the regenerative powers of the imagination. He refers to his reading of Lyrical Ballads as the "greatest event in the unfolding of my own mind," and as a young man his admiration for Wordsworth bordered on idolatry (Recollections 33, 383). But if Wordsworth was important to De Quincey, another major influence was Immanuel Kant, the impact of whose philosophy was to turn his thought away from Romantic poetics. De Quincey's response to Kant is remarkably different from other theorists of the Romantic period, e.g. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schiller, and Friedrich Schelling, all of whom co-opt his thought into their own idealist systems of thought, ignoring the rigorous empirical strictures Kant himself puts on
the theoretical faculty and its tendency to transcend the limits of possible experience for more glamorous heights (cf. Abrams 208 and Scruton 162-64).

De Quincey came in contact with Kant's work during his student days in Oxford. At Oxford, De Quincey was more interested in his own programme of study than the stale official curriculum, which did not include the latest trends in transcendental philosophy. He received private tuition in German from a German Jewish student by the name of Schwartzburg (Lindop 116). The choice of language was not arbitrary because at the time German "for vast compass, variety, and extent, far exceed[ed] all others as a depository for the current accumulations of knowledge," as he writes in his "Letter to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected" (10: 62). Furthermore, he was aware that "the very tree of knowledge in the midst of this literary Eden" was the venerable Kant, especially his Critique of Pure Reason (2: 101). The Edenic imagery is apt, since the fruit from this tree of knowledge resulted in De Quincey's fall from his Wordsworthian belief in a perfect harmony of world and mind. One of the central points of the Critique of Pure Reason (1781) is that the human mind can only know things as appearance, or phenomena, never as "things-in-themselves," or noumena. In Kant's view nature does not possess rules, rather the

order and regularity in appearances, which we call nature, are, then, something that we ourselves supply, nor would we encounter them if we, or the nature of our mind, had not originally supplied them. For this unity of nature must be necessary, i.e. it must be a particular a priori unity in the connection of appearance. But how would we be able a priori to undertake such a synthetic unity unless the original sources of knowledge in our mind contained a subjective basis for such an a priori unity and unless the subjective conditions were not at the same time objectively valid by virtue of being the basis for the possibility of knowing an object in experience in the first place? (136)
The proposition that the mind does not discover laws in nature but supplies them itself
borders on solipsism, which is a position that Kant does not want to advance. By a feat of
what some might be tempted to call mental gymnastics he saves himself from this
predicament by arguing that the subjective basis of our knowledge with its assumption of
unity and orderliness in experience is at the same time objectively valid because without it
we would not be able to conceive of experience at all. Kant can make this claim because
he has already proved, at least to his own satisfaction, that all rational human beings
possess the same basic intellectual faculties. It follows that we can have objective
knowledge of the things we encounter in experience in the sense that all rational humans
have the ability to share this knowledge. This knowledge, however, tells us nothing about
how these entities are in themselves, but only how they appear to the human
understanding that apprehends them. What Kant calls objectivity can also be termed inter-
subjectivity, or it may be called solipsistic in the sense that our knowledge is a product of
the "solipsism" of the human species.

To De Quincey, who started reading Kant with great Romantic expectations, the
argument that we can only know the appearance of things and never the things-in-
themselves was profoundly depressing. The philosophical revelations he had hoped for
turned out to be "culs-de-sac, passages the lead to nothing;... upon every path a barrier
faces you insurmountable to human steps" (2: 87). In other words, the road to Coleridge's
"great I AM" was barred and the barriers were insurmountable because De Quincey, who
had a great respect for logic, was forced to accept Kant's rigorous argument. De Quincey's
latest biographer, Grevel Lindop, writes that the "idea that space and time, causation, even
logic itself might all be merely properties of human consciousness with no basis in external
reality was one which he found terrifying to confront." The effect was, indeed, strong
enough to result in a phase of depression (Lindop 132). De Quincey himself writes: "Let a
man meditate but a little on this or other aspects of this transcendental philosophy, and he
will find the steadfast earth itself rocking as it were beneath his feet" (2:101)--not an
uncommon experience among subsequent readers of Kant, one might add. De Quincey reads Kant with fear and trembling, but he is unable to break free from the power of his thought, for he is fascinated with power, whether manifesting itself in the "dark idol" of opium or the pale professor from Königsberg. In the Confessions of an English Opium-Eater we catch a glimpse of him in his cottage on a winter night partaking of the not-quite-wholesome fruits of both: "a quart of ruby-coloured laudanum: that; and a book of German metaphysics placed by its side, will sufficiently attest my being in the neigbourhood . . ." (61).

Such pleasures, however, come with a price. In a letter written in 1844, while suffering from the withdrawal symptoms of one of his many failed attempts to give up opium, De Quincey describes the psychological effects of long-term opium taking and compares his state with his knowledge of Coleridge's addiction to the drug. Through De Quincey's own "mental ruin" he says he looked into and read the latter stages of Coleridge. His chaos I comprehended by the darkness of my own, and both were the work of laudanum. It is as if ivory carvings and elaborate fretwork and fair enamelling should be found with worms and ashes amongst coffins and the wrecks of some forgotten life or some abolished nature. In parts and fractions eternal creations are carried on, but the nexus is wanting, and life and the central principle which should bind together all the parts at the centre, with all its radiations to the circumference, are wanting. Infinite incoherence, ropes of sand, gloomy incapacity of vital pervasion by some one plastic principle, that is the hideous incubus upon my mind always. (Letter qtd. in Japp, Thomas De Quincey: His Life and Writings. With Unpublished Correspondence 241-42)

Although De Quincey draws parallels between himself and Coleridge we have seen how the latter accounts for his fits of dejection in the context of an absolutist system. Richard
Holmes writes of Coleridge that by "temperament and training he is a system-builder, who seeks to establish a philosophical structure within every experience and brand of knowledge even when he suffers a ghastly nightmare, or the horrors of opium withdrawal, he tries to fit it into the rules of experimental psychology" (51). De Quincey's letter, however, describes the breakdown of the kind of all-encompassing system which Coleridge strives to create. De Quincey blames opium for his agony, but one wonders to what extent his reading of Kant contributes to his sense of the collapse of grand intellectual edifices. De Quincey himself always maintains that opium affects different people differently. Its effect is dependent on the temperament and experiences of the user, or as he puts it in Suspiria de Profundis when discussing the effect of opium on dreams: "He whose talk is of oxen, will probably dream of oxen . . . Habitually to dream magnificently, a man must have a constitutional determination to reverie" (87). The effect of opium on the speculative De Quincey is to amplify the sceptical shock he had received from his reading of the Critique of Pure Reason. Reminiscing about Coleridge, De Quincey contrasts him with Kant. He shudders at the "alles-zermalender" or "world-shattering" Kant: "He could destroy--his intellect was essentially destructive. He was the Gog and he was the Magog of Hunnish desolation to the existing schemes of philosophy. He probed them; he showed the vanity of vanities which besieged their foundations,--the rottenness below, the hollowness above" (49). De Quincey contrasts this with Coleridge's "instinct of creation and restoration." Kant, he writes, "had no love, no faith, no self-distrust, no humility, no child-like docility; all which qualities belonged essentially to Coleridge's mind . . . " (49). De Quincey's sympathy is clearly with the humane qualities that he finds in Coleridge, but there is an uneasy sense that a philosophical system based solely on love, faith, self-distrust, humility and child-like docility will not be able to withstand a Kantian attack.

Kant himself would hardly have been amused by De Quincey's characterization of him as the metaphysical equivalent of the Huns. He saw his investigation of the limits and
legitimate application of reason as the necessary, and long overdue, groundwork for the generation of real knowledge. Truly scientific knowledge, he argues, can never be acquired through grandiose systems with premises that extend beyond the limits of possible experience, but must always be grounded in the a priori properties of the mind itself. He believed this task was possible by the examination of "reason alone and its pure thought," which for him is not as difficult as one might think, for he says

I do not need to seek far to attain complete knowledge of these, because they have their seat in my own mind. Besides, common logic presents me with a complete and systematic catalogue of all the simple operations of reason; and it is my task to answer the question how far reason can go, without the material presented and the aid furnished by experience.

(Critique of Pure Reason 6)

By clearing away misguided, because too ambitious, systems of thought, Kant believed himself to be paving the way for a philosophy that would finally be worthy to reclaim the ancient title of "queen of all the sciences" (3). One of the problems with Kant's approach is the methodological one of whether the human mind can ever fully understand itself. To take on this task is, as Kant acknowledges, to

undertake the most laborious of all tasks--that of self-examination, and to establish a tribunal, which may secure it in its well-grounded claims, while it pronounces against all baseless assumptions and pretentious, not in an arbitrary manner, but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws.

This tribunal is nothing less than the Critique of Pure Reason. (5)

Kant's tone is confident, but his metaphor of the tribunal draws attention to the ambiguity inherent in the task. Is it possible that reason can act both as judge and defendant? This is a problem which De Quincey senses. In a passage dealing not with Kant directly, but closely related to this problem, De Quincey observes that the "eye cannot see itself; we cannot project from ourselves, and contemplate as an object our own contemplating
faculty, or appreciate our appreciating power" (10: 153). This observation offers a clue to De Quincey's disappointment with the Kantian philosophy. He acknowledges its power to dismantle appealing, but logically dubious philosophies, but is unable to accept Kant's claims to have supplied the foundations of truly objective knowledge and thereby lasting remedies against metaphysical Angst. Ironically, De Quincey's scepticism towards the Kantian system is probably brought on by his reading of Kant himself.

In the footsteps of scepticism follows relativism, signs of which abound in De Quincey's work. In the autobiographical Suspiria de Profundis he recounts the story of his childhood spent with "three innocent little sisters . . . shut up for ever in a silent garden from all knowledge of poverty, or oppression, or outrage . . ." (98). Soon, the less-than-Edenic world outside encroaches on this paradise. The young boy is hypersensitive to the pain both of others and himself, which leads him to try to save the lives of spiders a housemaid is in the habit of killing. The woman quickly sees through his stratagems of diverting her, and when she kindly explains to him the fly-eating habits of spiders he gives up his efforts for "the difficulty which the housemaid had suggested, did not depart; it troubled my musing mind to perceive, that the welfare of one creature might stand upon the ruin of another: and the case of the spider remained thenceforwards even more perplexing to my understanding than it was painful to my heart" (126). Another example of relativism comes from the essay "Joan of Arc." After describing some colourful French legends and pretending to lend them his support he adds lightheartedly: "Observe, I don't absolutely vouch for all these things: my own opinion varies. On a fine breezy forenoon I am audaciously sceptical; but as twilight sets in, my credulity grows steadily, till it becomes equal to anything that could be desired" (5: 395). In a relative world the meaning and value of things cannot be established absolutely--the outcome always depends on time and circumstance.
ii. Power Games

An emphasis on power permeates De Quincey's writings. The spectacle of force, either of a single intellect or vast empires, fascinates him. Apart from his well known distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power, it comes across clearly in his political views. There is no doubt about where he takes his stand in politics. He is a Tory. But his political vision is different from that of the "organic" view of society advocated by Edmund Burke, who, although he happened to be a Whig, is nonetheless portrayed by Raymond Williams in Culture and Society as "the first modern Conservative," and that of the Romantic and Victorian "sages" who followed in Burke's footsteps: Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin (3, 11). Underlying this position is the feudal ideal of a stable, hierarchical structure in which people know their places and where the relation between rulers and ruled is modeled on the relationship between responsible, benevolent parents and their dependents. In organic terms, society is pictured as a single living entity, usually a body, in which each part plays a significant, but different, role. In a healthy body the "hands" perform the tasks decided on by the "head." In Burke's view this state of affairs is ultimately sanctioned by God:

Without . . . civil society man could not by any possibility arrive at the perfection of which his nature is capable, nor even make a remote and faint approach to it. . . . He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of this perfection--He willed therefore the state--He willed its connexion with the source and the original archetype of all perfection" (Reflections on the Revolution in France 107; qtd. in Williams 10).

De Quincey, although placing himself firmly in the "gang of . . . Conservatives," takes a more worldly and relativistic view of politics (10: 342). First of all, the "Whig and the Tory . . . are reciprocally necessary, each to the philosophical existence of the other" (New
Essays by De Quincey 352). He sees the relations of these two forces as mechanical rather than organic:

Philosophically speaking, neither Whigs nor Tories, taken separately, express the truth of our constitution—but both in combination. They are the antagonist forces of the English constitution, as necessary to each other as the centrifugal and centripetal forces in another system, which by mutual hostility produce an equilibrium, and a uniform motion, that could not otherwise have resulted. . . . To one party is confided the conservative charge of the popular powers—to the other of the powers of the crown. Either party, insulated, would represent an abortion; both together, make up the total constitution. ("French Revolution" 556; qtd. in McDonagh)

In her study De Quincey's Disciplines, Josephine McDonagh points out that in this passage De Quincey is defending a constitution that existed before the Reform Act of 1832, the groundbreaking act which extended the right to vote. McDonagh argues that De Quincey ignores the interests of groups outside the Whig-Tory system (36-37). De Quincey's view of society, however, depends on what he believes to be the two great principles in politics: "Jacobin and Anti-jacobin; principles as old as the human heart" (New Essays 51). In principle, therefore, he does not leave out the interests of radicals and the working class, although one can disagree with his, at times, violent opposition to their views. His Tory rhetoric needs to be placed in the context of his own relativistic political speculations, which are demonstrated by his view of the French Revolution. He is neither unconditionally for, nor unconditionally against it:

To speak the language of mechanics, the case was one which illustrated the composition of forces. Neither the Revolution singly, nor the resistance to the Revolution singly, was calculated to regenerate social man. But the two forces in union, where the one modified, mitigated, or even neutralized, the other, at times; and where, at times, each entered into a happy combination
with the other, yielded for the world those benefits which, by its separate tendency, either of the two had been fitted to stifle. (11:312)

In spite of his Tory sympathies, this view of the matter shows how dispassionate he can be about his own position. Lindop notes that the "peculiar characteristic" of De Quincey's political theory is that it undermines the validity of any particular commitment. If Whig and Tory are equally necessary, how is one to chose between them? The decision must be as arbitrary as choosing black or white in a chess game. In the event, as De Quincey implies, temperament makes the choice for us. The bias of our natures runs one way or the other. One suspects, therefore, that De Quincey, the Tory commentator of the Post [a newspaper he wrote for in 1827-28], was not always expressing deeply felt commitments. Often he was just taking the side assigned to him in the political shadow-boxing, for the sake of opposing. (286)

De Quincey's political writings undermine the traditional Conservative conviction of a necessary order, legitimized either by God or the "natural" inequality of individuals. His scepticism leaves the reader with the sense that politics is a relativistic game driven by the opposing--equally legitimate, or equally illegitimate--energies of left and right. Political stability can only be reached by pitting one force against another. The result is the unsettling paradox that the only effective restraint on power is neither law nor reason, but an opposing power.

This view of politics and society is dramatized in De Quincey's gothic novel Klosterheim; or, The Masque. The story takes place in Germany in the middle of the Thirty Years War (1618-48). A cruel prince rules the ancient city of Klosterheim. Although owing allegiance to the German emperor, the outcome of the war being uncertain and the prince being Machiavellian, he has been secretly negotiating with the invading Swedish armies. His main opponent in Klosterheim is Maximilian, a favourite of
the emperor. At one point in the tale Maximilian's fiancée, Lady Paulina, is kidnapped by the prince's men, taken to a nearby castle and tried for treason. Her captor is a ruthless Croatian general, whose career is an index of the political climate in which the story is set:

In common with many partisan officers who had sprung from the ranks in this adventurous war, seeing on every side, and in the highest quarters, princes as well as supreme commanders, the uttermost contempt of justice and moral principle,--he had fought his way to distinction and fortune through every species of ignoble cruelty. He had passed from service to service, as he saw an opening for his own peculiar interest or merit, everywhere valued as a soldier of desperate enterprise, everywhere abhorred as a man. (12: 133)

The Croatian's long habit of fighting for and against all the Princes of Germany has made him disregard all of them, "except on the single consideration of receiving his pay at the moment . . ." (12: 134). Before the tribunal, Paulina maintains her innocence, but when she informs the court of her near relation to the emperor and hints at the revenge he might inflict on her captors she is treated with scorn. "Menaces," the good lady is informed, "came with better grace from those who had the power to enforce them . . ." (12: 135).

Without power an individual's position, no matter how elevated or "legitimate," is precarious to say the least, as Paulina finds out next day in court when she is faced with an aid to reflection not uncommon among the sovereigns of the time: a torture machine.

Meanwhile in Klosterheim a mysterious character known as the Masque has been busy acting on the Croat's maxim. He not only threatens the ruler by claiming the prince may rule Klosterheim by day, but the Masque rules it by night--he enforces such boasts with macabre violence (12: 86). One by one prominent citizens start disappearing, leaving behind signs of bloody struggles. The key to the Masque's terror is his mystique, combined with the ferocity and the arbitrariness of his attacks: his victims include not only supporters of the prince, but also supporters of the emperor. When the citizens demand
the reasons for his raids he responds by saying that they will be made clear in due time, meanwhile "more blood must flow in Klosterheim" (12: 81).

Interestingly enough, the less than law-abiding Masque summons the equally unscrupulous prince to a tribunal to answer for a mysterious crime the prince is supposed to have committed (12: 139). The prince sees the challenge as an opportunity to arrest and execute his opponent on the spot. The confrontation takes place during a masked ball in the prince's castle. The Masque is apprehended and it looks as if his head will roll along with the heads of other conspirators the prince has exposed. But just before they are to be led to the scaffold, the Masque blows on a hunting horn: a great curtain rises revealing a vast gothic hall filled with an overwhelming number of the Emperor's men, fresh from having won an unexpected victory over the prince's allies, the Swedes. With this shift in the balance of power The Masque can finally reveal himself. He is no other than Maximilian, who, as it turns out, is also the legitimate ruler of Klosterheim, since he is the hitherto unknown son of the former prince, whom the current ruler of the city had secretly murdered. The usurper, piqued at this unexpected turn of events, points out that The Masque is in no position to talk, having recently killed a number of prominent Klosterheimers himself. But we learn that the Masque's reign of terror has been stage-managed from the beginning. No one has in fact been killed. Although Maximilian is clearly presented as being morally superior to the cruel usurper, the political moral of the story is that claims of either moral superiority or political legitimacy come "with better grace from those who [have] the power to enforce them. . ." A legate from the Emperor addresses the gathering: "Citizens of Klosterheim, I bring you from the Emperor your true and lawful Landgrave, Maximilian, son of your last beloved Prince" (12: 149). Later, however, he admits the more complex political reality of the situation when he says that the Emperor had kept Maximilian from approaching the usurper "until his pretensions could be established by arms" (12: 150). This is illustrated by the way De Quincey treats the revelation of the "true and legitimate" ruler of Klosterheim. The dramatic unmasking
of the Masque is accompanied by the equally dramatic unmasking of what is necessary to support his "legitimate" claims: military force. Given the less than comforting sociopolitical view presented in Klosterheim it is not surprising that De Quincey should write in Suspiria de Profundis: "Death we can face: but knowing, as some of us do, what is human life, which of us is it that without shuddering could (if consciously we were summoned) face the hour of birth?" (181).

iii. The Spectacle of Style

If this attitude were the sum total of De Quincey's writings they would make bleak reading. But there is much more to his work than this. First of all, neither he, nor anybody else, has the opportunity to ponder whether they would like to be born or not. The damage, so to speak, has already been done. Whether one feels De Quincey's view of existence is pessimistic or realistic is not so much the issue as how he reacts to what he perceives life to be. His response is characterized by an emphasis on the disinterestedness of art, combined with relativism and a latent materialism. The idea of the disinterestedness of art is, of course, the hallmark of Aestheticism, but it is the unusual combination with materialism that marks the beginning of Epicurean Aestheticism. First, let us look at De Quincey's insistence on the separation between life and art, and the emphasis on form at the expense of content that is typical of the "art for art's sake" argument. In his writings on literary theory, especially the essays "On Didactic Poetry," "Rhetoric," "Style," and "Language," De Quincey sounds the note that is to echo throughout the nineteenth century in the writings of his fellow connoisseurs of style, Pater and Wilde. "Agreeably to the general cast of the national character," De Quincey writes of the English temperament, "our tendency is to degrade the value of the ornamental, whenever it is brought before us under any suggestion of comparison with the substantial or grossly useful" (10: 259). The phrase "grossly useful" hints nicely at De Quincey's own stance. In his view, the English "err greatly" in placing matter over manner. Style, he argues, "ranks amongst the fine arts,
and is able therefore to yield a separate intellectual pleasure quite apart from the interest of the subject treated." It has "an absolute value, like the product of any other exquisite art, quite distinct from the value of the subjects about which it is employed, and irrelatively to the subject . . ." (10: 260). In defending style against his pragmatic compatriots, De Quincey points out how a skillful treatment of a difficult subject matter is invaluable in making it intelligible to the reader, and, conversely, how a writer, when dealing with a well-known subject, can rekindle the reader's interest by an original treatment of it. He notes that the importance of style tends to be lost on pragmatic readers: "Many a man is fascinated by the artifices of composition who fancies that it is the subject which has operated so potently" (10: 139). De Quincey is ingenious in showing how even the best subject matter is dependent on a competent means of delivery, but his main interest is to defend form for its own sake. Style "is a product of art the rarest, subtlest, and most intellectual; and, like other products of the fine arts, it is then finest when it is most eminently disinterested—that is, most conspicuously detached from gross palpable uses" (10: 261). This attraction to the potential of art to be completely disinterested leads De Quincey to make the half-playful, half-serious claim that the concept "didactic poetry" is a contradiction in terms: "As a term of convenience, didactic may serve to discriminate one class of poetry; but didactic it cannot be in philosophic rigour without ceasing to be poetry" (11: 215). De Quincey shares with Wilde a love of paradox, and, like Wilde, he likes to show how art, rather than reflecting life, invariably adds something to it. Familiar subjects, De Quincey writes,

even when positively disgusting, have a fascinating interest when reproduced by the painter or the poet; upon what principle has possibly not been sufficiently explained. Even transient notices of objects and actions, which are too indifferent to the mind to be more than half consciously perceived, become highly interested when detained and reanimated, and the full light of the consciousness thrown powerfully upon them, by a
picturesque description. A street in London, with its usual furniture of causeway, gutter, lamp-posts, &c., is viewed with little interest; but, exhibited in a scene at Drury Lane, according to the style of its execution, becomes very impressive. (11: 220)

The spectacle of style is an endless source of fascination for De Quincey. His Epicurean delight in form for its own sake is illustrated by his praise for the ability to "hang upon one's own thoughts as an object of conscious interest, to play with them, to watch and pursue them through a maze of inversions, evolutions, and harlequin changes . . ." (10: 97). Art as the "motion of fancy self-sustained from its own activities . . . flux and reflux of thought, half meditative, half capricious . . ." (10: 121)--that is the notion that he continually promotes in his writings on art.

A brief look at Kant's **Critique of Judgement** (1790) will show De Quincey's indebtedness to his aesthetic theories. We have witnessed De Quincey's disappointment with Kant's epistemology, but in Kantian aesthetics he finds ideas that are definitely to his liking. The independence and disinterested free-play of art is the central issue of Kant's aesthetic thought. In "Critique of Aesthetic Judgement," the first part of **Critique of Judgement**, one of the definitions of the beautiful is that "Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of an end" (80; emphasis in text). For Kant, art has "purposiveness without purpose." What he means by this paradox is that in the perception of beauty the perceiver becomes aware of an internal purpose in an object, without this purpose complying in any way with standards outside the object itself. Before Kant draws this conclusion he has rigorously excluded the notion that the beautiful has anything to do with either the agreeable (i.e. sensuous) or the good, both of which represent external interest. He insists that to make a purely aesthetic judgement the mind must be disinterested and free: "All interest presupposes a want, or calls one forth; and, being a ground determining approval, deprives the judgement on the object of its freedom" (49). De Quincey is too much of an Epicurean to make much of
Kant's exclusion of the sensuous from aesthetic judgement, but as we have seen in his response to the idea of didactic poetry he fully accepts the argument that instruction should not interfere in artistic practice. De Quincey writes that a "poet in the highest departments of his art may, and often does, communicate mere knowledge, but never as a direct purpose, unless by forgetting his proper duty" (11:215). The reference to "mere knowledge" and "proper duty" is an interesting example of moralistic diction being used to advance an anti-moralistic case.

In Kant's view, the perception of beauty arises from the free, harmonious play between the imagination and the understanding. The play of the two mental faculties is then referred to feeling. If we experience pleasure while perceiving an object we call it beautiful. It is crucial to Kant's argument that the play between the imagination and the understanding never amounts to logical concepts. Aesthetic judgements are not made by a series of logical processes, but by submitting our mental representations of objects to the judgement of feeling, resulting in either pleasure or displeasure (35).

Finally, Kant's aesthetics is decidedly anti-mimetic, because to judge a representation of object involves the mind in comparing that representation to a logical, i.e. non-aesthetic, concept of the object. For him, true beauty can only be found in objects that do not refer to anything outside themselves:

Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise), and a number of crustacea, are self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but please freely and on their own account. So designs à la grecque, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, &c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing--no Object under a definite concept--and are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words. (72)
The idea of art for art's sake is clearly derived from Kant's aesthetics, as writers on the subject have pointed out (Honour 365).

To understand how De Quincey combines Kant's notion of the disinterestedness of art with relativistic and materialist leanings, the process that ultimately results in Epicurean Aestheticism, it is revealing to contrast his reaction to Kant's thought with the reactions of such German thinkers as Fichte, Schiller, Schelling, and their English counterpart, Coleridge. These thinkers all bring out, and develop on their own terms, the idealist side of Kant's metaphysics, while rejecting the sceptical side of his work and the safeguards he insists on as a means to counter reason's propensity to build grand philosophical edifices on principles unverifiable by experience. The mood of these intensely Romantic followers of Kant is bold and expansive. They are striving for the grandest possible synthesis between the individual subject and the universe, an urge that is not shared by De Quincey's more sceptical, more empirical temperament.

In his series of letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), Schiller uses Kant's theories on the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience as material out of which he creates a veritable gospel of the regenerative powers of art. Schiller postulates that the human mind possesses two fundamental drives: the sensuous drive and the formal drive. The effect of the former he describes as follows: "Man in this state is nothing but a unit of quantity, an occupied moment of time--or rather, he is not at all, for his personality is suspended as long as he is ruled by sensation, and swept along with the flux of time" (420). One can compare this with Heraclitus's musing on the flux: "In the same rivers we step and we do not step. We are and are not" (Nahm 73). Schiller sees the formal drive as working against the Heraclitean flux. The formal drive, he tells us, "proceeds from the absolute existence of man, or from his rational nature, and is intent on giving him the freedom to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestations, and to affirm his Person among all his changes of Condition" (81). Only by uniting the two drives can humanity reach its full potential. This great unifier is the play drive, or art. In aesthetic experience,
according to Schiller, reality and form, contingency and necessity, passivity and freedom are united (103). The play drive provides humanity with the means of passing from "common reality to aesthetic reality, from mere life serving feelings to feelings of beauty." In short, the means to raise itself from the "limited to the absolute" (189).

The consummation of German idealism is G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of Absolute Spirit. His ideas on art must be seen in the context of this elaborate system: "Human history is the record of the gradual emergence of Geist [mind, spirit] to self-consciousness and self-definition. . . . The end of history will be the consummation of philosophy, art and religion having been both left behind and gathered within along the way--the emergence of absolute Geist, self-knowledge of God through man, a realm of pure thinking unmarked by sensuous representation" (Simpson 355-56). Art is the sensory, and therefore incomplete, manifestation of Geist, a step along the way to the final revelation of the absolute. It is worth noticing how far the craving for the absolute has led German idealism from Kant's definition of art as reflecting nothing but itself. Hegel's view of music is a case in point. Michael Inwood writes that Hegel "had a special reason for devaluing music. Serious art has a theme and, at a deeper level, a meaning: it represents God or the absolute in a sensory form. But music as such refers to nothing outside itself: it has no non-musical theme, and it does not express a vision of the world outside music" (x). Pater's contention that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" would not have found favour with Hegel, while De Quincey's love of music is reflected in the very structure of his writing, the most explicit example of which being the "Dream-Fugue" section of his essay "The English Mail-Coach."

Although one has the feeling De Quincey would like to take full part in the idealist speculation of the kind discussed above, it seems he cannot help but be sceptical of the ability of the spirit to overcome the flux of sensuous experience. Indeed, he seems unable to give full credence to the concept of pure spirit. The following description, where he touches briefly on the mind-body problem, is typical of his thinking: "The human body is
not the dress or apparel of the human spirit: far more mysterious is the mode of their union. Call the two elements A and B; then it is impossible to point out A as existing aloof from B, or vice versa. A exists in and through B; B exists in and through A" (10: 262). For De Quincey, the sensuous and the relative always impinge on the absolute.

De Quincey and Schiller both derive the notion of art as play from Kant's Critique of Judgement, but whereas Schiller, with his unshakeable belief in the power of art to regenerate the human race, can be said to place the emphasis on the "purposiveness" in Kant's "purposiveness without purpose" maxim, De Quincey seems to focus on the latter part of the phrase. In Schiller's version of aesthetic play contingency is subsumed in necessity, but for De Quincey no such grand synthesis is possible. If art is primarily a matter of style or play, the artist must always be haunted by the question, "What shall I say next?" (10:228). De Quincey compares the artist to an orator speaking on one of those topics which cannot be adequately decided by reference to facts, topics where the affirmative and the negative are both true: as, for example, the goodness of human nature and its wickedness; the happiness of human life and its misery; the charms of knowledge, and its hollowness; the fragility of human prosperity in the eye of religious meditation, and its security as estimated by worldly confidence and youthful hope. (10: 91)

The passage gives a good indication of the current of relativism that runs through De Quincey's texts. "What shall I say next?" the orator continually asks himself--"an anxiety besetting orators like that which besets poor men in respect to their children's daily bread" (10: 228). The reference to the poor man's anxiety is particularly poignant coming from a man who spent most of his life scrambling from one deadline to another, churning out innumerable essays for magazines in his efforts to support a wife and eight children. In the light of Frederick Burwick's observation that De Quincey's essays should be seen as "rhetorical acts" (xi), it is revealing to read De Quincey's description of the difficulties facing the orator: "The moment is secured; but alas for the next!" (10: 228). Here the
"judicial orator" or lawyer has a distinct advantage because he at least has the facts of the case at hand, since

the very points of the case are numbered; and, if he cannot find more to say upon No. 7, he has only to pass on and call up No. 8. Whereas the deliberative orator, in a senate or a literary meeting, finds himself always in this situation,—that, having reached with difficulty that topic which we have supposed to be No. 7, one of three cases uniformly occurs; either he does not perceive any No. 8 at all; or, secondly, he sees a distracting choice of No. 8's—the ideas to which he might next pass are many, but he does not see whither they will lead him; or, thirdly, he sees a very fair and promising No. 8, but cannot in any way discover off-hand how he is to effect a transition to this new topic. He cannot, with the rapidity requisite, modulate out of the one key into the other. His anxiety increases, utter confusion masters him, and he breaks down. (10: 228-9)

Given the difficulties that De Quincey sees facing the orator/artist, it is remarkable how rarely he does break down, how, in the midst of confusion, he is able to maintain "the note of leisurely good-humour and easy mastery of his material that characterizes most of his literary journalism" (Lindop 297). We know of the "hideous incubus" that preyed upon his mind, the dark vision of a world where "the nexus is wanting, and life and the central principle which should bind together all the parts at the centre, with all its radiations to the circumference, are wanting" (Japp 242). Although prone to viewing life as an incoherent struggle between various powers acting chaotically on one another, his Aestheticism enables him to distance himself from its confusion and treat it either as a spectacle to be watched, or as material to be gathered, played with and reassembled as he sees fit. By accepting the world as governed by material forces rather than spiritual ones, as a heap of fragments rather than an organic whole, and at the same time cultivating a means of being
able to play with these material forces and fragments, instead of trying to escape them, De Quincey signals a transition from Romanticism to Epicurean Aestheticism.

iv. The Connoisseur of Bad Matters

It is now time to look more closely at the Epicurean Aesthetic elements in De Quincey's writings. A good place to start is a passage from the *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* where De Quincey talks about what he considers to have been the happiest year of his life. This is the final year of the so-called "honeymoon period" of opium-taking, i.e. the period when the benefits of the drug still outweigh its disadvantages (Hayter 42). The passage comes from a section that is significantly placed between sections titled "The Pleasures of Opium" and "The Pains of Opium." As befits an Epicurean, De Quincey writes that "on a subject so important to us all as happiness, we should listen with pleasure to any man's experience or experiments . . ." (58). "Experiments" is, indeed, an apt word since he claims that "for the general benefit of the world" he has inoculated himself with 8000 drops of laudanum per day (58):

I, who have taken happiness, both in a solid and a liquid shape, both boiled and unboiled, both East India and Turkey . . . I (it will be admitted) must surely know what happiness is, if any body does. And, therefore, I will here lay down an analysis of happiness; and as the most interesting mode of communicating it, I will give it, not didactically, but wrapt up and involved in a picture of one evening, as I spent every evening during the intercalary year when laudanum, though taken daily, was to me no more than the elixir of pleasure. (58)

He asks the reader to picture him on a winter evening sitting in the book-lined drawing-room of his cottage. Winter is an indispensable element of his recipe for happiness:

"Indeed, so great an epicure am I in this matter, that I cannot relish a winter night fully if it be much past St Thomas's day, and have degenerated into disgustingly tendencies to vernal
appearances: no: it must be divided by a thick wall of dark nights from all return of light and sunshine" (59-60). This playful reversal of the common preference of summer over winter is typical of De Quincey. For the Epicurean of winter, any sign of "vernal appearances" is a sign of dismaying degeneracy. De Quincey admits that he used to consider winter a nuisance, but rather than rail against the inevitable he has adopted an attitude that enables him to derive pleasure from it--"for why am I called on to pay so heavily for winter, in coals, and candles, and various privations that will occur even to gentlemen, if I am not to have the article good of its kind? No: a Canadian winter for my money: or a Russian one . . ." (59). Continuing his description of the winter evening he asks an imaginary artist to paint him a decanter, into which he "may put a quart of ruby-coloured laudanum: that, and a book of German metaphysics placed by its side, will sufficiently attest my being in the neighbourhood . . ." (61). This playful mingling of "low" sensuality (opium) and an "elevated" subject matter (metaphysics) is characteristic of the materialistic and relativistic tendencies of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament.

De Quincey's playing with categories--the blending of the high and low, the intellectual and sensual--is at its most extravagant in his essay "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827). Here the highly abstract, refined field of aesthetics is brought to bear on the very concrete, unsavory details of murder. The essay is a mock exposé of the goings-on at the equally fictional Society of Connoisseurs in Murder. It comprises an introduction by a journalistic persona and a lecture by one of the members of the society to his fellow club members. (In 1854 De Quincey added a "Second Paper," originally published in 1839, and a "Postscript.") In the preliminary note the journalist introduces the reader to this unusual society. Although the writer presents himself as the model of virtue and common sense, the oxymoron in the title of his introduction, "Advertisement of a Man Morbidly Virtuous," undermines his own view of himself. The title implies that no values are absolute: being too moral can be a fault. As opposed to the priggish tone of the journalist, we have the debonair manner of the connoisseur in murder:
"Everything in this world has two handles," he states. "Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle (as it generally is in the pulpit and at the Old Bailey); and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it—that is, in relation to good taste" (13: 13). If a murder is about to be committed "and a rumour of it comes to our ears, by all means let us treat it morally" (13: 16). However, if a murder has already been committed, it is a different matter:

[S]uppose the poor murdered man to be out of his pain, and the rascal that did it off like a shot, nobody knows whither; suppose, lastly, that we have done our best, by putting out our legs, to trip up the fellow in his flight, but all to no purpose—"abiit, evasit, excessit, erupit," etc.—why, then, I say, what's the use of any more virtue? Enough has been given to morality; now comes the turn of Taste and the Fine Arts. A sad thing it was, no doubt, very sad; but we can't mend it. Therefore let us make the best of a bad matter; and, as it is impossible to hammer anything out of it for moral purposes, let us treat it aesthetically, and see if it will turn to account in that way. (13: 16)

"Making the best of a bad matter" becomes a motto of Epicurean Aestheticism. We know De Quincey's bleak view of life, but that does not mean that his art has to be bleak as well. In his writings, he is even willing to make the best of the thoroughly bad matter of murder.

At the beginning of his lecture the connoisseur in murder informs his listeners that people "begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed, a knife, a purse, and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature" (13: 12). Because of the "improvement" in murder the speaker feels that it is only reasonable that criticism should keep up with the latest developments in the field. He proceeds with a brief history of murder, starting with Cain and ending with Mr John Williams, whom all the members of the club consider to be the master of the modern
murder. The speaker is, in fact, giving the Williams' Lecture on Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts. Williams, declares the speaker, is the man who "has exalted the ideal of murder to all of us, and to me, therefore, in particular, has deepened the arduousness of my task" (13: 12). In the "Second Paper," De Quincey, still speaking through the mask of the connoisseur in murder, continues to play with the bad matter of murder, but at the same time denying that he would ever be tempted to commit one himself. The reason is an example of his relativistic, topsy-turvy sense of humour:

For, if once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing, and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination. Once begin upon this downward path, you never know where you are to stop. Many a man dated his ruin from some murder or other that perhaps he thought little of at the time. (13: 56)

In the "Postscript" De Quincey expands the aesthetic interest in murder to include other calamities, fires, for instance: "If you are summoned to the spectacle of a great fire, undoubtedly the first impulse is--to assist in putting it out" (13: 72). When we have done that, however, and "paid our tribute of regret to the affair considered as a calamity, inevitably, and without restraint, we go on to consider it as a stage spectacle" (13: 72). Spectacle is a key word here. To be able to view life as a spectacle is one of the distinguishing features of Epicurean Aesthetics. De Quincey is aware that not all readers have a taste for treating serious moral issues as spectacles, but argues that after all such churls have withdrawn from my audience in high displeasure, there remains a large majority who are loud in acknowledging the amusement which they have derived from this little paper; at the same time proving the sincerity of their praise by one hesitating expression of censure. Repeatedly they have suggested to me, that perhaps the extravagance, though clearly intentional, and forming one element in the general gaiety of
the conception, went too far. I am not myself of that opinion; and I beg to remind these friendly censors, that it is amongst the direct purposes and efforts of this bagatelle to graze the brink of horror, and of all that would in actual realisation be most repulsive. (13: 70-71)

What De Quincey wants to make clear is that imagination is one thing, the "actual realisation" of its constructions another. What is ultimately at stake for him is the freedom of art from any moral obligations that might limit its play. This is borne out by his defence of the extravagant handling of such a serious issue as the slaughter of his fellow citizens. He does not deny the moral considerations it raises, but believes that this is only one of its "handles":

After the first tribute of sorrow to those who have perished, but, at all events, after the personal interests have been tranquillised by time, inevitably the scenical features (what aesthetically may be called the comparative advantages) of the several murders are reviewed and valued. One murder is compared with another; and the circumstances of superiority—as, for example, in the incidence and effects of surprise, of mystery, etc., are collated and appraised. I, therefore, for my extravagance, claim an inevitable and perpetual ground in the spontaneous tendencies of the human mind when left to itself. (13: 73)

The Kantian theory of the separation of the aesthetic from the moral is clearly at work here, but for De Quincey the freedom of the mind does not necessarily lead only to the serene contemplation of pure beauty. In this instance it leads to an eerie identification between the creative mind and the mind of a murderer who has killed most of the members of two households, the Marrs and the Williamson. In the most polished of prose De Quincey recounts the ghastly tale of the "immortal Williams' murders of 1812" (13: 75). De Quincey talks of Williams as the "solitary artist, that rested in the centre of London, self-supported in his own conscious grandeur . . ." (13: 75). He tells us that
Mr. Williams, there is reason to believe, when he went out for a grand compound massacre . . ., always assumed black silk stockings and pumps. . . . In his second great performance, it was particularly noticed and recorded by the one sole trembling man who under killing agonies of fear was compelled . . . from a secret stand to become the solitary spectator of his atrocities, that Mr. Williams wore a long blue frock, of the very finest cloth, and richly lined with silk. (13: 79)

The murderer as dandy: a dandy who limited his activities to London because "the great artist disdained a provincial reputation . . ." (13: 75). For Williams, "murder was not pursued by him simply as a means to and end, but also as an end for itself" (13: 108). This is brought out by Williams's attempt on the life of the youngest member of the Williamsons' household, a girl about nine years old. He had already killed three members of the household, but had been forced to work in a hurry, which was not his preferred method. This little girl he intends to kill simply for the sake of killing, which De Quincey deduces from the fact that she "had seen nothing, heard nothing--was fast asleep, and her door was closed; so that, as a witness against him, he knew that she was as useless as any one of the three corpses" (13: 111):

But, because our present murderer is fastidiously finical in his exactions--a sort of martinet in the scenical grouping and draping of the circumstances in his murders--therefore it is that hope becomes reasonable, since all such refinements of preparation demand time. Murders of mere necessity Williams was obliged to hurry: but, in a murder of pure voluptuousness, entirely disinterested, where no hostile witness was to be removed, no extra booty to be gained, and no revenge to be gratified, it is clear that to hurry would be altogether to ruin. (12: 112)
The use of the adjective "pure" with a word like "voluptuousness," and the combination of the phrase "pure voluptuousness" with the notion of disinterestedness, is a macabre example of the sensual and relativistic tendency of Epicurean Aestheticism.

After a brief, spectacular reign of terror, Williams is apprehended and put in prison, where he takes his own life:

At what hour was uncertain: some people fancied at midnight. And in that case, precisely at the hour when, fourteen days before, he had been spreading horror and desolation through the quiet family of poor Marr, now was he forced into drinking of the same cup, presented to his lips by the same accursed hands. (13: 118)

Williams dies, but the sense of the immense power he possessed seems to survive him by De Quincey's reference to the "accursed hands" that have done his work and eventually turn on Williams himself. The link between this amoral power and the imagination is brought out in De Quincey's description of Coleridge's reaction to the murders:

Coleridge, whom I saw some months after these terrific murders, told me, that, for his part, though at the time resident in London, he had not shared in the prevailing panic; him they affected only as a philosopher, and threw him into a profound reverie upon the tremendous power which is laid open in a moment to any man who can reconcile himself to the abjuration of all conscientious restraints, if, at the same time, thoroughly without fear. (13: 75)

The suppression of moral scruples leads to an increased sense of power that has a strong appeal to many artists, although it takes a certain type of artist, a De Quincey rather than a Coleridge, to apply it openly as an aesthetic principle.

In the second part of the "Postscript" De Quincey contrasts Williams's case with the case of the M'Keans brothers, men who
until lately had borne most respectable characters; but some mercantile crash had overtaken them with utter ruin, in which their joint capital had been swallowed up to the last shilling. This sudden prostration had made them desperate: their own little property had been swallowed up in a large social catastrophe, and society at large they looked upon as accountable to them for a robbery. In preying, therefore, upon society, they considered themselves pursuing a wild natural justice of retaliation. (13: 119)

To De Quincey, the crime they commit is a shambles; the amateurish brothers are quickly apprehended and hanged. De Quincey sees the M'Keans as helpless pawns driven to murder by social forces. They are not artists "self supported in [their] own conscious grandeur," but victims of the chaotic business practices of laissez-faire economics. They are dilettantes whose work only serves to bring into stronger relief the consummate professionalism of the "epicure in murder," Mr Williams (13: 110):

Immeasurable, therefore, was the interval which divided them from the monster Williams.

They perished on the scaffold: Williams, as I have said, by his own hand; and, in obedience to the law as it then stood, he was buried in the centre of a quadrivium, or a conflux of four roads (in this case four streets), with a stake driven through his heart. And over him drives for ever the uproar of unresting London! (13:123-24)

Thus ends the "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts." The repetition of the verb "to drive" in the last two sentences is noteworthy. Williams is a monster--this is what makes him so interesting to De Quincey--but equally monstrous, and interesting, is the custom of driving a stake through his heart. The frantic culture that drives a stake through Williams's heart and then drives over his body is the same culture that shares the blame for driving the "until lately . . . most respectable" M'Keans to murder. The brothers are
individuals lost in the unresting flux of the capital. "Upon what slender accidents hang oftentimes solemn life-long results!" De Quincey had noted earlier in the essay (13: 83).

But he is not really making a political or philosophical judgement of life. Rather he is using Williams's career and the chaotic energies of the "infinite metropolis" (13: 95) of London as material out of which he constructs the uncanny and powerful scene of the city's traffic driving over the impaled body of one of its shadiest citizens. The unsettling connection between the city and the "monster" Williams is presented by a mind "monstrous" enough to be able to look, not only into the chaos of the city, but also into the mind of a killer, but, ultimately, a mind independent enough to be able to distance itself from the uproar of both in order to write complex and powerful passages like the one that concludes the essay.

Not all of De Quincey's work is as extreme and intense as his speculations on murder. His Epicurean Aestheticism also has a quieter and, to anticipate the subject of the next chapter, more Paterian side. In Suspiria de Profundis, De Quincey speaks of his "constitutional determination to reverie" (87), although we know that he discovered an artificial aid to his natural inclination. In Confessions of an English Opium-Eater he writes:

I often fell into these reveries upon taking opium; and more than once it has happened to me, on a summer-night, when I have been at an open window, in a room from which I could overlook the sea at a mile below me, and could command a view of the great town of L----, at about the same distance, that I have sate, from sun-set to sun-rise, motionless, and without wishing to move. (48)

The scene is given the following interpretation by De Quincey himself:

it has often struck me that the scene itself was somewhat typical of what took place in such a reverie. The town of L---- represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, and brooded over
by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. (49)

This sense of distance, or "aloofness," from everyday life leads to a strange state of mind, a paradoxical calm:

Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of the intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halcyon calm; a tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose. (49)

The scene and its interpretation by De Quincey is a fine illustration of an Epicurean Aesthetic state of mind, as well as the self-reflexive tendency of this sensibility. De Quincey describes himself contemplating the town of L----- and the sea from his open window (in the 1856 edition of the Confession the town is revealed to be Liverpool). He then turns what he sees into a symbol of his mind in a state of reverie, thus presenting the reader with a mind musing over a symbol of the activity of its own musing. The passage is typical of the Epicurean Aesthetic enjoyment of the formal operations of the mind itself, of what De Quincey describes as the ability to "hang upon one's own thoughts as objects of conscious interest, to play with them, to watch and pursue them through a maze of inversions, evolutions, and harlequin changes . . ." (10:97); it illustrates the movement of the mind sustained by its own half-serious, half-capricious activities (10:121).

De Quincey says of opium that it "buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples, beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles. . . ." (Confessions 49). But keeping in mind his own admonition in Suspiria de Profundis that without "a constitutional determination to reverie" opium-taking does not create very
impressive results (87), the ability to build "upon the bosom of darkness" should rather be attributed to an artistic sensibility than a drug.

While the Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge celebrates the bond between the creative imagination and nature, i.e. how well the world is fitted to the mind and vice versa, De Quincey cannot fully share this belief. He feels too keenly the forces of disintegration: "Infinite incoherence, ropes of sand, gloomy incapacity of vital pervasion by some one plastic principle, that is the hideous incubus upon my mind always" (Letter qtd. in Japp 242). But there is a quality in the writing of a line like this that works against the pessimism of its content. In a desert of sand, De Quincey makes "ropes of sand," useless but aesthetically pleasing, even "Infinite incoherence" is momentarily reclaimed from chaos by the phonic echo that connects the two words. Rather than giving in when faced with the "bad matter" of disorder, De Quincey finds a way of living with it, even to the point of being able to make moments of utter despair darkly beautiful.

v. Art and Science

In the first section of this chapter, we saw that when Coleridge looks at the starry night sky he finds a benevolent presence, "the great I AM," behind its mighty depths. By the time De Quincey publishes his essay "System of the Heavens, as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescopes" (1846), science has allowed the human eye to peer further into the abyss of space. One of the phenomena Rosse's new telescope reveals is a mysteriously shaped nebula in the remote constellation of Orion resembling the haughty profile of a monstrous head. De Quincey turns this weird apparition into a powerful symbol embodying his anxiety concerning the cold, materialistic picture of the universe that science is developing. De Quincey tells his readers how this cosmic death's head overshadows what up to this time had been the most sublime thing he had ever seen: the ancient Egyptian statue known at the time as the Memnon's head--actually Ramses II (Hayter 86)--which for him symbolizes the presence of a transcendent loving presence pervading the world. The
eclipsing of this positive image by the dark apparition revealed by Rosse's telescope is a
dramatic demonstration of De Quincey's loss of faith in Romanticism.

Instead of the warmth of Romantic idealism, the science of astronomy reveals
frosty, unfathomable abysses in which lonely planets drift at a shocking rate, "with no
prospect of coming to an anchorage" (8: 26). It is important to note that for De Quincey,
scientific progress increases, rather than reduces, the complexity of existence. In the essay,
he recounts a story of a man in the eighteenth century who despised astronomy. To this
character, the solar system appeared decidedly vulgar, because it kept time with such
tedious precision. In De Quincey's own period, things had changed, and he observes
sarcastically: "There is no want of variety now, nor in fact irregularity; so that our friend
of the last century who complained of the solar system as too monotonous would not need
to do so any longer. There are anomalies enough to keep him cheerful" (8: 30-31).

De Quincey is both intrigued and troubled by the relativistic problems that face
astronomers. Their lives would be much easier if they could assume that either our own
planetary system were fixed, and all other systems in motion, or that our own system were
in motion and the rest of the cosmos were stationary. "But now, because it is not safe to
rest in either assumption, the range of possibilities for which science has to provide is
enlarged; the immediate difficulties are multiplied . . ." (8: 25). The anxiety of astronomers
is a version of the relativistic problems De Quincey himself has analyzed in the case of
orators speaking on one of those topics which cannot be adequately decided by referring
to facts, cases where both the affirmative and the negative are true. In De Quincey's world
no place seems fixed and secure, a point he makes in relation to epistemological problems
in astronomy. Stars that seem connected with each other may, or may not, lie in very
different parts of space. They may, or may not, have been brought into relation only by the
observer:

There have been, and there are, cases where two stars dissemble an
interconnexion which they really have, and other cases where they simulate
an interconnexion which they have not. All of these cases of simulation and dissimulation torment the astronomer by multiplying his perplexities, and deepening the difficulty of escaping them. He cannot get at the truth. . . .

(8: 26)

For De Quincey, the scientist and the artist are plagued by uncertainty. But this is a bad matter that cannot be mended, and rather than seek refuge in absolutist metaphysics he endeavours to make the most of the flux of experience by dealing with it as calmly and elegantly as possible.

De Quincey continues the exploration of the parallels between science and his own aesthetic temperament in his description of a picturesque new observatory raised by the University of Glasgow. He knew the observatory well, for he had resided in it for a while as a guest of his friend, John Pringle Nichols, Professor of Astronomy at the university. The arrival of the telescope had actually forced him out of his room at the observatory (Lindop 359). De Quincey could have interpreted that event as symptomatic of art being rudely replaced by science, but instead he enjoyed discussing astronomy with the professor and looking at the night sky through the telescope. De Quincey's depiction of the Glasgow observatory parallels the description of his opium-induced aesthetic meditation by a window overlooking another city in the throes of industrialization, i.e. Liverpool:

What makes the Glasgow Observatory so peculiarly interesting is its position, connected with and overlooking so vast a city, having as many thousands of inhabitants as there are days in a year . . . , and nearly all children of toil; and a city, too, which, from the necessities of its circumstances, draws so deeply upon that fountain of misery and guilt which some ordinance . . . has bequeathed preferentially to manufacturing towns--to Ninevehs, to Babylons, to Tyres. How tarnished with eternal canopies of smoke, and of sorrow, how dark with agitations of many orders, is the mighty town below! How serene, how quiet, how lifted above
the confusion, and the roar, and the strifes of earth, is the solemn
observatory that crowns the heights overhead! And duly, at night, just
when the toil of overwrought Glasgow is mercifully relaxing, then comes
the summons to the labouring astronomer. (8: 28)

The astronomer and the Epicurean Aesthete have a similar relation to the toiling
inhabitants of the city. At an ungodly hour, they take up a position above the crowd, but
by raising their "secret eyes" (8: 28) above the ordinary they gaze into extraordinary
complexities which are always on the point of overwhelming them. But the astronomer
and the Epicurean Aesthete strive to maintain their pose in the labyrinth of relativity. This
similarity between the scientific and aesthetic temperaments will become a crucial factor in
Epicurean Aestheticism as it is developed by Pater, Wilde, and Stoppard.
Chapter II

Walter Pater:
The Art of Alienation

i. Pater vs. Coleridge

The Opium-Eater dies in 1859—the year of the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. At the time Walter Pater is studying for his B.A. degree at Oxford, where he reads and is influenced by Darwin's work. In the introduction to a collection of essays titled *1859: Entering an Age of Crisis*, Howard Mumford Jones writes that Darwin's book is both "a crucial, great volume in the long tradition of British empirical thought of which it is in one sense the culmination, and a volume out of which, in one sense, the current of relativism flows into our time . . ." (17). The relativism inherent in Darwin's work is one of the many things that makes it so unsettling for the Victorians. Richard D. Altick writes that Darwinism delivered the coup de grâce to whatever lingering hopes there were that the historicity of the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian view of man springing from it would somehow be substantiated by science. The long-cherished providential theory, that God had created man, in all his pristine perfection, as a special favor, and tailored the universe to his special needs, was finished. (228)

This results in a dramatic change in humanity's view of itself and the world it inhabits. Altick writes:
The ancient metaphor of the great chain of being therefore had to be revised. Hierarchy remained, but it was a hierarchy to which the dimension of time had been added. It gave the impression now of a vertical zoo in a state of eternal flux rather than a structure of classic design raised by the Creator and enduring unchanged to the end of time. Not a single place in it was stable or secure. If man now happened to occupy the choicest location, his supremacy was but the incident of a moment. (229)

Relativism and "the eternal flux": these two themes are always in the background, and more often than not, the foreground of Pater's writings.

The doubts about Romantic ideology that can be detected in De Quincey become fully explicit in Pater's Darwinian, post-Romantic sensibility. This is not to say, however, that Pater has no sympathy with the Romantic outlook. The complexity of his position is suggested by Hayden Ward when he writes that

Pater is important to English literary history because he combines a commitment to the romantic theory that art is essentially an expression of personality with a sympathetic response to the scientific and historical studies of the Victorian period that suggest how complex and ambiguous "personality" is. Pater's writings explore the ways in which biology, psychology, history, religion, and myth shape the individual's understanding of his own times and help him to interpret the bearing of the past upon the present. In this linking of aesthetics to religion, history, and science, Pater bridges, more subtly than any other writer of the late Victorian period, the dominant Romanticism of his own century and the dominant Modernism of the twentieth. (217)

Coming after Darwin, Pater realizes that the scepticism inherent in the methodology of the experimental sciences threatens the intellectual basis of Romantic theory. It is noteworthy that in his first magazine article, titled "Coleridge's Writings" and published in the
Westminster Review in 1866, Pater should take on the main theorist of English Romanticism, whom he treats, in a characteristically subtle but unmistakable way, as a member of an old, venerable, but ultimately doomed, species rapidly being superseded by a new breed better adapted to the changes in the intellectual environment. (It is left to the reader to infer that Pater himself may be viewed as a fine specimen of this new breed.) In Pater's view, Coleridge's failure is to have been a seeker after the absolute in an age where complete certainty is no longer possible. The paragraph in which Pater describes his perception of the shift in sensibility from absolutism to relativism is worth a close look, since it lays out his appraisal of, and reaction to, the changes brought about by the rise of modern thought at the expense of older systems of understanding the world:

Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the "relative" spirit in place of the "absolute." Ancient philosophy sought to arrest every object in an eternal outline, to fix thought in a necessary formula, and the varieties of life in a classification by "kinds," or genera. To the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions. The philosophical conception of the relative has been developed in modern times through the influence of the sciences of observation. (Appreciations 66)

With its methodology of induction supported by experiments to test hypotheses, science challenges the a priorism of "ancient" philosophy (Craik 1). The biologist Lewis Wolpert writes: "Scientists are concerned not with absolute truth but with theories that provide understanding of the phenomena involved" (103). In short, paradigms of probability replace paradigms of necessity. A fundamental feature of the experimental method is that the conditions of an experiment can never be defined with absolute finality: "Rather the aim is to do experiments on the fact that they work--that they fulfil predictions, or confirm other experiments" (Craik 1-2). For Pater, the sciences reveal a world of ceaseless flux, as types of life evanesce into each other "by inexpressible refinements of change" and things
pass into their opposites "by accumulation of undefinable quantities" (Appreciations 66). This world-view leads to a shift from absolutist to relativistic theories of truth. Pater writes: "The faculty for truth is recognized as a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail" (67). I have been quoting thus far from the revised version of the essay on Coleridge, which appeared in Pater's collection of literary criticism Appreciations (1889). Although it is debatable whether the essay as a whole was improved by the revision, certain passages benefited from a final touch of Pater's pen. In this instance, subtle changes, like the alteration of the above sentence, which originally read "A faculty for truth is a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail" (my emphasis) to "The faculty for truth is recognised as a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail" (my emphasis), show how active the notion of relativism is as a compositional principle in Pater's writings. To assert that the faculty for truth is X seems to be subtly out of keeping with the relativistic argument Pater is putting forward; therefore the sentence is modified to say that the faculty of truth is recognised as being X, with the result that the tone changes from indicating a statement of an indisputable Truth to a truth based on a consensus of opinion. Pater continues his description of the characteristics of modern thought as follows:

The moral world is ever in contact with the physical, and the relative spirit has invaded moral philosophy from the ground of the inductive sciences. There it has started a new analysis of the relations of body and mind, good and evil, freedom and necessity. Hard and abstract moralities are yielding to a more exact estimate of the subtlety and complexity of our life. Always, as an organism increases in perfection, the conditions of its life become more complex. Man is the most complex of the products of nature.

Character merges into temperament: the nervous system refines itself into

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1 I will be quoting from the original essay, except for cases where I believe Pater's revised text offers additional insights.
intellect. . . . It seems as if the most opposite statements about [man] were alike true: he is so receptive, all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing upon him, so that every hour in his life is unique, changed altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch. It is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change—and bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these. To the intellect, the critical spirit, just these subtleties of effect are more precious than anything else. What is lost in precision of form is gained in intricacy of expression. It is no vague scholastic abstraction that will satisfy the speculative instinct in our modern minds. (Appreciations 67-68)

Along with the relativism of modern thought, Pater also accepts the rather unflattering notion that the human mind is not separate from, but intricately linked to, matter. In other words, he subscribes to the materialist critique of the Cartesian tradition of regarding mind and matter as completely separate entities. In his leanings towards materialism Pater is in agreement with Epicurus who believed the world to be, to use a phrase coined by Arthur Eddington, "a fortuitous concourse of atoms" (251; qtd. in Strodach 146). In holding this view the ancient Epicurus is, according to Pater's distinction between modern and ancient thought, more modern than many of Pater's near contemporaries, Coleridge, for instance. It is Coleridge's "spiritualistic philosophy" that Pater sees as his main weakness

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2 Many modern materialists prefer the term "physicalism" over materialism, for the reason that modern physics has come to talk about reality more in terms of energy, fields, and forces, rather than "dead" matter (Earle 109). Although it leads to the abandonment of certain classic materialist principles this is nevertheless a refinement rather than a rejection of the materialist position, since the reality of unmaterial entities such as souls or spirits is rejected in favour of the view that in order to exist at all an entity must have a physical basis.
Pater portrays Coleridge as an heir to a mode of thinking that stretches back through such mystics as Schelling, Böhme, and Plotinus to ancient Greece, where Platonism, and supernaturalism of all kinds, found a vigorous opponent in Pater's "intellectual forefather," Epicurus. Pater writes that

Coleridge's prose writings on philosophy, politics, religion, and criticism, were, in truth, but one element in a whole lifetime of endeavours to present the then recent metaphysics of Germany to English readers, as a legitimate expansion of the older, classical and native masters of what has been variously called the a priori, or absolute, or spiritual, or Platonic, view of things. (Appreciations 81)

Pater sees Coleridge as "part of the long pleading of German culture for the things 'behind the veil.'" (Appreciations 82). The "a priori, or absolute, or spiritual, or Platonic, view of things" is indeed linked closely with German culture, especially German Romanticism, whose culmination is Hegel's philosophy of Absolute Spirit. Step by step, says Pater, from ancient times onwards the spiritualist view "works out the substance of the Hegelian formula: 'Was ist, das ist vernünftig; was vernünftig ist, das ist' ['What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational' (Philosophy of Right 10)]" ("Coleridge's Writings" 118-19).

Pater adds in his suavely subversive way that a "science of which that could be the formula is still but an intellectual aspiration; the formula of true science is different" ("Coleridge's Writings" 119). Pater goes on to say:

Experience, which has gradually saddened the earth's colour, stiffened its motions, withdrawn from it some blithe and debonair presence, has moderated our demands upon science. The positive method makes very little account of marks of intelligence in nature; in its wider view of phenomena it sees that those incidents are a minority, and may rank as happy coincidences; it absorbs them in the simpler conception of law. But the suspicion of a mind latent in nature, struggling for release and
intercourse with the intellect of man through true ideas, has never ceased to haunt a certain class of minds. Started again and again in successive periods by enthusiasts on the antique pattern, in each case the thought has seemed paler and more evanescent amidst the growing consistency and sharpness of outline of other and more positive forms of knowledge. ("Coleridge's Writings" 119).

The experimental sciences have "saddened the earth's colour," but Pater sees no point in trying to deny their findings. For him, the results of the empirical sciences, disenchancing as they may seem, are not mistakes or aberrations, but knowledge humanity has acquired about itself and its status in the world. In Pater's view, Coleridge, an "enthusiast on the antique pattern," was fighting a losing battle when he turned from poetry to idealistic philosophy in his efforts to "console and strengthen the human mind, vulgarized or dejected, as he believed, by the acquisition of new knowledge about itself in the "éclaircissement" of the eighteenth century" ("Coleridge's Writings" 111).

In the light of Romanticism's general hostility towards the eighteenth century, Pater's support for the Enlightenment, in conjunction with a critique of the main theorist of English Romanticism, is a crucial moment in the development of the post-Romantic sensibility of Epicurean Aestheticism. De Quincey's unease about the theoretical underpinnings of Romanticism and his exploration of an alternative aesthetics is continued and expressed more decisively by Pater. In the light of the Darwinian view that evolution is a matter of chance, rather than the ineluctable manifestation of Absolute Spirit, the Epicurean Aesthete cannot but question Hegel's wildly optimistic dictum "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." The Darwinian view explains much better why the rational is not always apparent in the actual and why the actual does not always appear quite rational. To continue a little longer this contrasting of the Romantic and Epicurean Aesthetic viewpoints, one can cite a line from Blake's "A Song of Liberty" where the poet claims that "every thing that lives is Holy" (160). For Epicurean Aesthetes this is a touch
too enthusiastic. In response to the great visionary's high argument they might reply: "Everything that lives is simply living. That is all." By the time Pater is writing, modern thought, in the teeth of Romantic opposition, has gone a long way towards naturalizing the human mind and demystifying nature. In the light of De Quincey's divergence from Romantic theory, it is telling that Pater should find in him a fellow Epicurean Aesthete and quote his view of Coleridge that he "wanted better bread than was made of wheat" (Recollections 75; slightly misquoted in "Coleridge's Writings" 116).

A commentator on the philosophy of Epicurus has said that in the troubled Hellenistic period Epicureanism was "worldly wisdom for hard times" (Strodach 84, 187). The phrase seems peculiarly apt in relation to the work of De Quincey and Pater, writing in a period that sees the publication of Dickens's condition-of-England novel, Hard Times (1854). Hard times--but as De Quincey says: "we can't mend it. Therefore, let us make the best of a bad matter . . . " (13: 16). Similarly, Pater writes that we live "in a world where after all we must needs make the most of things" (Appreciations 5). A passage from "Coleridge's Writings" shows that when faced with hard times the Epicurean Aesthete, instead of giving in to pessimism, sets about salvaging what can reasonably be salvaged. For instance, in relation to the growing secularization of modern life, Pater observes:

Coleridge thinks that if we reject the supernatural, the spiritual element in life will evaporate also, that we shall have to accept a life with narrow horizons, without disinterestedness, harshly cut off from the springs of life in the past. But what is this spiritual element? It is the passion for inward perfection with its sorrows, its aspirations, its joy. . . . The life of those who are capable of a passion for perfection still produces the same mental states, but that religious expression of them is no longer congruous with the culture of the age. . . . 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 by 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. (126)

Again the word "spectacle" appears. To Pater, as it had been to De Quincey, the notion of the spectacle is crucial. Being on the side of modern thought in its quarrel with ancient, Pater may at times be impatient with what he feels is Coleridge's antiquated mode of metaphysicizing, but this is not the main impetus behind his essay. Rather than merely being content with scoring intellectual points off a past master, Pater turns Coleridge's career into an Epicurean Aesthetic event by treating the man and his work as a show. Coleridge is a writer caught between two modes of thinking--one ancient and fading, the other modern and emerging. From a purely intellectual point of view Pater disapproves of Coleridge, but from an aesthetic point of view the case is different: "Forms of intellectual and spiritual culture often exercise their subtlest and most artful charm when life is already passing from them" ("Coleridge's Writings" 106). Coleridge's career illustrates "the spectacle of the reserve of the elder generation exquisitely refined by the antagonism of the new" (106). Although Pater has adopted the new mode of thought, he refrains from judging one of the old school too harshly, in order to appreciate the "peculiar charm" of Coleridge's difficult and quaintly noble position, which is to "feel the change everywhere, yet not to abandon oneself to it . . ." (106). Adapting to change is something "clearer minds," like Pater's presumably, have done, while "weaker minds" do not perceive the challenge of the new at all (106). Although Pater disagrees with Coleridge's absolutism, he nonetheless feels that Coleridge is more interesting precisely because he fought against the rise of modern ideas. Pater's love of spectacle is such that he can say this even though he feels that Coleridge's resistance was detrimental to his art (111).
Epicurean Aestheticism is an artistic reaction to the breakdown of absolute values brought about by modern science and the pervasive relativism engendered by it. As Pater reaches the conclusion of his essay he gives a defence of his position, which can serve as an illustration of the Epicurean Aesthetic manner. In the course of the essay Pater has used the case of Coleridge to demonstrate that resisting modernity is futile. The unattainability of absolute principles in any field whatsoever is certainly a bad matter. Is there any way of making the best of it? Pater says:

What the moralist asks is, Shall we gain or lose by surrendering human life to the relative spirit? Experience answers, that the dominant tendency of life it to turn ascertained truth into a dead letter—to make us all the phlegmatic servants of routine. The relative spirit, by dwelling constantly on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things, breaking through a thousand rough and brutal classifications, and giving elasticity to inflexible principles, begets an intellectual finesse, of which the ethical result is a delicate and tender justness in the criticism of human life.

("Coleridge's Writings" 132)

Already, Pater has managed to show that the loss of absolute principles—being an artful rhetorician he gives them a negative connotation by calling them "inflexible"—need not be bad at all, since this loss can actually lead to a finer ethical sense. Pater then attempts to persuade the reader of the feasibility of his position by a graceful treatment of his opponent, while not forgetting to remind the reader that this treatment is better than Coleridge could expect if he were to be judged in the spirit of the absolute standards he tried to establish:

Who would gain more than Coleridge by criticism in such a spirit? We know how his life has appeared when judged by absolute standards. We see him trying to apprehend the absolute, to stereotype one form of faith, to attain, as he says, "fixed principles" in politics, morals, and religion; to fix
one mode of life as the essence of life, refusing to see the parts as parts only; and all the time his own pathetic history pleads for a more elastic moral philosophy than his, and cries out against every formula less living and flexible than life itself. ("Coleridge's Writings" 131-32)

Although Pater sees life as "elastic" he nonetheless does not try to deny the emotional and intellectual need to resist the flux. After all, the scientific view he subscribes to springs from an attempt to reach some certainty in life, although the final result of that attempt may be the certainty that there is no certainty. Pater concludes his essay by saying that while the ability to live comfortably with the flux remains itself "the Sangraal of an endless pilgrimage," Coleridge in his search for "something fixed where all is moving . . . may still be ranked among the interpreters of one of the constituent elements of our life" ("Coleridge's Writings" 132). The qualification "may still be" is important. By granting Coleridge the status of an interpreter of modern life, Pater is really acting as the generous "diplomat" of a new sensibility that, in order to develop its own potential, has distanced itself from most of what Coleridge actually had to say.

ii. The Critic as Chemist

The combination of an appreciation of another artist with a statement of Pater's own position, the method that characterizes the essay on Coleridge, is continued in the essays written between 1867 and 1872, and collected in Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873)—later retitled and revised as The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (1877, 1888 and 1893). In his biography The Case of Walter Pater, Michael Levey talks about the divergence of Pater's treatment of his subject from the expected Victorian norms: "Few serious books on history, literature or art were likely to close with the admonition that 'To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life'" (141). For a Victorian art critic to admonish his readers was, of course, nothing new: Ruskin immediately springs to mind--it was the sensuous, relativistic tone of the
admonition that caused alarm. The Renaissance is, obviously, much more than a call to "gather ye rosebuds, while ye may." For one thing, it continues the encounter between modern and ancient thought that plays such an important role in the essay on Coleridge.

The partially true, but inadequate, view of Pater as a dreamy hedonist interested in nothing but his own exquisite sensations is unlikely to be ever fully discarded; but it is no longer the dominant critical opinion (Brake and Small xv). The view is inadequate because it completely overlooks Pater's interest in contemporary philosophical and scientific trends and the impact they clearly have on his work. A curiosity about science need not lessen a person's enthusiasm for art: as an artist with materialist leanings the Epicurean Aesthete is interested in both.

In the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance Pater makes a brief reference to the French positivist Auguste Comte, whose view on the historical development of world-views is probably among the sources for his distinction between modern and ancient thought. Comte's theories were introduced in England by George Henry Lewes and John Stuart Mill (Houghton 33-34), and it is from the latter's article in The Westminster Review that Billie Andrew Inman plausibly argues that they reached Pater (81). John Passmore gives a succinct account of Comte's historical hypothesis, the so-called "Law of the Three Stages," which states that

positivism is the last stage in the development of inquiry, preceded first by theology and then by metaphysics. In the theological stage, Comte argued, men explain phenomena by referring them to the arbitrary acts of spiritual beings; in the metaphysical stage, they substitute "powers" or "faculties" or "essences" for spirits; only in the third, positive, stage do they come to see that to "explain" is simply to describe the relations holding between phenomena. (16)

Although Pater ultimately distances himself from Comte--a point to be dealt with in a later section--the similarity between this theory and Pater's, and phrases such as the "positive
method" and "more positive forms of knowledge" from "Coleridge's Writings," in addition to Pater's tendency to denigrate metaphysics, shows the influence of positivism on his thinking.

In *The Renaissance*, the clash between modern and ancient thought starts with the first sentence of the "Preface." Pater quotes Matthew Arnold's absolutist maxim about seeing "the object as in itself it really is." In his essay "On Translating Homer" (1861), Arnold argues that the critical effort "to see the object as in itself it really is" has been dominant on the Continent for a long time, but missing in his native country due to the "eccentric and arbitrary spirit" of English writers, who, like the rest of their fellow citizens, exhibit the national trait Arnold wittily brands "Doing as One Likes" (1: 140, 5: 115). Doing as he likes, Pater quotes Arnold's maxim in order to subvert it, as critics have not failed to notice (e.g. Houghton 16-17; Hough 157-58; Phillips xvi-xvii). By doing so he lays himself open to Arnoldian charges of Philistinism, but Pater's position is a little more sophisticated than that. Anyone acquainted with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*--as Inman's work shows that Pater was (21)--would be on his or her guard against the claim that the human mind can ever know objects as in themselves they really are, "things-in-themselves" or noumena to use Kantian terminology. For Kant, the human mind can only know things as "appearances," or phenomena, because the reality that exists independently of human consciousness has always to be mediated through that consciousness: by ordering and shaping experience the human mind "produces" reality. Pater's approach to Arnold's "Object" can be compared to Kant's view of the relations between "things-in-themselves" and the human mind. Neither Kant nor Pater are so sceptical as to try to deny objectivity altogether, but Pater writes that if to "'see the object as in itself it really is,' has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever" he immediately adds the following proviso, "and in æsthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly" ("Preface" xxix). One critic remarks: 'Pater writes 'and' and not 'but' here in an
attempt to assert the continuity of his work with Arnold's; a possible contradiction, as is usual with Pater, is made to look merely like an elaboration, because Pater's 'first step' towards knowing the object often looks like a step away" (Phillips xvi). This first step, however, is neither eccentric nor arbitrary, but necessary if the observer is to have any knowledge of the object at all.

Pater shares Kant's belief in the subjective basis of aesthetic judgment, presented in the Critique of Judgement. Whether Pater ever read this book is not known. Inman's work on Pater's library borrowings shows that apart from the Critique of Pure Reason, Pater signed out a volume containing the Critique of Practical Reason and Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals (21). Given this interest in Kant, in particular, and Pater's interest in German philosophy, in general--a fact which was probably influential in his being elected as a fellow of Oxford's Brasenose College (Levey 94)--it would seem a little curious had he never looked at Kant's central work on aesthetics. In any case, he would have been familiar with the basic arguments of the Critique of Judgement from his reading of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. Furthermore, De Quincey was another source of Kantian aesthetics. Pater owned an edition of De Quincey collected works (Inman 339), and he would also have been exposed to Kant's ideas, if a little bohemianized, through the l'art pour l'art doctrine of Gautier, Baudelaire and their English disciple, Swinburne. That Pater read and admired all four authors is well established (Inman 7; Levey 108).

The parallels between Pater's and Kant's aesthetics are apparent from the first section of the Critique of Judgement, where Kant writes:

If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the Object by means of understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination (acting perhaps in conjunction with understanding) we refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgement of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgement, and so not logical, but aesthetic--which
means that it is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective. (41-42)

If Arnold were to accuse Pater of "doing as he likes," Kant could come to his defence by criticizing Arnold for confusing a logical evaluation of an object with an aesthetic judgment of it. Kant continues:

To apprehend a regular and appropriate building with one's cognitive faculties, be the mode of representation clear or confused, is quite a different thing from being conscious of this representation with an accompanying sensation of delight. Here the representation is referred wholly to the Subject, and what is more to its feeling of life--under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure--and this forms the basis of a quite separate faculty of discriminating and estimating, that contributes nothing to knowledge. (42)

In the Critique of Judgement, Kant gives the philosophical arguments for the position which Pater, in his blase dismissal of metaphysical questions, "as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere," simply asserts, a little too dogmatically perhaps (The Renaissance xxx). For Pater, beauty cannot be arrived at by abstract reasoning, since he considers aesthetic judgments to be empty when they do not refer to particular works of art; like Kant, he distinguishes between aesthetic and logical judgments. Pater writes:

"What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (The Renaissance xxx). It is tempting to ask how Pater can recognize beautiful objects to be moved by in the first place if no true definition of beauty exists. Pater's answer, however, is suggested by his reminder that "beauty exists in many forms"--hence different temperaments may recognize different types of beauty ("Preface" xxx). This relativistic conclusion does not seem to trouble Pater at all, whereas one suspects that Arnold would find it disconcerting.
The matter is complicated further by an assumption shared by Kant and Pater that although aesthetic judgment is subjective this does not mean that it is totally solipsistic. According to Kant, people who have derived pleasure from an object want others to agree with their judgment and talk as if the impressions they had can be related directly to the object in question. Although they may come up with examples to "prove" their point, total agreement, although a theoretical possibility in Kant's system, can never be guaranteed, since aesthetic judgments are based on subjective taste and not reason, and thus cannot be conclusively proved or refuted. In Pater's case, the gap between the subjective and objective is partly bridged by the aesthetic critic's "scientific analysis" of his or her sensations: "How is my nature modified by its [the aesthetic object's] presence, and under its influence?" (The Renaissance xxix). By answering this question and thereby making "subjective facts" public, the critic presents other people with the description of a process which would otherwise have remained private.

As an example of the influence of scientific concepts on Pater's work I have already noted the parallel between his distinction of modern thought from ancient and Comte's "Law of the Three Stages." Another seminal influence is Darwin; in his essay "Darwin, Pater and the Crisis in Criticism," Philip Appleman discusses the impact of Darwinism on Pater. In the same way that the relativism inherent in Darwinism is combined with a rigorous empiricism, Pater subjects his private impressions to painstaking analysis. In this way the subjective is tempered with the objective (Appleman 91). When discussing his own critical method, the procedure he terms aesthetic criticism, Pater frequently makes use of scientific vocabulary, as well as drawing explicit analogies between the critic and the scientist. The objects with which the aesthetic critic deals are "receptacles of so many powers or forces: and possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities." Their effects on the critic are "primary data," and although it must be realized "for one's self, or not at all," the analysis of this information is compared to the way "a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others . . ." (The
The steps which initially led away from the object finally lead back towards it without ever reaching it completely. For Kant and Pater, the judgment of taste is a paradoxical hovering in the twilight between subject and object.

This twilight, confusing enough for their readers, seems at times even to confuse Kant and Pater themselves. Finding instances of this confusion and analyzing them helps to make sense of a theory which, although paradoxical, need not be incoherent. In the first chapter of *The Renaissance*, titled "Two Early French Stories," Pater discusses the charm antiquarianism can give to old literature, but insists that the "first condition of such aid must be a real, direct, aesthetic charm in the thing itself." Unless it has that charm, unless some purely artistic quality went to its original making, no merely antiquarian effort can ever give it an aesthetic value, or make it a proper subject of aesthetic criticism" (12-13; my emphasis). Already having made an Arnoldian reference to "the thing in itself," he continues that this "quality, wherever it exists, it is always pleasant to define, and discriminate from the sort of borrowed interest which an old play, or an old story, may very likely acquire through a true antiquarianism" (13). Here we catch a glimpse of Pater at work carefully discriminating and defining his volatile impressions—the critic as chemist. Yet Pater has forgotten to add his usual relativist proviso, for in order to be consistent with what he had said in the "Preface" a few pages earlier, he should have indicated that the definition of an aesthetic object can never be fully objective, since "one must realise such primary data for one's self, or not at all" (xxix). Like Arnold, Pater believes in aesthetic value residing in certain aesthetic objects, but, except in Arnoldian "lapses" like these, he is in agreement with Kant about the paradoxical quality of beauty: it exists, but can only be realized subjectively, which means that definitive aesthetic judgments are

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3 An apparent confusion of this kind appears, for instance, in section 48 of the *Critique of Judgement* (172-75). For a concise account of Kant's aesthetics, including its moments of confusion, see Shaper.
impossible. Kant accounts for this "peculiarity of the judgement of taste" (139) in the following way:

If any one does not think a building, view, or poem beautiful, then, in the first place he refuses, so far as his inmost conviction goes, to allow approval to be wrung from him by a hundred voices all lauding it to the skies. . . .

In the second place, a proof a priori according to definite rules is still less capable of determining the judgement as to beauty. If any one reads me his poem, or brings me to a play, which, all said and done, fails to commend itself to my taste, then let him adduce Batteux or Lessing, or still older and more famous critics of taste, with all the host of rules laid down by them, as a proof of the beauty of his poem; let certain passages particularly displeasing to me accord completely with the rules of beauty, (as set out by these critics and universally recognized): I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or any arguing about the matter. I would prefer to suppose that those rules of the critics were at fault, or at least have no application, than to allow my judgement to be determined by a priori proofs. I take my stand on the ground that my judgement is to be one of taste, and not one of understanding or reason. (Critique of Judgement 139-40)

Coming from such a great lover of the a priori, these are strong words indeed. He continues with an uncharacteristically sensuous example:

This would appear to be one of the chief reasons why this faculty of aesthetic judgement has been given the name of taste. For a man may recount to me all the ingredients of a dish, and observe of each and every one of them that it is just what I like, and, in addition, rightly commend the wholesomeness of the food; yet I am deaf to all these arguments. I try the
dish with my own tongue and palate, and I pass judgement according to their verdict (not according to universal principles). (140)

In aesthetic matters, both Kant and Pater deny the certainty of universal rules, yet both want to say something about art: a paradox, a "scandal" which is, interestingly enough, not limited to art criticism. In Pater's time, his theory of the rise of relativism at the expense of absolutism is demonstrated by Darwinism, in which relativism and empiricism blend. Today, relativism is still on the rise. The average working scientist may not be too concerned with the philosophical implications of this, but more thoughtful scientists recognize that since Heisenberg and quantum theory, subjectivity is an inescapable element in all scientific enquiry. The old dream of absolute certainty has been tempered by uncertainty, and today many see probability rather than necessity as being at the heart of all scientific endeavour (Casti 24-25; Heisenberg 58; Davies and Gribbin 26-29).

iii. To Be, or Not to Be, a Humanist

On this relativistic note we return to The Renaissance to have a closer look at Pater's exploration of the struggle between absolutism and relativism. One of the figures Pater discusses in the book is Pico della Mirandola, the fifteenth century humanist who attempted to reconcile Christianity with all religions and philosophies of the world. In him, Pater recognizes the absolutist impulse he had detected in Coleridge, the passion "for something fixed where all is moving" ("Coleridge's Writings" 132). Pater can sympathize with this impulse, while at the same time subscribing to the modern view that its fulfillment is impossible. Pater argues that Pico could undertake the project of a grand synthesis of all existing religious and philosophical systems, because he, and the scholars of the period, did not possess the method that distinguishes such works as Darwin's Origin of Species: "They lacked the very rudiments of the historic sense. . . . They had no idea of development, of the differences of ages, of the process by which our race has been 'educated'" (The Renaissance 22). Pater continues in a passage which shows that his own
impressionistic and relativistic method, while focusing on the critic's personal response, does not advocate a complete disregard of the object itself in favour of what only suits his fancy. When dealing with writers he feels are too subjective, such as Pico and his contemporaries, Pater tempers their subjectivity with his objectivity. The following is his evaluation of Pico's project:

The religions of the world were to be reconciled, not as successive stages in a regular development of the religious sense, but as subsisting side by side, and substantially in agreement with one another. And here the first necessity was to misrepresent the language, the conceptions, the sentiments, it was proposed to compare and reconcile. Plato and Homer must be made to speak agreeably to Moses. Set side by side, the mere surfaces could never unite in any harmony of design. Therefore one must go below the surface, and bring up the supposed secondary, or still more remote meaning,--that diviner signification held in reserve, in recessu divinius aliquid [some divine quality in the depths], latent in some stray touch of Homer, or figure of speech in the books of Moses. (The Renaissance 22-23)

This is clearly not to advocate the critical solipsism that Pater is sometimes accused of promoting. The main point here, however, is that in opposition to the view that texts and objects in general contain a buried, absolute meaning, Pater works on the assumption that surfaces may be all there is, that the attempt to go below the surface may not be a sign of profundity, but an over-zealous attempt to fit heterogeneous elements into a unified system. The (post)modern reader may think of the parallels between this assumption and those of deconstructionist criticism, and, indeed, Richard Dellamora writes that in "recent
years, it has become something of a commonplace to associate rhetorical strategies in the writing of Walter Pater with deconstruction" (127).

But readers need look no further than positivism to find parallels with Pater's position, for he shares the positivist view that "knowledge consists in a description of the coexistence and succession of phenomena." To "explain," therefore, is simply to describe the relations holding between phenomena (Passmore 16). In short, essences are replaced by relations. In the essay on Coleridge, Pater criticized the system-builder's refusal "to see the parts as parts only" ("Coleridge's Writings" 132). To "see the parts as parts only" is to acknowledge the atomization of reality, but simply to acknowledge fragmentation is not enough for Pater. His aesthetics is a theorizing of the uneasy feeling that to go below the surface, in an attempt to discover a necessary unity between the parts and the whole, may be mistaken. Instead of attempting a bogus synthesis (naive optimism), or merely staying still (pessimism), Pater wants to drift elegantly from the surface of one material fragment to the next—a mental journey the Epicurean Aesthete wants to make as enjoyable or, at the very least, as painless as possible.

In response to Pico's attempt to unite all religions and philosophies, Pater argues that the only "basis" for such a unity is that these systems are all creations of the human mind: it is only as symbols of the activity and creativity of the human brain—the ceaselessly shifting "ground" described in the "Conclusion"—that Pater asks readers to concern themselves with Pico's works (The Renaissance 22). Pater wants to draw attention to the aesthetic features of Pico's career, because he feels that the only way to salvage Pico's work from oblivion is to treat it as a spectacle: "as a curiosity of the human mind, a 'madhouse cell,' if you will, into which we may peep for a moment, and see it at work weaving strange fancies . . ." (23). For Pater, the best appreciation of Pico's efforts is an

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4 For deconstructionist readings of Pater's texts see, e.g., Loesberg, Miller, and Dellamora.
aesthetic one, because from a strictly theoretical point of view the solutions that are
offered in Pico's ancient books
will satisfy us as little as perhaps it satisfied him. It is said that in his
eagerness for mysterious learning he once paid a great sum for a collection
of cabalistic manuscripts, which turned out to be forgeries; and the story
might well stand as a parable of all he ever seemed to gain in the way of
actual knowledge. (31)

Yet, in spite of this, the essay ends with lavish praise for Pico, but as had been the
case with Coleridge, Pater can only be generous to Pico after he has dismantled most of
what he tried to accomplish. We are told that Pico
had sought knowledge, and passed from system to system, and hazarded
much; but less for the sake of positive knowledge than because he believed
there was a spirit of order and beauty in knowledge, which would come
down and unite what men's ignorance had divided, and renew what time
had made dim. (31-32)

Having characterized Pico as an absolutist, Pater suddenly wants the reader to like Pico by
implying that this man spent his life searching for something he did not really want to find.
Pater may (or may not) mean well, but this last-minute attempt to retouch Pico's absolutist
image with relativist colours is confusing to the reader and more than a little patronizing to
his subject. Notwithstanding this puzzling manoeuvre, the impression that remains is
similar to the one that remains after reading Pater on Coleridge: once again, the life and
work of a thinker "on the antique pattern" is treated as an amusing spectacle to be
appreciated by the connoisseur.

The reason for Pater's praise for Pico is that "he is a true humanist" (32), but the
brand of humanism attributed to Pico seems to fit Pater much better. The "essence of
humanism," writes Pater,
is that belief of which he seems never to have doubted, that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality—no language they have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate, or expended time and zeal. (The Renaissance 32)

But is this humanism? Addressing the issue of whether Pater is a humanist or not can help us reach a fuller understanding of his position. Pater frequently uses the words "humanist" and "humanism" and always with approval. But is he a "true humanist"? An answer to that question seems to be an example of what Pater himself means by the status of modern knowledge: it cannot be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions (Appreciations 66). Part of the problem is the broadness of the term "humanism," which, apart from referring to the Renaissance movement, has been used to designate communism, pragmatism, and existentialism (Abbagnano 69, 72). If by humanism we mean an umbrella term describing the study of, and concern for, human beings faced with taking responsibility for their own existence unaided by supernatural forces, Pater is a humanist. Understood in this sense, humanism is more or less synonymous with secular rationalism and atheism, or at the very least, agnosticism—a historical force that can be traced back from its current realization in the democratic Welfare State through modern science, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance all the way to the "Greek Enlightenment" as represented by Athens in the fifth century B. C. (Blackham 103; Soper 138). But to describe Pater as a humanist in anything but this broad sense is problematic, as the following example indicates. Richmond Crinkley, who gives his study of Pater the affirmative title Walter Pater: Humanist, finds that the most extensive definition Pater gives of what he means by humanism is the noncommittal one already quoted from the essay on Pico. Crinkley writes that the "humanism which Pater offers as a response to the
relativistic condition of the modern world must be understood somewhat differently from
the humanism of Matthew Arnold, for example." Crinkley continues that humanism
as traditionally understood, and as understood by Arnold, affirms a single
valid tradition, based on Hellenic and Judeo-Christian origins and
comprehending the "best" part of Western thought. Pater's humanism takes
as its duty the preservation of everything that has interested living men. It
includes whatever has moved men—not only the best; the assertion of some
set of explicit values is notably absent in Pater's definition. Inclusion,
recovery, and reconciliation characterize Pater's humanism. (61)

Yet Crinkley continues to talk of humanism as if it were a unified position, although he has
just demonstrated that Pater's humanism, supposedly characterized by "[i]nclusion,
recovery, and reconciliation," is a private humanism which must be understood differently
from not only Arnold's humanism, but humanism "as traditionally understood."
Furthermore, as the essays on Coleridge and Pico show, Pater can only "include, recover
and reconcile" thinkers different from himself after he has politely devastated their
systems. Pater takes a lively interest in other people, but primarily as actors in the great
spectacle of history. Another issue that places Pater at a certain remove from humanism as
generally understood is his materialism. A definition from C. Hugh Holman's and William
Harmon's A Handbook to Literature states that the term humanism "suggests any attitude
that tends to exalt the human element or stress the importance of human interests, as
opposed to the supernatural, divine elements," so far this would include Pater, but the
authors add: "--or as opposed to the grosser, animal elements" (242), and here Pater is
distanced by his materialist leanings.

Let us call the object of Holman's and Harmon's definition "traditional humanism"
to distinguish it from Pater's brand of humanism. Materialism is a persistent problem for
traditional humanists. On the one hand, they prefer to rely on rational, increasingly
scientific, inquiry rather than dogma, but, on the other hand, they are not willing to accept
the reductive, anti-humanist implications of science. In an essay from a collection titled
*The Humanist Outlook*, Karl Popper stresses traditional humanism's links with the
Enlightenment's project of self-liberation through knowledge. In support of this he refers
to Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Kant writes:

> Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is
> man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from
> another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of
> reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction
> from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to use your own reason!"—that
> is the motto of enlightenment. (262)

In their search for "Emancipation through Knowledge," (the title of Popper's essay),
modern humanists count on science, which although not without its problems, as they are
quick to point out, they nevertheless feel is the most rational tool of inquiry available
(Blackham 38). The traditional humanist's relationship with science, however, is highly
ambiguous—a symptom which can be noted in Pater's contemporary, the humanist and
biologist Thomas Henry Huxley. In his essay "On the Physical Basis of Life" (1869), after
laying out the argument suggested by the title, Huxley arrives at the eerie conclusion that
if life can be reduced to molecular forces

> it must be true, in the same sense and to the same extent, that the thoughts
to which I am now giving utterance, and your thoughts regarding them, are
the expression of molecular changes in that matter of life which is the
source of our other vital phenomena. (154)

However, foreseeing the unpopularity of this unflattering argument, he writes: "I should
not wonder if 'gross and brutal materialism' were the mildest phrase applied to them in
certain quarters." But he asserts: "I, individually, am no materialist, but, on the contrary,
believe materialism to involve grave philosophical error" (154-55). Materialism may, or
may not, be erroneous, but this schism in Huxley's position "most effectively illustrates the
peculiarities of his philosophy," as Passmore observes (39). This "peculiarity" is not unique to Huxley, though, but seems to haunt the great humanist hope of emancipation through knowledge: exorcizing the ghost of superstition raises the spectre of pure physicality.

This peculiarity seems built into the humanist project. For instance, in their efforts to affirm the purely human against the supernatural and divine, the Renaissance humanists paid serious attention to humanity's ties to nature. Their studies led to the rediscovery of ancient Greek materialists, like Epicurus, who like Pater, qualifies as a humanist, according to a broad definition of the term (Abbagnano 70; Blackham 102, 107-10). However, the difference between the traditional humanist, on the one hand, and Epicurus and the Epicurean Aesthetic Pater, on the other, is that while the traditional humanist wants to maintain an ontological difference between humanity and the rest of nature, Epicurus and Pater, along with modern science, do not make this categorical distinction (Soper 138). Pater's description of humanity is naturalistic: "Man is the most complex of the products of nature." Pater thinks of human faculties as inextricably linked with matter: "the nervous system refines itself into intellect" ("Coleridge's Writings" 107). Characteristically, however, the "grossness" of the materialist argument is softened somewhat in Pater's refined discourse. Pater's Epicurean Aesthetic position shows that the materialist's and the artist's outlooks, though they sometimes appear mutually exclusive, need not necessarily be so.

Examining Pater's relationship with traditional humanism, apart from clarifying his viewpoint, helps us to get a better understanding of The Renaissance. By dealing with this period he is returning to the origins of humanism, a phenomenon created when Italian thinkers and artists in the second half of the fourteenth century began looking towards classical antiquity with the intention of revitalizing their own time (Abbagnano 70). One of the aims of Pater's project is to return to classical antiquity once more. But this may prove a difficult journey, for Pater is twice removed from the ideal. Unable to travel directly, he
has to reach his destination, the home of what he calls "Hellenic humanism" via the Renaissance (The Renaissance 148). "Can we bring down that ideal into the gaudy, perplexed light of modern life?" he asks (146). In other words, is Pater humanist enough to believe in the success of this cultural journey? A contrast between his views and those of the Renaissance writers gives an indication of the answer. In an essay on humanism in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Nicola Abbagnano quotes a passage of Pico's Oration on the Dignity of Man as an example of the Renaissance writers' faith in "man's capability to form his world, to vary it, and to better it absolutely" (70). Pico attributes the following words to the Almighty:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. (224-25; qtd. in Abbagnano 70)

By exalting humanity's dignity and freedom, writers like Pico fought against the dogmatism of medieval institutions and thus paved the way for the critical outlook Pater links directly with the rise of modern thought (Plato and Platonism 174). However, this critical inquiry into every facet of life results in various blows to human dignity and freedom, the most recent for Pater's generation being Darwinism, the effect of which is to
oust humanity from the central position granted it by the Renaissance humanists. These
depressing results are accepted by Pater, who is too scientifically minded to be able to find
Pico's triumphant view of humanity convincing. Although he would probably have nothing
against being free to fashion himself in whatever shape he chooses he knows that he is
earthly rather than heavenly, mortal rather than immortal. For an Epicurean Aesthete,
these are the conditions under which freedom must be sought.

In spite of his doubts about the intellectual soundness of the Renaissance's ideal,
however, Pater acknowledges that Pico's humanist rhetoric "helped man onward to that
reassertion of himself, that rehabilitation of human nature, the body, the senses, the heart,
the intelligence, which the Renaissance fulfils" (The Renaissance 27). Pater would
probably be delighted to revive this ideal in the nineteenth century, but he feels that a gulf
separates his time from that of Pico. The dignity of human nature espoused by
Renaissance humanism "is founded on a misconception of the place in nature both of the
earth and of man" (The Renaissance 26). Of Pico's pre-Copernican, pre-Darwinian world-
view, he writes:

How different from this childish dream is our own conception of nature,
with its unlimited space, its innumerable suns, and the earth but a mote in
the beam; how different the strange new awe, or superstition, with which it
fills our minds! 'The silence of those infinite spaces,' says Pascal,
contemplating a starlight night, 'the silence of those infinite spaces terrifies
me: 'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinitis m'effraie.' (The Renaissance
27)

During the Renaissance, speculation is united with a self-assured humanism, but once
thinkers admit everything to rigorous scrutiny the result is a "drift" that takes them further
and further away from the source of their optimism. One by one reassuring ideas, such as
God, and the centrality of earth and the human race in the universe, become less and less
tenable. In Pater, this process can be seen by comparing Pico's triumphant statement from
the Oration on the Dignity on Man with Pater's dismissal of it as a "childish dream." In the same way that Pater sees modern thought, and himself, drifting away from the self-confident humanism of the Renaissance, both drift away from the Arnoldian belief in complete objectivity. In The Last Romantics, Hough observes shrewdly that the "desire for metaphysical security, central in Arnold's life, is to Pater something a little unworthy . . ." (138). In "Coleridge's Writings," Pater himself writes: "Perhaps the chief offense in Coleridge is an excess of seriousness, a seriousness that arises not from any moral principle, but from a misconception of the perfect manner" (111). According to the dandyish scholarship of Pater, being too solemn in the search for truth is "bad form." Pater continues:

There is a certain shade of levity and unconcern, the perfect manner of the eighteenth century, which marks complete culture in the handling of abstract questions. The humanist, he who possesses that complete culture, does not weep over the failure of a theory of the quantification of the predicate, nor shriek over the fall of the philosophic formula. A kind of humour is one of the conditions of the true mental attitude in the criticism of past stages of thought. Humanity cannot afford to be too serious about them, any more than a man of good sense can afford to be too serious in looking back upon his own childhood. ("Coleridge's Writings" 111)

It is clear by now that the word "humanist" is best understood as referring to Pater's private brand of humanism, i.e. the position I call Epicurean Aestheticism. Paradoxically, the only "complete" and "perfect" manner in an incomplete, imperfect world is a calm renunciation of the notion of completeness and perfection. Pater portrays absolutism as a childhood habit which humanity must discard in order to grow up, although one has the feeling that he does not want to discard past stages completely--like childhood they can offer rich and varied material for Epicurean Aesthetic musings.
But what about Pater's project of journeying to Ancient Greece via the Renaissance? "Breadth, centrality, with bliteness and repose, are the marks of Hellenic culture. Is such culture a lost art?" Or, continues Pater, "Can we bring down that ideal into the gaudy, perplexed light of modern life"? (The Renaissance 146). He asks this question in the chapter on Johann Winckelmann, who although he lived in the eighteenth century, is presented by Pater as "the last fruit of the Renaissance" (xxxiii). Beautiful, blithe and homosexual, Winckelmann possesses obvious attractions for Pater, for whom he is the avatar of the Greek ideal—an ideal consisting in the effortless, because perfectly unconscious, union of the fleshly and spiritual sides of life. Winckelmann is in sympathy with a Greece "represented by that group of brilliant youths in the Lysis [a dialogue by Plato on love and friendship], 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). Pater contrasts paganism, or "Hellenic humanism" (48), with medieval Christianity, whose representative Fra Angelico "would have shrunk from the notion that what the eye apprehended was all" (131-32).

Although Pater speaks with admiration of the natural simplicity symbolized by Winckelmann, he is "the last fruit of the Renaissance," which suggests that the optimism associated with the ancient Greek and Renaissance periods cannot survive the hard times of the nineteenth century. Now, whether such happy, well-adjusted creatures as the ancient Greeks, those "splendid lion-hearted children" as Nietzsche calls them, ever existed is another matter (On the Genealogy of Morals 94). But Pater, along with a great many Western thinkers, certainly enjoys conjuring them up with his prose. Assuming, for argument's sake, that they were as splendid as Nietzsche claims, Pater makes it clear that Winckelmann was the last man to feel as they felt: "To most of us," Pater writes, "after all our steps towards it, the antique world, in spite of its intense outlines, its own perfect self-expression, still remains faint and remote" (The Renaissance 115). Once again, we witness
the paradoxical process of steps leading towards, without ever quite reaching the cherished ideal.

In spite of Pater's love of ancient Greece and the Renaissance, his journey to the former via the latter is not a complete success, yet it is not completely in vain either. He is, after all, a traveller in a world where "we must needs make the most of things." One of Pater's discoveries is Greek tragedy, an art form which flourished after the passing of the unity of being that Winckelmann understands so well, because he actually seems to have possessed it. Pater writes:

The longer we contemplate that Hellenic ideal, in which man is at unity with himself, with his physical nature, with the outward world, the more we may be inclined to regret that he should ever have passed beyond it, to contend for a perfection that makes the blood turbid, and frets the flesh, and discredits the actual world about us. (The Renaissance 143)

Although the loss of the ideal unity of sense and spirit eventually leads to the "spiritual sickness" of the middle ages, Pater, the consummate spectator, feels that a new stage was necessary to save mankind from "the ennui which ever attaches itself to realisation, even the realisation of the perfect life . . ." (143). Therefore, "it was necessary that a conflict should come, that some sharper note should grieve the existing harmony, and the spirit chafed by it beat out at last only a larger and profounder music" (143). Greek tragedy symbolizes the conflict that follows the loss of unity, but it also "shows how such a conflict may be treated with serenity, how the evolution of it may be a spectacle of the dignity, not of the impotence, of the human spirit" (143). Greek tragedy shows how the Greeks were capable of "bringing joy out of matter in itself full of discouragements" (143).

Pater's interest in this feat is understandable, since it parallels his own Epicurean Aesthetics. Pater's essay on Winckelmann was originally published in 1867. In it he prefigures Nietzsche, who finds a symbol of his own philosophy in Greek tragedy (cf. The Birth of Tragedy [1872]). Breathing the same post-Darwinian air as Pater, Nietzsche feels
that life is a brutal struggle, but he also feels an urge to overcome pessimism. His "solution" is to claim that "the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (The Birth of Tragedy 22). If certainty has given way, what remains is whether one has, or has not, the energy to go on. On this Nietzsche and Pater agree. They differ, however, in the manner in which they proceed: while the former philosophizes with a hammer, the latter is a touch more diplomatic.

In the same way that Pater may see Arnold's need for metaphysical certainty as a little unworthy, there are hints that he finds Winckelmann's natural simplicity a little too simple. For instance, Greek tragedy is beyond Winckelmann's range:

Into this stage of Greek achievement Winckelmann did not enter. Supreme as he is where his true interest lay, his insight into the typical unity and repose of the highest sort of sculpture seems to have involved limitation in another direction. His conception of art excludes that bolder type of it which deals confidently and serenely with life, conflict, evil. (143)

Pater is in a much better position than Winckelmann to detect the parallels between modernity and Greek tragedy: the gaudy light of modernity is certainly not the sweet light Winckelmann understood, but it is the only light available. What the modern light reveals is a world composed of physical forces, a nature not so much "red in tooth and claw," to use Tennyson's phrase (Poems 2: 56.15), as simply indifferent to human concerns. The dread of the indifference of nature, so keenly felt by Tennyson, is expressed by him in a poem titled, appropriately enough, "Despair":

O we poor orphans of nothing--alone on that lonely shore--
Born of the brainless Nature who knew not that which she bore! (Poems 3: 33-34; qtd. in Houghton 84)

The sense of the great indifference of nature is expressed by Nietzsche in the following way:
You want to live "according to nature"? O you noble Stoics, what fraudulent words! Think of a being such as nature is, prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without aims or intentions, without mercy or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain; think of indifference itself as a power—how could you live according to such indifference? (Beyond Good and Evil 20-21)

Also, to continue this theme in a different key, Pater lived in a society whose indifference to its less fortunate members often mirrored that of nature, a civilization whose lively chaos, exhilarating for some, terrifying for others, was justified on Malthusian and Darwinian grounds. Epicurean Aesthetes, along with such Victorian thinkers as Mill and Huxley, reject the justification of laissez faire capitalism on the ground that it is "only natural" (Peckham 304). That something is natural is for them all the more reason for not accepting it outright—after all, "Life is terribly deficient in form," as Wilde says ("The Critic as Artist" 375). In addition to its obvious flippancy, Wilde's epigram can also be seen as containing two serious lessons from Darwinism. First, nature is blind; second, it is constantly changing: thus the appeal to "nature" and "naturalness" must lose some of its common-sense attraction. Although Pater is too much of an Aesthete to make any graphic references to the not-so-comely material conditions of Victorian society, much of The Renaissance can nevertheless be read as a reaction to the hard times in which he lives.

Speaking about "the gaudy, perplexing light of modern life" may be seen as Pater's way of describing an actuality the details of which he leaves in the capable hands of writers like Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell.

At the end of the discussion on Winckelmann, Pater sums up the aesthetic explorations of the chapter:

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5 Whether such application of Darwin's theory of evolution is justifiable or not can be debated. In his essay "Darwinism and Darwinisticism," Morse Peckham coins the term "Darwinisticism" to designate the hasty application of Darwinism to society (304).
We have seen that the development of the various forms of art has corresponded to the development of the thoughts of man concerning humanity, to the growing relation of the mind to itself. Sculpture corresponds to the unperplexed, emphatic outlines of Hellenic humanism; painting to the mystic depth and intricacy of the middle age; music and poetry have their fortune in the modern world. (148)

He adds: "Let us understand by poetry all literary production which attains the power of giving pleasure by its form, as distinct from its matter" (148). The influence of Hegel can be detected in the debatable practice of making certain art forms correspond to specific stages in the evolution of thought. That there is something intrinsic in painting that makes it more suitable than other mediums to express "the mystic depth and intricacy of the middle age" is easily disproved by the prominent role of painting in Modernist art. The important point here, however, is Pater's grappling with how modern experience can be dealt with in an artistic manner. He selects literature as the medium which is equal to the task: "Only in this varied literary form can art command that width, variety, delicacy of resources, which will enable it to deal with the conditions of modern life" (148). And finally Pater starts to assess the results of his mental journey from Victorian England to ancient Greece via the Renaissance. The question of the Greek ideal still remains: "Can the blitheness and universality of the antique ideal be communicated to artistic productions, which shall contain the fulness of the experience of the modern world?" (148). Having learnt from Hegel the art of synthesizing a thesis (the Greek ideal) and its antithesis (modern life), but employing it to his own relativistic, un-Hegelian ends, he no longer has to answer either "yes" or "no." This procedure saves him from having to choose modern life to the exclusion of the Greek ideal, or visa versa. This type of thinking can be contrasted with that of a much less diplomatic writer, Thomas Carlyle. In Pater, Carlyle's "Everlasting No" and "Everlasting Yea," as described in Sartor Resartus (1838), are
replaced by the Epicurean Aesthetic attitude one might call the "Everlasting Maybe." Here is what Pater feels art can, and should try to, achieve:

What modern art has to do in the service of culture is so to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom. That naïve, rough sense of freedom, which supposes man's will to be limited, if at all, only by a will stronger than his, he can never have again. The attempt to represent it in art would have so little verisimilitude that it would be flat and uninteresting. The chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, even in the moral order. For us, necessity is not, as of old, a sort of mythological personage without us, with whom we can do warfare. It is rather a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world. (The Renaissance 148)

Although Pater speaks of "spirit" at the beginning of the quotation, the rest of the passage shows that he does not use the word in a Hegelian way, but simply as a way of referring to mental activity, the individual consciousness through which is woven the "magic web of which modern science speaks." Humanity is not seen as separated from physical forces, but intricately tied to them. Pater continues: "Can art represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom?" (148-49). He is not asking for much, which follows from his opinion that the unlimited freedom Pico and the Renaissance humanists believe in is based on an overestimation of human potential. Pico's completely free humanity is for Pater an empty abstraction. He writes: "Natural laws we shall never modify, embarrass us as they may; but there is still
something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch their fatal combinations" (149). Here art can touch modern life with the ethos of Greek tragedy:

In those romances of Goethe and Victor Hugo, in some excellent work done after them, this entanglement, this network of law, becomes the tragic situation, in which certain groups of noble men and women work out for themselves a supreme dénouement. Who, if he saw through all, would fret against the chain of circumstance which endows one at the end with those great experiences? (The Renaissance 149)

Experiences followed by a question mark—the end of the chapter sounds the note that will be taken up in the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance, i.e. "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (152). Answering Pater's question, one can safely say that there are actually many people who "would fret against the chain of circumstances," including philosophical idealists, believers of all creeds, and traditional humanists, but not Epicurean Aesthetes. The influence of science has led Pater to reject supernaturalism and adopt a naturalistic explanation of experience. For him, it does not follow that this deprives life of all its grandeur. It is worth comparing these lines with the conclusion of the work that bears much of the responsibility for causing the "modern tragedy," Darwin's Origin of Species:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved. (429)
The ability to take a broad, amoral view of life and still recognize its beauty, the
diplomatic, but not quite convincing, nod towards Christianity, the spectator's joy in a
continual becoming of endless forms—all this appears peculiarly Paterian.

v. Being and Not Being: The Paterian Self

Any discussion of Pater would be inconclusive without a mention of The Renaissance's
famous, and deliberately inconclusive, "Conclusion." In keeping with its Heraclitean
epigraph, "All things are in motion and nothing at rest," the final chapter of the book
emphasizes the fleeting nature of life—the "splendour of our experience" and its "awful
brevity" (152). There is only one definite conclusion on offer in Pater's "Conclusion":
death. "[W]e are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve . . . we
have an interval, and then our place knows us no more" (153). Running through the text,
and all of Pater's writings, is the feeling that the beauty of life is heightened by its
shortness. It follows that since life derives so much of its value from death, the splendour
of existence remains inextricably bound up with the threat of its completion. Pater's
"Conclusion" is an exhortation to live fully; not to do so would be "on this short day of
frost and sun, to sleep before evening" (152), but the call to enjoy life is always made with
the painful awareness of how little time there is for living. The parallels with Epicureanism
are clear. Epicurus says: "We are born only once, and we cannot be born twice; and one
must for all eternity exist no more. You are not in control of tomorrow and yet you delay
your [opportunity to] rejoice. Life is ruined by delay and each and every one of us dies
without enjoying leisure" ("The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings" 29).

Pater's interest in such figures as Heraclitus and Epicurus is far from being a case
of mere antiquarianism. Rather, these thinkers interest him because of the way they
prefigure problems that become increasingly significant in the light of the secular and
relativistic tendency of modern thought. The connection between modernity and
Heraclitus's belief that "everything flows," is made explicit in the first sentence of the
"Conclusion": "To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes of fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought" (150). In Plato and Platonism (1893), Pater elaborates on his understanding of the link between Heraclitus and modernity. After quoting once more the Greek philosopher's saying on the flux, which Pater translates as "All things give way: nothing remaineth" (9), he comments:

The bold paradox of Heraclitus is, in effect, repeated on all sides, as the vital persuasion just now of a cautiously reasoned experience, and, in illustration of the very law of change which it asserts, may itself presently be superseded as a commonplace. . . . To the "observation and experiment" of the physical enquirer of to-day, the eye and the sun it lives by reveal themselves, after all, as Heraclitus had declared (scarcely serious, he seemed, to those around him) as literally in constant extinction and renewal; the sun only going out more gradually than the human eye; the system meanwhile, of which it is the centre, in ceaseless movement nowhither. . . . And the Darwinian theory--that "species," the identifying forms of animal and vegetable life, immutable though they seem now, as of old in the Garden of Eden, are fashioned by slow development, while perhaps millions of years go by: well! every month is adding to its evidence. Nay, the idea of development (that, too, a thing of growth, developed in the progress of reflexion) is at last invading one by one, as the secret of their explanation, all the products of the mind, the very mind itself, the abstract reason; our certainty, for instance, that two and two make four. Gradually we have come to think, or to feel, that primary certitude. Political constitutions, again, as we now see so clearly, are "not made," cannot be made, but "grow." Races, laws, arts, have their origins and end, are themselves ripples only on the great river of organic life; and language is changing on our very lips. (14-15)
Pater's half-joyful, half-fearful appreciation of the ceaseless change of experience conveys the Epicurean Aesthetic perception of the combined splendour and brevity of life. At the end of the passage, Pater even draws attention to the fact that the language he employs to express his sense of the ceaseless sequence of change is itself changing. Commenting on this passage, Hough emphasizes the importance of the Heraclitean concept of the flux on Pater's thinking, but stresses that Pater "does not, however, produce it as a piece of ancient wisdom; he regards the doctrine of Heraclitus as an early intuitive guess at a truth which modern philosophy and science have confirmed" (139; see also Loesberg 19).

If everything is continually passing away and a "counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life," the question for Pater becomes: "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?" (152). Theoretically, every moment holds within it the possibility of a splendid experience. The secret is not so much to be in the right place at the right time, but to be in the right mood:

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.

(The Renaissance 152)

But does the perceiver really have an opportunity to experience anything at all, if he or she is in constant motion, as we all must be according to the doctrine of the flux? This is a problem not only for Pater, but for Aestheticism in general. The individualistic side of Aestheticism is represented by the well-known sentence from the "Preface" to The Renaissance: "What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me?" (xxix). The extreme form of this attitude is reached in the solipsistic view of the self presented in the "Conclusion".
The whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Everyone of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (151)

But countering the hyper-emphasis on the private self in the "Conclusion" are passages which suggest the unstable nature of that very self. "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end," Pater states. But is there really anyone there behind the thick wall of personality to experience his or her dream of a world? Pater continues:

Analysis goes a step further still, and assures us that those impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off— that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unwrapping of ourselves. (151-52)

If Pater's argument "drifts" from a stress on the individual self to an emphasis on the fluctuating nature of that self, the consistency of Pater's imagery is noteworthy. In the "Conclusion," he describes life as "a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream," while in *Plato and Platonism*, published twenty years later, races, laws and arts
are characterized as "ripples" constantly beginning and ending on "the great river of organic life" (15). This ceaseless motion is suggested by the syntax of the last sentence of the passage from the "Conclusion" quoted above: "It is with this movement . . . that analysis leaves off"; a hyphen brings the sentence to an apparent stop--but then it begins again, suggesting the "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving" that characterizes Pater's conception of the self.

In Plato and Platonism, Pater discusses two Heraclitean epigrams alongside the one that serves as an epigraph for the "Conclusion:": "'No one has ever passed twice over the same stream.' Nay, the passenger himself is without identity. Upon the same stream at the same moment we do, and do not, embark: for we are, and are not" (10). Heraclitus's paradox refers to the notion that having passed over a stream once, the second time one crosses it, time has passed, so both the stream and the individual are no longer quite the same. This paradox is an apt expression of the twilight existence of the Paterian self. Perpetually to be and not to be may seem the height of alienated indecision. However, Pater is not so much out-Hamleting Hamlet as trying to live with a situation where either being or not being is no longer a question, but an actuality in world whose only certainty seems to be uncertainty.

Heraclitus possesses a strong attraction for many relativistic thinkers. Given Pater's belief that modern philosophical and scientific thought was substantiating the relativistic intuitions of Heraclitus, the following passage by another "prince of the relative," Werner Heisenberg, would probably have pleased him, since Heisenberg makes a very "Paterian" linkage between Heraclitus and modern thought. The passage is worth quoting at length, since it includes a succinct account of the key Heraclitean ideas which influenced Pater:

In the philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus the concept of Becoming occupies the foremost place. He regarded that which moves, the fire, as the basic element. The difficulty, to reconcile the idea of one fundamental principle with the infinite variety of phenomena, is solved for him by
recognizing that the strife of the opposites is really a kind of harmony. For Heraclitus the world is at once one and many, it is just "the opposite tension" of the opposites that constitutes the unity of the One. He says: "We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife."

Looking back to the development of Greek philosophy up to this point one realizes that it has been borne from the beginning to this stage by the tension between the One and the Many. For our senses the world consists of an infinite variety of things and events, colors and sounds. But in order to understand it we have to introduce some kind of order, and order means to recognize what is equal, it means some sort of unity. From this springs the belief that there is one fundamental principle, and at the same time the difficulty to derive from it the infinite variety of things. That there should be a material cause for all things was a natural starting point since the world consists of matter. But when one carried the idea of fundamental unity to the extreme one came to that infinite and eternal undifferentiated Being which, whether material or not, cannot in itself explain the infinite variety of things. This leads to the antithesis of Being and Becoming and finally to the solution of Heraclitus, that the change itself is the fundamental principle; the "imperishable change, that renovates the world," as the poets have called it. But the change itself is not a material cause and therefore is represented in the philosophy of Heraclitus by the fire as the basic element, which is both matter and a moving force.

We may remark at this point that modern physics is in some way extremely near to the doctrines of Heraclitus. If we replace the word "fire" by the word "energy" we can almost repeat his statements word for word from our modern point of view. Energy is in fact the substance from which
all elementary particles, all atoms and therefore all things are made, and energy is that which moves. Energy is a substance, since its total amount does not change, and the elementary particles can actually by made from this substance as is seen in many experiments on the creation of elementary particles. Energy can be changed into motion, into heat, into light and into tension. Energy may be called the fundamental cause for all change in the world. (62-63; my emphasis)

The passage offers an interesting and, of course, anachronistic, light on Pater's "energy imagery" in the "Conclusion": "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?" (152). To maintain this energy is success in life, and one way of conserving energy is to refrain from forming too rigid habits: "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own" (152). But although Pater advocates a relaxing of constraints, he is not arguing that "anything goes." He wants to "court" new impressions, the erotic hint is hardly accidental, but he also wants to "be for ever curiously testing new opinions" (152). In other words, Pater's curiosity does not stop at traditional opinions, he wants to test the new ones as well. This "curious testing" is applied not only to two of Pater's more important influences, science and philosophy, but also to the Citadel of Aestheticism, the individual self. To question the orthodoxies of others would be consistent with the individualistic side of Aestheticism, but to doubt one's own orthodoxies is taking alienation to new heights--a move that turns alienation into art.

We have seen how in the "Conclusion" Pater singles out the orthodoxies of Comte and Hegel. His interest in both writers is well-known. In this instance they may be seen as representing two competing modes of thinking: science and idealistic philosophy. The text of the "Conclusion" was first published as a part of the essay "Poems by William Morris" in The Westminster Review in 1868, i.e. two years after "Coleridge's Writings," where
Pater had linked Hegel with ancient thought and Comte with modern thought. Pater is clearly on the side of modern thought, which explains why he urges his readers not to get too caught up with Hegelian orthodoxies, but he also wants to keep the orthodoxies of the representative of science at a certain distance. This need for distance, this commitment to noncommitment, is characteristic of Epicurean Aesthetism, and eventually it leads to taking up a sceptical attitude towards one's own orthodoxies. Attitude is a crucial word here. Pater takes up an attitude, not only towards the flux of the external world, but also towards the flow of his own mind. By doing so he becomes an Epicurean of the flux, listening, as it were, to the strange music of chance. Furthermore, Pater's Epicureanism is also manifested in his materialist leanings. For materialists, human beings are ever-changing because the elements of which they are made are in perpetual motion. Pater writes:

Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us: it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many currents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations. That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them--a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it. (The Renaissance 150)

For Pater, Epicurus, and modern physicalists, the individual life is ultimately "but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names" (The Renaissance 150). In the "Conclusion" the image of the web, the inescapable web of life, is taken up from the previous chapter on Winckelmann: "a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world" (148). The Paterian self is alone, while at the same time connected with the "central forces" of
A product of nature, the Paterian self is both alienated from and connected with the world. Making the most of this peculiar situation is the theme of the "Conclusion." Epicurean Aesthetes know that the self is in continual drift. They realize that trying to resist it would be futile—the only "rest" comes with death—but, as Pater would say, there is still something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch the fatal combinations which make up the perpetually weaving and unweaving web of experience. Pater intertwines ethics and aesthetics as the question of free will melts into a question of personal style. Taking up an attitude towards the flux cannot stop it, but what it can do is impart a sense of grace to the individual and, in the bargain, allow him or her the make experience as fruitful as possible: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (The Renaissance 152). Pater knows full well that the ecstasy cannot really be maintained, for earlier in the "Conclusion" he had written: "This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (150).

A significant part of the Epicurean Aesthetic outlook is an acknowledgment of the scientific method of observation and experiment. A few lines from an essay by one of these experimenters, Huxley, offer an interesting gloss on Pater's "Conclusion." In the essay "On the Physical Basis of Life," printed in 1869 but originally given as lecture, Huxley tells his listeners: "Every word uttered by a speaker costs him some physical loss; and, in the strictest sense, he burns that other may have light—so much eloquence, so much of his body resolved into carbonic acid, water, and urea. It is clear that this process of expenditure cannot go on for ever" (146). Although not as blunt a Huxley, Pater is aware

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6 An example of such "central forces" would be the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics. In The Age of Science: The Scientific World-View in the Nineteenth Century, David Knight observes: "It was the Second Law of Thermodynamics which gave Victorian intellectuals a certain frisson because it seemed to imply that the world was running down" (163).
of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that heat will flow only from hot to cold. A flame that burns must eventually burn out.7

Peter Ackroyd concludes his review of a new biography of Pater by asking: "How does one burn with a hard, gem-like flame?" (90). Ackroyd's tone is sardonic, but the question is legitimate. We have seen how Pater derives his flame imagery from Heraclitus, employing it as a metaphor for the self: like fire the Paterian self changes ceaselessly, yet continuing to exist while the interval given to it lasts. But then Pater adds the hardness of the gem-like to the ever-changing fire. This merging of contraries results in a striking, but potentially confusing, image. In spite of all his talk about relativism, the incessant flux will not suffice for Pater. Jonathan Loesberg gives a good analysis of Pater's complex feelings towards change:

Pater defines his world in the empirical terms of flux, seeing those who do not accept flux and relativity as blind to "the tendency of modern thought." Yet he also clearly wants to define a position from which to savour sensation, one that accepts friction but that is not caught up within it, a position that transcends sensation. Accordingly, Pater wants a form of sensation that is also an act of sensation, a form that allows a position from which to observe flux and yet may still be quickened, vitalized by that flux—since nothing else will quicken or vitalize. (19-20)

Loesberg delineates how Pater both accepts and resists change. The coexistence of these two impulses is reflected in the dual nature of the Paterian flame—a truly successful life is the one that can maintain the precarious balance between accepting flux and being

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7 That Pater was aware of, and interested in, the frisson that could be derived from the Second Law of Thermodynamics is evident from the passage I have already quoted from Plato and Platonism and the story "Sebastian Van Storck" from Imaginary Portraits, although this may be missed in a casual reading, since for stylistic reasons Pater never uses such technical terms as "entropy," but prefers to talk of "the slow disintegration by which nature herself is levelling the eternal hills" (127).
dissipated by it. The need for discipline in face of disintegration is emphasized in one of Pater's more importance influences, Baudelaire, especially in his theories on the dandy. "The specific beauty of the dandy," writes Baudelaire, "consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakable determination to remain unmoved; one is reminded of a latent fire, whose existence is merely suspected, and which, if it wanted to, but it does not, could burst forth in all its brightness" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 422). Without the hardness of the gem the flame would burn itself out in an inelegant frenzy.

Baudelaire has been singled out as being of supreme importance in the aesthetic examination of and adjustment to the increasing flux of modernity (cf. Benjamin's influential study Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism). Pater continues these explorations, with the crucial difference that he aligns himself with the relativistic implications of modern science, thus rejecting the craving for the absolute that runs through Baudelaire's work. While Baudelaire views the Aesthete's restraint as an intimation of a timeless, supernatural realm, Pater divorces Aestheticism from such Platonic strivings. The Epicurean Aesthetic "determination to remain unmoved" is the determination of a constantly flowing consciousness, striving not for transcendence, but for the successful synthesis of the heat of flame with the hardness of the gem.
vi. Marius the Epicurean Aesthete

It is not particularly surprising that the sensuous, relativistic "Conclusion" to The Renaissance should have been interpreted as urging late Victorian virgins to make the most of time. That it was "not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives," as T. S. Eliot acidly puts it (32), was sufficient reason for Pater to withdraw it from the second edition of the book. But he was not troubled enough to withdraw it completely, for it appeared in subsequent editions published during his lifetime, accompanied with the following footnote:

This brief "Conclusion" was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here, with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original meaning. I have dealt more fully in Marius the Epicurean with the thoughts suggested by it. (The Renaissance 150)

Although Pater states that Marius the Epicurean represents a fuller working out of the views suggested by the "Conclusion," many critics interpret the novel as a retraction of the more daring secular and relativistic opinions of Pater's early writings in favour of kinder, gentler, essentially Christian, values. That Pater both omitted and mitigated the anti-Christian sentiments of some of his earlier work is beyond dispute. A directly confrontational remark like the following from "Coleridge's Writings" is deleted in the revised form of the essay: "The Catholic church and humanity are two powers that divide the intellect and spirit of man" (115). Furthermore, in the original version of the "Conclusion" Pater writes: "The service of philosophy, and of religion and culture as well, to the human spirit, is to startle it into a sharp and eager observation." In the revised

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8 See for instance Benson 90, Charlesworth 50, Monsman 95-97, and Ryals 157-74. Critics who see more of a continuity between The Renaissance and Marius the Epicurean include Knoepflmacher 189-222, McGrath 45, Buckler 266-72, and Loesberg 266-72.
version the reference to religion is deleted: "The service of philosophy, of speculative
culture, towards the human spirit, is to rouse, to startle it to a life of constant and eager
observation" (152). Now, whether such omissions and modifications represent a change in
Pater's position or a diplomatic, at times purely evasive, restating is another matter. I agree
with those critics who take Pater at his word when he says that Marius the Epicurean is
intended to deal more thoroughly with the controversial issues raised in the "Conclusion."
While the issue of Christianity plays an important role in the novel, it is not only
Christianity that is at stake, but supernaturalism in general, because the event in Marius's
life which comes closest to a religious revelation actually occurs before he really becomes
acquainted with Christianity. If Marius the Epicurean is a Christian novel then Pater has
indeed altered his position radically, abandoning his former allegiance to modern thought,
with its relativistic physical sciences, in favour of ancient thought, with its absolutist
"spiritualistic philosophies" ("Coleridge's Writings" 119). Such a shift is not impossible, of
course, but it is improbable in this case.

As a young man at Oxford, Pater lost his religion due to the influence of relativistic
ideas. But from the start, adherence to modern notions did not preclude a detached
interest in what for him had become outworn systems of speculation and belief. One of
Pater's biographers tells us that his undergraduate companions, Matthew Moorhouse and
Robert McQueen, witnessed his loss of faith and were "pained, puzzled, and even possibly
a little dazzled by the to them infernal squibs which Pater exploded under beliefs they had
absorbed as children and which, like children, they simply felt must be true" (Levey 82).
But on occasions, Pater would advance something even more startling than
straightforward attacks on Christianity, namely:

a defense of religious ceremonies on the grounds of their aesthetic appeal.
Moorhouse felt ill at ease in witnessing High Church ritualism, and in an
effort to convert Pater to this viewpoint took him to some Low Church
services. "Spectacularly disappointing," was Pater's comment. As to the
sermons preached, they were to be judged entirely, to Moorhouse's amazement, by their language. Anticipating Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, even down to his languid utterance, Pater observed, "It doesn't matter what is said as long as it is said beautifully." (Levey 82-83)

Pater's loss of faith did not exclude a lifelong interest in ecclesiastic rituals and music, a strange habit which lead to Benjamin Jowett's exasperated, but apt, judgement: "Mr. Pater, you seem to think that religion is all idolatry" (Hough 146). This early instance of accepting Christianity on secular grounds strongly suggests that one need not propose a radical shift in Pater's allegiance to account for the presence of supernaturalism in Marius the Epicurean. From a strictly logical point of view, modern thought and ancient are opposites, but from an aesthetic angle, it is possible to align oneself with the former, while at the same time experiencing the "peculiar charm" of the latter ("Coleridge's Writings" 107).

An important clue to a reading of Pater's novel may be found by reflecting on its full title: Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas. First of all the title says "Marius the Epicurean," not "Marius the Cyrenaic," or "Marius the Christian." Between these two extremes--represented by his two friends, the pagan hedonist Flavian and the austerely Christian Cornelius, respectively--we have Marius the Epicurean. Epicureanism represents a refinement of Cyrenaicism, the purely hedonistic philosophy of Aristippus of Cyrene (c. 435-355 B.C.). While Epicureanism is hedonist, in the sense that its emphasis is on pleasure, it differs crucially from Cyrenaicism in its understanding of what precisely constitutes pleasure. By pleasure Cyrenaics mean bodily gratification, which they place above mental enjoysments. Epicureans, however, consider peace of mind to be the highest pleasure, and thus evaluate mental and bodily pleasures on the basis of whether these contribute to one's peace of mind or not. Epicurus says: "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself. But the things which produce certain pleasures bring troubles many times greater than the pleasures" ("The Principal Doctrines" 26). Epicurus is very concerned with
distinguishing his brand of hedonism from less discriminating kinds: "So when we say that pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul" ("Letter to Menoeceus" 25). The point concerning pain is crucial, for unlike the Cyrenaics, Epicureans regard the absence of pain as a type of pleasure (Long 61-63).

In the same way that it is necessary to pay close attention to the designation of Marius as an Epicurean, rather than a Christian or Cyrenaic, the novel's subtitle is equally important--His Sensations and Ideas. Given Pater's interest in philosophy, one way of understanding the subtitle is by taking it as a reference to two great opposing schools of thought: materialism and idealism. In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant writes: "The distinction between the two schools, subtle as it is, dates from the earliest times; and the two positions have ever since been maintained in unbroken continuity." Kant selects Epicurus as the outstanding philosopher among the "sensualists" and Plato among the "intellectualists" (667). "Sensation" is a key word in materialist and empiricist philosophies from Epicurus onwards, while "Idea" is a key word in idealist philosophies since Plato. A reflection on the full title of Pater's novel suggests that, as an Epicurean, Marius is ultimately a materialist and empiricist, but that his super-subtle brand of Epicureanism allows him to partake not only of the fruits of his own sensualistic philosophy, but also of those of the rivalling intellectualist school. A description of this peculiar brand of Epicureanism is given in the chapter "New Cyrenaicism" where, after reflecting on his situation, Marius draws the following conclusion:

If he could but count upon the present, if a life brief at best could not certainly be shown to conduct one anywhere beyond itself, if men's highest curiosity was indeed so persistently baffled--then, with the Cyrenaics of all ages, he would at least fill up the measure of that present with vivid sensations, and such intellectual apprehensions as, in strength and
directness and in their immediately realized values at the bar of an actual experience, are most like sensations. (83)

A life of sensation is, indeed, Marius's goal, but it must be a life of select sensation (81). The narrator argues against a hasty interpretation of the "Conclusion" of _The Renaissance_ and follows it closely in order to elaborate on the thoughts suggested by it (Small 227). For instance, in his gently sardonic way he observes that the maxim "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 at the table" (83).

In the chapter preceding "New Cyrenaicism," the narrator explains how in his reading Marius works his way back through Epicurus and his famous Roman follower Lucretius to "the writer who was in a certain sense the teacher of both, Heraclitus of Ionia" (73). Heraclitus is their teacher only in "a certain sense" because, while his full doctrine preaches the ultra-mysterious Logos, his effect on Greek philosophy was to undermine the possibility of absolute knowledge, mystical or otherwise: "And as it had been with his original followers in Greece, so it happened now with the later Roman disciple"--and, one might add, Pater himself (76). Resembling his author, Marius's attitude towards the transcendent aspects of the Heraclitean philosophy is typical of the Epicurean Aesthete, who, while admiring ideas, pledges his allegiance to sensations:

The bold mental flight of the old Greek master from the fleeting, competing, objects of experience to that one universal life, in which the whole sphere of physical change might be reckoned as but a single pulsation, remained by him as hypothesis only--the hypothesis he actually preferred, as in itself most credible, however scantily realizable even by the imagination--yet still as but one unverified hypothesis among many others concerning the first principle of things. He might reserve it as a fine, high, visionary consideration, very remote upon the intellectual ladder, just at the point indeed where that ladder seemed to pass into the clouds, but for
which there was certainly no time left just now by his eager interest in the real objects so close to him, on the lowlier earthy steps nearest the ground.

(76)

The narrator reverses the preference of idealists by having the Epicurean Marius actually prefer the "lowlier earthy steps" to the supposedly lovelier ideal steps, the slender possibility of which is admired, but also subtly mocked by the suggestion that if one were ever to reach them one's head would be firmly in the clouds. A realm beyond the vicissitudes of the empirical is seriously questioned by Marius. For him, like Protagoras, the individual is to him- or herself the measure of all things (75)—a radically sceptical condition which summarily closes the high a priori road to universal and necessary truths: "At least he would entertain no theory of conduct which did not allow its due weight to this primary element of incertitude or negation, in the conditions of man's life" (76-77).

Judged by traditional novelistic standards the story of Marius is uncommonly uneventful, but the reason for this is that Pater's hero is a philosophical pilgrim whose progress can easily be illustrated without much outward action. That Marius is intended as a representative of a larger intellectual development may be seen from the narrator's comments on Marius's arrival at the notion of uncertainty as an inescapable condition of human life: "Just here he joined company, retracing in his individual mental pilgrimage the historic order of human thought, with another wayfarer on the journey, another ancient Greek master, the founder of the Cyrenaic philosophy, whose weighty traditional utterances (for he had left no writing) served in turn to give effective outline to the contemplations of Marius" (77). We have already seen how this pilgrimage continues through Epicurus and Lucretius, a process leading to the relativistic "modern thought" of Pater's own time. The connection between Aristippus of Cyrene and modernity is explicitly made by the narrator:

The difference between him and those obscure thinkers [e.g. Heraclitus in his mystical meditations on the Logos] is almost like that between an
ancient thinker generally, and a modern man of the world: it was the
difference between the mystic in his cell, or the prophet in the desert, and
the expert, cosmopolitan, administrator of his dark sayings, translating the
abstract thoughts of the master into terms, first of all, of sentiment. (77)

Following Aristippus in his scepticism and "healthfully sensuous wisdom," Marius's maxim
becomes "Life as the end of life" (81). Anxious, however, to avert the reader's too hasty
interpretation of this saying the narrator adds: "Not pleasure, but a general completeness
of life, was the practical ideal to which this anti-metaphysical metaphysics really pointed"
(81). After the harsh reaction to the "Conclusion" of The Renaissance, Pater is anxious not
to be seen as promoting vulgar hedonism, hence his reservation about the controversial
word "pleasure," but this is mere evasiveness since the implication is that "a general
completeness of life" is to be preferred solely on Epicurean grounds. The difference,
however, between the Epicurean and Cyrenaic definitions of pleasure must always be kept
in mind. Restating and continuing the argument from the "Conclusion," the narrator says:

Conceded that what is secure in our existence is but the sharp apex of the
present moment between two hypothetical eternities, and all that is real in
our experience but a series of fleeting impressions:--so Marius continued
the sceptical argument he had condensed, as the matter to hold by, from his
various philosophical reading:--given, that we are never to get beyond the
walls of this closely shut cell of one's own personality; that the ideas we are
somehow impelled to form of an outer world, and of other minds akin to
our own, are, it may be, but a day-dream, and the thought of any world
beyond, a day-dream perhaps idler still: then, he, at least, in whom those
fleeting impressions--faces, voices, material sunshine--were very real and
imperious, might well set himself to the consideration, how such actual
moments as they passed might be made to yield their utmost, by the most
dexterous training of capacity. (84)
The discipline required to train oneself to make the most of experience is likely to remain outside the range of the ordinary glutton. The next sentence, with its emphasis on the material world and on making the best of a bad matter, reveals Marius's Epicurean Aestheticism: "Amid abstract metaphysical doubts, as to what might lie one step only beyond that experience, reinforcing the deep, original materialism or earthliness of human nature itself, bound so intimately to the sensuous world, let him at least make the most of what was 'here and now'' (84).

In the previous chapter, the narrator characterizes Marius's outlook, as "a scepticism almost dryly practical," thereby suggesting an intermediary position between a despairing scepticism, on the one hand, and a facile optimism, on the other. His is "a scepticism which developed the opposition between things as they are and our impressions and thoughts concerning them—the possibility, if an outward world does really exist, of some faultiness in our apprehension of it—the doctrine, in short, of what is termed 'the subjectivity of knowledge'' (79). Pater's discussion, here and in what follows, is probably informed by his reading of the sceptical portions of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason—the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves, and the dilemma in which human reason perpetually finds itself. Kant writes: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer" (7). The narrator of Marius the Epicurean says that the subjectivity of knowledge

is a consideration, indeed, which lies as an element of weakness,\textsuperscript{9} like some admitted fault or flaw, at the very foundation of every philosophical

\textsuperscript{9} In Plato and Platonism Pater uses very similar phrasing in a discussion on the connection between the paradoxes of Zeno and Kant's later analysis of the conflict of human reason with itself. Pater writes of Zeno's mastery of the paradox: "It may be said that no one has ever really answered him; the difficulties with which he played so nicely being really connected with those "antinomies," or contradictions, or inconsistencies, of our thoughts,
account of the universe; which confronts all philosophies at their starting, but with which none have really dealt conclusively, some perhaps not quite sincerely; which those who are not philosophers dissipate by 'common', but unphilosophical, sense, or by religious faith. The peculiar strength of Marius was, to have apprehended this weakness on the threshold of human knowledge, in the whole range of its consequences. (79; my emphasis)

The parallel with Kant's view of the "peculiar fate of human reason," is noteworthy: Marius's awareness of the peculiar weakness of his, and everybody else's reason, is also his "peculiar strength." It is characteristic of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility that an opinion which could have been expressed in a more straightforward manner should be presented in the playful and peculiar guise of paradox.

At the end of the abstruse and sensuous musings presented in the "New Cyrenaicism," Marius is called to the imperial city. After he has experienced the great spectacle of Rome it is typical of his restless intellect that he should start to question not only the orthodoxies of the people he meets there, but also his own Epicurean theory. This questioning occurs in a chapter titled appropriately enough "Second Thoughts," in which the narrator presents Marius reflecting on the species of Epicureanism he had previously developed:

It had been a theory, avowedly, of loss and gain—so to call it: of an economy. If, therefore, it missed something in the commerce of life, which some other theory of practice was able to include, if it made a needless sacrifice, then it must be, in a manner, inconsistent with itself, and lack theoretic completeness. Did it make such a sacrifice? What did it lose, or cause one to lose? (149)

which more than two thousand years afterwards Kant noted as actually inherent in the mind itself—a certain constitutional weakness or limitation there, in dealing by way of cold-blooded reflexion with the direct presentation of its experience" (22; my emphasis).
To talk explicitly of an Epicurean "theory" marks a change from the "Conclusion" of The Renaissance, where Pater's tone had been decidedly anti-theoretical: "[W]e shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch" (The Renaissance 152). Nevertheless, this change only represents an evolution of an idea from the "Conclusion" itself, i.e. that we should not only question the orthodoxies of others but our own as well (The Renaissance 152). At this later stage in his thinking, Pater has acknowledged that an anti-theoretical theory is a theory. In Marius the Epicurean, the "sequel" to the "Conclusion," Pater shows a young man refining his early hedonistic philosophy in order to make it more consistent with its own hidden implications.

Marius has "second thoughts" about his early Epicureanism after listening to a lecture by the Stoic rhetorician Cornelius Fronto, whose Stoicism, incidentally, is so refined as to be "almost Epicurean"--a subtle, but arguably crucial, precondition for his being influenced by this man at all (143). Fronto's defence of the "old morality" of Stoicism is that in the Roman world it represents "one mode of comeliness in things--as it were music, or a kind of artistic order . . ." (143), "such a music as no one who had once caught its harmonies would willingly jar" (147). This modulation of morality into music appeals to Marius, although he does not see it actualized in Stoicism, whose failure, in his view, is represented by its most illustrious practitioner's, the emperor Marcus Aurelius's, condoning of the barbarism of the Roman arena. The notion of morals as music stays with Marius, yet, as is to be expected, he is not satisfied with the mere idea, but wants to make it sensuous: "But where might Marius search for all this, as more than an intellectual abstraction? . . . Where was that comely order, to which as a great fact of experience he must give its due; to which, as to all other beautiful 'phenomena' in life, he must, for his own peace, adjust himself?" (148). The clue to the answer to these questions is given in the final sentence of the chapter in which it is asked. As Marius comes out of the lecture
hall after listening to the Stoic's talk, the knight Cornelius rides past "with that new song he had heard once before floating from his lips" (148). The "new song" is Christianity.\(^{10}\)

Marius is drawn closer to Christianity after a unique experience on a serene day in the country when he feels he may have come in contact with a supernatural presence, "an eternal friend to man, just hidden behind the veil of a mechanical and material order, but only just behind it, ready perhaps even now to break through . . ." (176). This "eternal friend" is the "Great Ideal" of both Stoicism and Christianity, and although Marius's sensations and ideas "never fell again precisely into focus as on that day" the event has a profound effect on him. The last sentence of the chapter in which the event is recounted reads as follows: "Must not all that remained of life be but a search for the equivalent of that Ideal, among so-called actual things—a gathering together of every trace or token of it, which his actual experience might present?" (180-81). The sentence marks the end of the third, and penultimate, part of the book. A Christian reader might see what remains of the book, and of Marius's life, as a fulfillment of the Great Ideal, since in the fourth and last part Cornelius introduces Marius to a comely Christian congregation, and although Marius dies soon afterwards, his death is the result of his risking his life for Cornelius. The knight's survival could therefore be seen as symbolizing the triumph of altruistic Christian idealism over egocentric pagan materialism.

What Ian Small calls the "provisional nature of Pater's narrative" (xx-xxi) certainly makes a Christian reading possible. But it is this very quality of tentativeness which

\(^{10}\) To have the Stoic and Christian share the same name is one of the many subtle stylistic devices that characterize this novel. Cornelius the Christian supplies Marius the Epicurean with the sensuous content for Cornelius the Stoic's abstract idea. The two Corneliuses represent the old and new phases of Roman civilization--the name that connects them alludes to Pater's notion of the intricate relationship between growth and decay, being and non-being. The process that he describes in the "Conclusion" as the "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (152) applies not only to his notion of personal experience, but of experience in general. For instance, the early Christians' tombs have their marble taken from pagan tombs: "the inscription sometimes a palimpsest, the new epitaph being woven into the faded letters of an earlier one" (198).
simultaneously undermines such a reading. The chapter in which Marius's supposedly supernatural experience occurs is titled "The Will as Vision." Recalling Marcus Aurelius's words that "'Tis in thy power to think as thou wilt" Marius wonders: "Might the will itself be an organ of knowledge, of vision?" (176-77). Surely, "will" and "vision," in the sense of revelation, are not the same thing, and one is led to interpret the title of the chapter as another case of the narrator's gentle irony. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the narrator makes it clear that the supposedly supernatural experience has in fact a perfectly natural explanation: "On this day truly no mysterious light, no irresistibly leading hand from afar, reached him; only, the peculiarly tranquil influence of its first hour increased steadily upon him in a manner with which, as he conceived, the aspects of the place he was then visiting had something to do" (177). Marius's idea of a supra-sensory companion comes not from above, but from below, i.e. from memories of actual friendships his imagination constructs a friendly supernatural presence. That this idea will then play a significant role in his life is not called into question, but divine revelation is denied in favour of human will (one has the feeling that at this point in his career Pater is too polite, or cunning, to say wish-fulfillment).

The emphasis on the aesthetic, at the expense of the theological, aspects of religion is reinforced by the characterization of Christianity as a "new song." One of the chief attractions of Christianity for Marius is its "wonderful singing" (200). He comes to appreciate Christianity as "the most beautiful thing in the world" (214). Time and circumstance are also crucial elements his judgement:

He had lighted, by one of the peculiar intellectual good-fortunes of his life, upon a period when, even more than in the days of austere ascésis which had preceded and were to follow it, the church was true for a moment, truer perhaps than she would ever be again, to that element of profound serenity in the soul of her Founder which reflected the eternal goodwill of
God to man, "in whom", according to the oldest version of the angelic message, "He is well-pleased". (207)

To shut oneself from experiencing "the most beautiful thing in the world" would, indeed, be a blunder in the careful Epicurean economy of life. The Great Idea of Christianity begins to give shape to Marius's sensations, but what makes this influence possible has been, and continues to be, his own Epicureanism. After Cornelius takes him to the small congregation that meets at the house of Cecilia, Marius first senses the beauty of the new religion, but then has second thoughts about the potentially constraining nature of that beauty. The moment he detects more than a purely aesthetic claim on him he gets anxious. Certainly, the "strange new society" he had discovered has its benefits: "Merciful intention made itself known remedially here, in the mere contact of the air, like a soft touch upon aching flesh" (202):

On the other hand, he was aware that new responsibilities also might be awakened--new and untried responsibilities--a demand for something from him in return. Might this new vision, like the malignant beauty of pagan Medusa, be exclusive of any admiring gaze upon anything but itself? At least he suspected that, after the beholding of it, he could never again be altogether as he had been before. (202; my emphasis)

Making the reference of the pronoun "it" unclear, i.e. it can refer to both Christianity and Medusa, contributes to the ambiguous, subtly subversive, tone of the narrative: in the space of two sentences connotations of Christianity shift from the merciful to the monstrous. Marius is faced with the difficult question of whether or not he should pursue the new religion any further. The dilemma can only be solved in the context of his Epicureanism: "Faithful to the spirit of his early Epicurean philosophy and the impulse to surrender himself, in perfectly liberal inquiry about it, to anything that as a matter of fact attracted or impressed him strongly, Marius informed himself with much pains concerning the church in Cecilia's house . . ." (203). The use of the word "pains" in relation to a
philosophy of pleasure shows the crucial difference between Epicureanism and Cyrenaicism. For the latter, pain should always be avoided, while for the former moments of discomfort are justified by the benefit they may ultimately bring. It is Marius's Epicurean curiosity that makes him continue his association with Christianity, but it is this very curiosity, and the need to preserve the freedom to exercise it in the future, that guard him against the absolutist claims of the new religion.

A passage from an earlier chapter titled "The Most Religious City in the World," illustrates how different Marius's attitude towards religion is from that of his unequivocally Christian friend, Cornelius. I have suggested that the narrator sometimes treats the titles of his chapter with gentle irony (the irony becomes most obvious and scathing in the chapter dealing with the cruelties of the Roman arena, "Manly Amusement"). On his ramble through the city with Cornelius, Marius finds out that Rome is not merely "the most religious city of the world," but that it has become "the romantic home of the wildest superstition": "Such superstition presented itself almost as religious mania in many an incident of his long ramble--incidents to which he gave his full attention, through contenting in some measure with a reluctance on the part of his companion, the motive of which he did not understand till long afterwards" (103). At this stage Marius is still unaware of his friend's already belonging to a religion that has an exclusive claim on his attention. The rest of the passage shows the way Marius can satisfy his curiosity about religious matters, without letting that curiosity chain him to any particular religion, or superstition--the relativistic narrator deliberately blurs the boundaries between the two, knowing that one man's religion is another's superstition:

Marius certainly did not allow this reluctance [of Cornelius] to deter his own curiosity. Had he not come to Rome partly under poetic vocation, to receive all those things, the very impress of life itself, upon the visual, the imaginative organ, as upon a mirror; to reflect them; to transmute them into golden words? He must observe that strange medley of superstition,
that centuries' growth, layer upon layer, of the curiosities of religion (one faith jostling another out of place) at least for its picturesque interest, and as an indifferent outsider might, not too deeply concerned in the question which, if any of them, was to be the survivor. (103-4)

Marius accepts Christianity because not doing so would run counter to the only philosophy to which he remains faithful, Epicureanism. Furthermore, as we have seen, it is his faithfulness to the temper of this materialist philosophy that leads him to have second thoughts about its early, somewhat dogmatic, formulation. The development of his Epicureanism, his realization that not allowing oneself to enjoy the beauties of Christianity is an unnecessary loss, marks the appearance of the undogmatic dogma, the commitment to noncommitment of Epicurean Aestheticism: a system of thought that is flexible enough to satisfy those who like Marius, and his author, experience life as a ceaseless flux.

Pater's preoccupation with the interplay of extinction and development saturates Marius the Epicurean. This is evident from the very first sentence of the novel:

As, in the triumph of Christianity, the old religion lingered latest in the country, and died out at last as but paganism--the religion of the villagers, before the advance of the Christian Church; so, in an earlier century, it was in places remote from town-life that the older and purer forms of paganism itself had survived the longest. While, in Rome, new religions had arisen with bewildering complexity around the dying one, the earlier and simpler patriarchal region, "the religion of Numa", as people loved to fancy, lingered on with little change amid the pastoral life, out of the habits and sentiment of which so much of it had grown. (3)

The complexity of the sentence structure reflects the "bewildering complexity" of the subject matter. The reader is confronted with three interconnected stages of religious development: Christianity; the old pagan religion, and the older and purer paganism known as the Religion of Numa. While most authors of historical novels strive to present
past periods with as much freshness as possible, Pater has his narrator deliberately remind
the reader of the layer upon historical layer that have accumulated on top of his chosen
period. Readers have to work their way through two "sediments" of religion, Christianity,
and the old religion, to reach the Religion of Numa. What Christianity is to the old pagan
religion, the old religion is to the Religion of Numa. Although the subject of the opening
chapter is Marius's experience of the Religion of Numa, right from the start the narrator
draws attention to the complex movement from one stage of religious development to the
next. As a practitioner of the "historical method" the narrator sets up a multiplicity of
comparison in an effort to understand and appreciate not only the past, but also the
present, for as the novel progresses it becomes increasingly clear that it is as much about
the time of Pater as that of Marius.

This focus on the parallels and differences between past and present suggests the
preoccupation with the aesthetic patterns that, to the duly trained eye, appear in flux.
What emerges from the multiple comparisons of the opening chapter are precisely such
patterns: in the play of history the old, pagan religion is forced to change places with
Christianity as the new religion reenacts, with its own unique variations, the role the old
religion had already played against the even older Religion of Numa. Recognizing and
deriving aesthetic pleasure from performances like these is the Epicurean Aesthete's goal
and achieving it involves taking up a dispassionate attitude towards the stream of
experience. Here Pater is drawing out and developing a "spectator attitude" that is present
in the classic Epicurean writers. Lucretius writes:

When the winds are troubling the waters on a mighty sea it is sweet to view
from the land the great struggles of another man; not because it is pleasant
or delightful that anyone should be distressed, but because it is sweet to see
the misfortunes from which you are yourself free. It is sweet too to watch
great battles which cover the plains if you yourself have no share in the
danger. But nothing is more pleasing than to be master of those tranquil
places which have been strongly fortified aloft by the teaching of wise men. From there you can look down upon other men and see them wandering purposelessly and straying as they search for a way of life—competing with their abilities, trying to outdo one another in social status, striving night and day with the utmost effort to rise to the heights of wealth and become masters of everything. Unhappy minds of men, blind hearts! How great the darkness, and how great the dangers in which this little life is spent. (3: 35; qtd. in Long 74)

Writing in an age reeling from the impact of Darwinism, Pater knows that no position is absolutely secure, not even that "fortified aloft by the teachings of wise men": today's wise victors quickly become tomorrow's foolish victims. The rise of Christianity in Marius's time, and its decline in Pater's, is a case in point—a case whose complex relation to the decline and fall of the Roman empire is an example of the type of patterns that Pater detects and salvages from the flux of history. At the time in which Marius the Epicurean is set, the second century A.D., Christianity seems a relatively insignificant force compared to the mighty Roman Empire; yet Pater's readers know how the new religion triumphed over the old world. In Pater's time, however, Christianity itself is under attack, and a central issue in his novel is a comparison between the second and the nineteenth centuries. Already in the second paragraph of the novel the narrator links Marius's youth to Wordsworth's speculations about the beneficial effects of nature on humanity (4). Later, the connection between past and present is made explicit: "That age and our own have much in common, many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives--from Rome, to Paris or London" (149). One of the difficulties Marius and his "modern representatives" have in common is a preoccupation with flux and uncertainty. Paradoxically, this difficulty they have in common complicates the comparison between "then and now," since one of the implications of Pater's relativism is the notion that it is not possible to view the past from
the vantage point of a completely fixed "now." Like the Paterian self, the Paterian "now" is and is not, which is to say that as a relativist Pater views history, both ancient and modern, as a continuous process, a stream in which both the observed and the observer are caught. That history may resemble a dark river where waves clash, disappear, and reappear in endless succession is the disheartening aspect of the flux. But to Epicurean Aesthetes this cannot be helped. Rather than trying to escape they accept the situation and start appreciating the endless forms of experience as they arise, evolve, and vanish on the stream.

The structure of Pater's novel reflects this view of existence as a ceaseless play of conflicting forces. The most Christian chapter of the book, "Divine Service," where Marius attends a mass celebrating the Eucharist, is followed by a chapter titled "A Conversation Not Imaginary," where Marius witnesses a sceptical philosopher demonstrate the highly debatable status of the most sacred ideas of religion and philosophy. However, these diametrically opposed powers, Christianity and scepticism, are presented within a framework which distinguishes the novel from being merely a pessimistic tract on the chaos of life. Rather, Marius experiences Christianity and scepticism as he would experience an artistic performance, and the reader is invited to do the same. In "Divine Service" the narrator observes: "And so it came to pass that on this morning Marius saw for the first time the wonderful spectacle--wonderful especially, in its evidential power over himself, over his own thoughts--of those who believe" (215). In "A Conversation Not Imaginary" Marius, and the reader, are treated to the spectacle of those who do not believe, as we witness the dialectical drama of an elegant master of scepticism reducing a dogmatic, idealistic philosophy student to a state of utter confusion.

What Pater presents in Marius the Epicurean is not so much a traditional story as a series of interconnected patterns or moods. The rise and fall, extinction and adaptation of the various systems of ideas in the mind of Marius are placed in the larger context of the vicissitudes of the Roman Empire, whose culture is paralleled with that of Pater's own
period. "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," he writes in The Renaissance (86)—and like music Pater's prose is highly structured, at times to the point of appearing static, while at the same time being concerned with ceaseless movement. This curious feature reflects the Epicurean Aesthetic attempt to unite the hardness of the gem with the heat of the flame. A passage from the novel's concluding chapter, "Anima Naturaliter Christiana,\textsuperscript{11} will serve as a conclusion to this discussion, for the segment illustrates the crucial formal and thematic concerns of the work:

For still, in a shadowy world, his deeper wisdom had ever been, with a sense of economy, with a jealous estimate of gain and loss, to use life, not as the means to some problematic end, but, as far as might be, from dying

\textsuperscript{11} Glossed in the Oxford edition of the text as "a soul [or mind] naturally Christian" (291). The use of this phrase, from Tertullian, is in my view, an example of the narrator's systematically ironic and ambiguous style, for while Marius never formally converts to Christianity the Christian strangers among whom he dies consider him a martyr to their cause. The Christians "took up his remains, and buried them secretly with their accustomed prayers; but with joy also, holding his death, according to their generous view in this matter, to have been of the nature of a martyrdom, and martyrdom, as the Church had always said, a kind of sacrament with plenary grace" (267; my emphasis). This is the end of Marius the Epicurean. Beside the Christians' "generous view" needs to be set the view of Marius himself: As he starts to fear for his life after risking it for Cornelius we are shown what he thinks of martyrdom: "To him, in truth, a death such as the recent death of those saintly brothers [recounted in chapter 14, "Manly Amusement"], seemed no glorious end. In his case, at least, the Martyrdom, as it was called—the overpowering act of testimony that Heaven had come down among men—would be but a common execution: from the drops of his blood there would spring no miraculous, poetic flowers; no eternal aroma would indicate the place of his burial; no plenary grace, overflowing for ever upon those who might stand around it. Had there been one to listen just then, there would have come, from the very depth of his desolation, and eloquent utterance at last, on the irony of men's fates, on the singular accidents of life and death" (261; my emphasis). The phrase "plenary grace" is a crucial link between the two passages, pointing to the relativistic conclusion that while the death of Marius is interpreted by the Christians as a cause for joy, we need, at the very least, to play the deceased's own view of the matter against the Christian one.
hour to dying hour, and end in itself:--a kind of music, all-sufficing to the
duly trained ear, even as it died out on the air. (264)

The narrator is describing the dying thoughts of Marius, the meaning of whose death, like so much in this novel, is deliberately left an open question. The reference to the necessity of discipline in order to appreciate the music of "a shadowy world" and the way the musical allusion is underscored by the near-rhyme of "ear" and "air" reflect the way the novel's conclusion makes the most of the death of an Epicurean Aesthete by presenting it with Paterian grace.
Chapter III

Oscar Wilde: Strange Perspectives

i. A Portrait of an Artist in the Making

Oscar Wilde continues to be the most spectacular figure of British Aestheticism. With characteristic lack of modesty he writes of himself: "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age" (De Profundis 194). In spite of opposing views that he was either indifferent to, or in flight from, the problems of his age, Wilde's claim can actually be defended on the grounds of his susceptibility to the crucial intellectual currents of the late Victorian period.

In the same way that much of Wilde's early poetry is a rather unsatisfactory amalgam of rhythms, moods, and images from Keats, Rossetti, Swinburne, and Arnold, to name a few, his early essays, "The Rise of Historical Criticism" and "The English Renaissance," are hardly more than discordant echoes of Ruskin, Arnold, and Pater. In addition to the overpowering influence of literary figures on his work, the 1989 publication of Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of a Mind in the Making demonstrates the effect contemporary philosophical, scientific, and social thought had on him. The notebooks show him grappling with the ideas of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, as well as Victorian thinkers such as Mill, Spencer, Huxley, Tyndall, and Clifford. What has contributed to charges of Wilde's escapism and shallowness is undoubtedly a tendency noted by Richard Ellmann: "However passionately he read in philosophy, the history of science, and literature, the reputation Wilde sought was of being brilliant without zeal" (Oscar Wilde 41). In fact, before Wilde
turned himself into the most genuinely dazzling figure of the Victorian fin de siècle, his writings suggest a mind dazzled by the conflicting energies of a century which, in spite of his frequent criticism of its ugliness, he nonetheless calls "one of the most important eras in the progress of the world" ("The Critic as Artist" 407).

In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde's mouthpiece, the artistic critic Gilbert, argues that what makes the nineteenth century "a turning point in history" is the rise of critical inquiry, the secular and undogmatic temper that Pater refers to as "modern thought." Although both Pater's and Wilde's notions are informed by Arnold's tireless promotion of "Criticism," for them criticism is a more iconoclastic power: "An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all," says Gilbert, and with epigrammatic abruptness he attributes the "turning point in history" to the work of Darwin and Renan--"the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God" ("The Critic as Artist" 388, 407).

The secular, pro-Darwinian attitude of "The Critic as Artist" (first published in 1889 but extensively rewritten and collected with "The Decay of Lying," "Pen Pencil and Poison, and "The Truth of Masks" in Intentions [1891]) marks a crucial break from Wilde's earlier work, which suggested a more "ancient" frame of mind, to use Pater's distinction between ancient and modern thought. In my view, a shift from "ancient" absolutism to "modern" relativism is central to Wilde's development as an artist. His views change from a rather confused, but predominantly Platonic, Aestheticism to a more intellectually and aesthetically consistent Epicurean Aestheticism. The beneficial effect of this change in world-view is reflected in works written between 1889 and 1895. Intentions marks a crucial stage in the development, for with it Wilde moves to a relativistic theory of beauty, a point put most forcefully in a new conclusion to "The Truth of Masks," an essay originally published in 1885:

Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic
standpoint, and in aesthetic criticism attitude is everything. For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. (432)

In contrast to the relativism of *Intentions*, we have such essays as "The Tomb of Keats" (1877), where Wilde goes into Platonic raptures over "the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens" (5), and "The Poets and the People" (1887) which concludes with a Ruskinian cry for a poet who will "rouse the nation to a sense of duty and inspire the people with hope . . ." (45). Surely any talk of duty, apart from the aesthetic variety, is bad form, coming from a self-proclaimed leader of an aesthetic movement.

If much of Wilde's early work is marred by the unresolved conflict of too many philosophies ("art for art's sake," transcendent theories of art, Ruskinian didacticism, etc.), his later work is saved, paradoxically, by yet another influence: Epicureanism. The conclusion of "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) contains one of the more explicit statements of the Epicurean basis of his later work: "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment" (289; see also *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 77). In my view, it is the fusion of Epicureanism and Aestheticism, the synthesis I call Epicurean Aestheticism, that finally provides Wilde with an architecture capable of giving intellectual and aesthetic shape to the wild heights and strange perspectives of his verbal palaces.

"The Soul of Man under Socialism" is an example of the playful and "irresponsible" nature of Wilde's art, for to believe with Regenia Gagnier that the essay suggests Wilde's commitment to a cause, one has to ignore the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure he takes in turning socialism on its head by arguing that its triumph consists in freeing the rich from the terrible bore of having property, and paving the way for its own antithesis, individualism (Gagnier, *Critical Essays* 6-9). Wilde is, of course, not being totally trivial. He never is. But he is never totally serious either. A scene from *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) may further help to indicate the playfully Epicurean tone that I see as the hallmark of his best work. As Ernest enters the stage, Algernon asks: "How are you, my
dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?" To which Ernest responds: "Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?" (1.38-41). The Epicurean's key concern becomes the controlling force of Wilde's aesthetics. Continuing the work of Pater, Wilde shifts the connotations of "Criticism" from "high seriousness" à la Arnold to Epicurean delight. The contemplative life is presented as the finest gift of the critical spirit and "in a world where after all we must needs make the most of things" this is the closest the Epicurean Aesthete can get to a divine state:

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 [cf. Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus" 25]. We, too, might live like them, and set ourselves to witness with appropriate emotions the varied scenes that man and nature afford. ("The Critic as Artist" 384)

Once Wilde reaches the vantage point of Epicurean Aestheticism, former influences, such as Newman and Ruskin, lose their hold over him--but although these figures no longer possess an intellectual or ethical force for him, this does not stop him from enjoying their prose:

The mode of thought that Cardinal Newman represented--if that can be called a mode of thought which seeks to solve intellectual problems by a denial of the supremacy of the intellect--may not, cannot, I think, survive. But the world will never weary of watching that troubled soul in its progress from darkness to darkness. ("The Critic as Artist" 341)

Like De Quincey and Pater, Wilde appreciates the dark beauty of intellectual chaos.

Wilde's old idol Ruskin is subjected to the same treatment:

Who cares whether Mr. Ruskin's views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his . . . so sure and certain, at its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as great a
work of art as any of those wonderful sunsets that bleach or rot on their
corrupted canvases in England's Gallery. . . . ("The Critic as Artist" 366)

It is ironic that the third subject of Gilbert's Epicurean Aesthetic reading should be Pater:
"Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of the Monna Lisa [sic]
something that Lionardo [sic] never dreamed of?" (366). All Gilbert is doing is treating
Pater in the same manner Pater had formerly treated Coleridge and Pico della Mirandola.
The technique established by Pater ends up being used on himself: an homage that is
simultaneously flattering and humiliating.

Furthermore, this type of aesthetic enjoyment of things that are no longer
convincing is directly related to the relativism Wilde inherits from Pater. Gilbert argues: "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, and loves it not the less because it knows it to be unattainable" ("The
Critic as Artist" 405). In the same way that the search for truth becomes a continual
movement from perspective to perspective, a journey that must be its own reward,
Epicurean Aesthetes move from one text to another without concerning themselves too
much about the "shallow shibboleths" of a Newman, a Ruskin or, even, a Pater. Wilde's
choice of the adjective "shallow" is worth a closer look. Since the word is traditionally
used to label the type of elegant drifting Wilde is advocating, his use of it may be seen as
contesting its common meaning. From the point of view of relativism, a belief in absolutes
is naive and shallow.

Although both Pater's and Wilde's writings continue in the spirit of Arnold's
"disinterestedness," there is a subtle shift in the younger men's argument, which is reflected
in their attitude to what for Arnold is a dangerous competitor to literary culture, science.
This sets them apart, not only from Arnold, but also from the branch of absolutists I call
Platonic Aesthetes. Since he is both an important influence on Pater and Wilde, and a
more urbane opponent of science than, say, Yeats in his rants against Huxley and Tyndall
(Autobiographies 115), I will continue to focus on Arnold's arguments. In the essay "Literature and Science" (1882) Arnold sets up a dichotomy between the two terms of the title and indicates that modern people are forced to choose between them (10: 70), while both Pater and Wilde attempt a broader view. They retain Arnold's emphasis on criticism as "the free play of the mind," but present a different configuration of literature, science, and criticism. While Arnold juggles the notion of the potentially anarchic "free play of the mind" with such earnest cultural cornerstones as "Right Reason" and "the Will of God," Pater is certainly more consistent in his linking free play of the mind with relativism, which he sees as having been mainly developed through the influence of the physical sciences. The tension between Arnold's and Wilde's view can be seen by a remark of Gilbert's on the ineffectuality of Arnold's approach; the comment suggests an association, rather than dichotomy, between science and culture:

The English mind is always in a rage. The intellect of the race is wasted in the sordid and stupid quarrels of second-rate politicians or third-rate theologians. It was reserved for a man of science to show us the supreme example of that "sweet reasonableness" of which Arnold spoke so wisely, and alas! to so little effect. The author of the Origin of Species had, at any rate, the philosophic temper. ("The Critic as Artist" 406)

If Wilde outgrew not only his early influences like Ruskin and Newman, but also varied significantly from Arnold, it has been argued that Wilde outgrew Pater as well (Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 50). While it is true that Wilde makes some cutting remarks about Pater's personality, he is nonetheless very much continuing his work in developing an aesthetic reaction to what both writers see as the main intellectual event of their time: the rise of relativism at the expense of absolutism. Gilbert gives a brief account of this shift from "ancient" to "modern" thought which parallels the one given by Pater in "Coleridge's Writings":
Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who sits at ease and watches, who walks in loneliness and dreams. But we who are born at the close of this wonderful age, are at once too cultured and too critical, too intellectually subtle and too curious of exquisite pleasures, to accept any speculations about life in exchange for life itself. ("The Critic as Artist" 381)

The ancient mystic is replaced by the modern critic. Not only does Gilbert use one of Pater's favourite adjectives, "exquisite," but he also quotes directly, in his typical offhand way, from Pater's essay on Coleridge: "Who, as Mr. Pater suggests somewhere, would exchange the curve of a single rose-leaf for that formless intangible Being which Plato rates so high?" ("The Critic as Artist" 382; cf. Pater, Appreciations 68). The tone of understated defiance present in Pater is brought into the open by Wilde's Gilbert, a defiance that is in sharp contrast to any Romantic nostalgia for the Golden Age:

The courts of the city of God are not open to us now. Its gates are guarded by Ignorance, and to pass them we have to surrender all that in our nature is most divine. . . . We cannot go back to the saint. There is far more to be learned from the sinner. We cannot go back to the philosopher, and the mystic leads us astray. ("The Critic as Artist" 381-82)

This advice may make some travellers feel a bit lost, but for Gilbert that cannot be helped. His only imperative is "to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity" ("The Critic as Artist" 382). Wilde's view of history indicates a complex relationship between past and present, for he has Gilbert argue that being truly modern means not so much living in the present, as having found a position from which to view the evolution that has led up to the present: "For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives" ("The Critic as Artist" 382). Wilde's theme is inseparable from the paradoxical language in which it is presented: the standard definition of "the present" is opened up to its opposite "the past." Finally, as was
the case with Pater, the impetus for the study of the past is the Epicurean principle that studying it will enrich present moments as they pass.

In contrast to the Platonic Aesthete, Wilde sees himself as participating in the rise of modern thought, and therefore he is not threatened by its other manifestations, e.g. science, not to mention consumerism, which he is quite happy to exploit. Rather than viewing art and science as opposites, he presents the latter as an ally of his Epicurean Aestheticism. Gilbert claims that by revealing to us the absolute mechanism of all action, and so freeing us from the self-imposed and trammelling burden of moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become, as it were, the warrant for the contemplative life. It has shown us that we are never less free than when we try to act. ("The Critic as Artist" 382-83)

He continues that heredity "has hemmed us round with the nets of the hunter. . . . We may not watch it, for it is within us" (383). Both the imagery and tone parallel the passage in The Renaissance where Pater talks of natural law, or necessity, as "a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks . . ." (148). In both Wilde and Pater there is an acceptance of a materialistic explanation of life, but coexistent with this acceptance is the need to explore possibilities that may preserve intellectual and aesthetic freedom. In "The Critic as Artist," Gilbert states bluntly that the imagination is simply the result of heredity. Although imagination is thus rudely toppled from its Romantic pedestal, Gilbert nonetheless believes it "can help us to leave the age in which we are born, and to pass into other ages, and find ourselves not exiled from their air" (383). Although the imagination is accounted for in biological terms, it still retains its power to enrich our experience by allowing us to sympathize with other people and epochs. Furthermore, materialism, both philosophical and commercial, the dreaded enemy of the Platonic Aesthete, is not seen as a threat by Gilbert:
Men are the slaves of words. They rage against Materialism, as they call it, forgetting that there has been no material improvement that has not spiritualized the world, and that there have been few, if any, spiritual awakenings that have not wasted the world's faculties in barren hopes, and fruitless aspirations, and empty or trammelling creeds. ("The Critic as Artist" 360)

The issue comes down to transcendent idealism vs. materialism. In a decisive break with the Romantics and their Victorian followers Carlyle and Ruskin, Pater had written that the problem of the modern world could no longer be solved by "any joyful union with the external world: the shadows had grown too long, the light too solemn, for that" (The Renaissance 146-67). Epicurean Aesthetes acknowledge their belatedness, but regard it simply as the price of modernity.

If Wilde's aesthetic development is characterized by his movement from Platonic to Epicurean Aestheticism, once this transition is complete he is quite willing to pay the price of modernity, since, as he put it in "The Critic as Artist," the gates of innocence are guarded by ignorance (381-82). Wilde would rather be wicked than vulgar. But his new perspective does not entail a simple rejection of an exploded past: Epicurean Aesthetes muse on past epochs in order to multiply their own experience, but do so without trying to escape the present.

ii. The Matter of Form

The evolution of Wilde's aesthetic method from Platonic to Epicurean Aestheticism is reflected in the greater unity of form and content in his later work. A look at his shorter fiction, written between 1886 and 1894, illustrates this point. In the introduction to her edition of Wilde's Complete Shorter Fiction, Isobel Murray praises his two volumes of fairy-tales, The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates, and while she cannot but point out Hans Christian Andersen's influence on these stories she
concludes: "Andersen wrote far, far more fairy-tales than Wilde; he did not write more that survive" (10). This is a large claim which is unlikely to further Wilde's reputation, for this particular genre is not the best vehicle for his talent. While they are certainly competently written these tales are highly derivative, and any attempt to rank imitations higher than original work is likely to bring out the shortcomings of the imitations.

One reason for the weakness of Wilde's fairy-tales is the fact that in them he is trying to deal with subjects which may be too complex for this genre. In a letter to a friend he writes that these stories are "an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality--to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative" (qtd. in Murray 9). The problem with most of these tales, however, is that while they do indeed deal with modern problems they rely too heavily on ancient solutions. They tend to be structured around simple, and generally sentimental, binaries, such as good poor people vs. wicked rich people, heavenly vs. earthly justice, etc.

In "The Happy Prince," written in 1886 and published two years later, contemporary issues like urban poverty, child labour, the relation between art and life, and even homosexual love are raised without being dealt with in a manner that really does them intellectual or aesthetic justice. The Happy Prince and his friend the Swallow both make sacrifices which result in their downfall. As is to be expected their good deeds are not understood on earth, but the reader does not have to worry too much--the protagonists are rewarded handsomely in heaven.

An indicator of the unresolved tension between the form and content of these tales is the ending of the last story of A House of Pomegranates. In "The Star-Child," the selfish protagonist commits a cruel deed and is condemned to wander the earth for three years in order to learn the golden rule. The tone of the story is so melancholy that the obligatory happy ending, where the Star-Child becomes a wise and loving king, is unconvincing because all too sudden. As if to make amends for this, Wilde adds a final paragraph stating that the Star-Child died soon afterwards from the hardships he had suffered during his
wandering, and we are told that the king who succeeded him was evil. But this second drastic shift of tone in a very short period of time is a symptom rather than a solution of the aesthetic difficulties Wilde has gotten himself into. Writing in this genre Wilde cannot resist, as Andersen was often strong enough to do, the convenient crutch of a happy end—yet this lack of originality undermines his attempt to deal with modern problems. He seems too eager to exploit the emotionalism inherent in the genre ever to risk subverting it too blatantly. The result is unintentional ambiguity.

Much more successful are his attempts in the related genre of the parable, the pieces known as "Poems in Prose." In the fairy-tales Wilde hovers awkwardly between acceptance and subversion of that genre, but in the prose poems he skillfully uses the religious parable and Biblical language to serve his own sceptical and relativistic ends. Here Wilde succeeds in doing what he had attempted in the fairy-tales, i.e. to treat modern problems not in a realist manner, but in a mode that is "ideal" in the sense of being remote from reality, a technique which allows the reader to view experience from an unexpected angle. Furthermore, there is a deliberate wickedness, a frank insincerity in these texts which suits Wilde much better than the mannered emotionalism of the fairy-tales.

A piece like "The Doer of Good" (1894) illustrates the temper of belatedness that characterizes Wilde's position, the subtle, hyper-critical temper of those who "are born at the close of this wonderful age" ("The Critic as Artist" 381). It is important to note the way the choice of the adjective "wonderful" indicates how the Epicurean Aesthete's approach to the fin de siècle differs from those who see it as a time of decadence. Aesthetic Epicureans do not lament their belatedness—they celebrate it.

In "The Doer of Good" the ancient problem of morality is viewed from a modern perspective. The opening of this piece introduces the theme of lateness that characterizes Wilde's treatment of Christian morality: "It was night-time and He was alone" (Complete Shorter Fiction 253). In the same way that Wilde's text is a late nineteenth-century commentary on ancient scripture, Wilde's method is not to look at Jesus as he performs
miracles and good deeds, but to speculate on his life at a later date when He is forced to see the unexpected results of His work. When Christ asks a spoilt sensualist why he lives the way he does, the man responds: "But I was a leper once, and you healed me. How else should I live?" (254). Christ asks a man lusting after a woman, "Why do you look at this woman in such a wise?" to which the man responds: "But I was blind once, and you gave me sight. At what else should I look?" (254). Finally Christ comes across a man weeping by the roadside. When asked why he cries, the man answers: "But I was dead once and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?" (255). This sombre ending is offset by the skill with which Wilde uses a dogmatic form to present a sceptical commentary on Christian morality. The story can be taken as an illustration of Gilbert's thesis that "we are never less free than when we try to act" ("The Critic as Artist" 383). Also, the ironic title points toward the conclusion of this relativistic fable: even Christ himself is caught in a net of circumstances where a good deed can easily turn into its opposite.

If Wilde succeeds in employing the parable for his own relativistic ends, another form which suits him even better is the dialogue. The subtitle of Part I of "The Critic as Artist" may urge the importance of doing nothing, but there is certainly no lack of energy in this talk, for Wilde knows the importance of discussing everything, as the subtitle of Part II indicates. The discussion between Gilbert and Ernest opens with Gilbert at the piano wanting to play something by Chopin or Dvorák. But his friend is in the mood for talk rather than music, something Gilbert is just as happy to do in spite of his insistence that he is not. The reference to music is important: Wilde's most typically Epicurean Aesthetic play, The Importance of Being Earnest, also opens with a leisured dandy playing the piano. In both works everything is played with. The reference to music also serves as shorthand for the compositional principle that informs these texts, Pater's maxim, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" (The Renaissance 86).
In "The Critic as Artist" the dialogue is the aesthetic medium which allows Wilde to present modern problems from a variety of viewpoints, with the intellectual playfulness and daring that characterize his response to them. For Pater, music is the perfect artistic form because it refers to nothing but itself. Aspiring towards this condition, Wilde presents a character in "The Critic as Artist" discussing the genre of which he is a product:

> Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato . . . the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things, gaining in this manner all the richness and reality of effect that comes from those side issues that are suddenly suggested by the central idea in its progress, and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance. (391)

The connection between Wilde and his Epicurean Aesthetic forerunners, De Quincey and Pater, can be seen in the way Wilde's description of the dialogue is reminiscent of De Quincey's characterization of the aesthetic enjoyment that can be derived from hanging "upon one's own thoughts as an object of conscious interest, to play with them, to watch and pursue them through a maze of inversions, evolutions, and harlequin changes . . ." (10: 97) and the delight of the "flux and reflux of thought, half meditative, half capricious . . ." (10: 121). This experience is summed up by Wilde in the Paterian phrase "the delicate charm of chance." Furthermore, to his exercise in self-reflexivity Wilde adds another twist when he has Gilbert's imaginary antagonist, Ernest, respond: "By its means, too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly
sophistical argument" (391). Ernest may not be as clever as Gilbert, but he knows the importance of being an earnest foil for his friend.

The relation between the dialogue form and Wilde's view that criticism recognizes no position as final is obvious. Ultimately, his understanding of the dialogue and criticism springs from the complex view of personality he shares with De Quincey and Pater. In "The Critic as Artist," we are presented with the paradox of the true critic who "will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and through constant change alone, he will find his true identity" (393). This relativistic view of the mind explains why Gilbert follows Pater's reasoning in the "Preface" to The Renaissance that beauty is relative and therefore cannot be defined in the abstract.

Epicurean Aestheticism shares with the Platonic variety a dedication to beauty, but differs in its conception of the nature of the aesthetic. While for the latter, beauty is fixed and eternal, Wilde's Gilbert, echoing Pater, states that the "true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things" ("The Critic as Artist" 393).

To keep his texts from settling into an orthodoxy Wilde continually upsets and plays with the reader's expectations. When Ernest shows signs of having been convinced by Gilbert's arguments, Gilbert sighs: "Ah! don't say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong" (401). This attitude is also reflected in "The Decay of Lying" where the Gilbert-like Vivian responds to the Ernest-like Cyril's charge that he is not being consistent: "Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the reductio ad absurdum of practice" (292). In his dialogues Wilde uses frivolity and contradiction, not in an anti-intellectual way, but as a way of keeping the readers' thoughts in constant motion, hence attempting to recreate in their minds the Epicurean Aesthetic
commitment to noncommitment, the notion that everything may be treated as an open question.

The dialogue form is crucial to an understanding of Wilde, but, as is to be expected, critics are not in agreement on its role in his work. In the critical commentary to their impressive edition of Wilde's Oxford notebooks, Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand relate his use of the dialogue to Hegelian dialectics. They do so in the context of their claim that his entire work rests on intellectual foundations laid in the reading and writing he did during and shortly after his years at Oxford. They believe his critical and creative writings have been misunderstood because critics have neither had access to his Oxford notebooks nor taken his education seriously enough. Smith and Helfand write: "We believe that publication and interpretation of this material will provide the basis for a revaluation of Wilde's significance in the history of literature and criticism" (vii). Their thesis is that

Wilde's aestheticism, usually thought of as derived from Pater, Arnold, Ruskin, and the French decadent poets, is shown by the notebooks to be based on a carefully reasoned philosophical and political stance, a synthesis of Hegelian idealism and Spencerian evolutionary theory which fundamentally shaped his criticism and fiction. (vii).

The union of idealism and science seems peculiar, but Smith and Helfand supply the intellectual context which gave rise to it:

This reconciliation, which seems so contradictory and strange today, was quite typical of a via media reached by mid-century religious and secular intellectuals. Two historians that figure significantly in Wilde's notebooks, W. E. H. Lecky and H. T. Buckle, are typical of rationalist, secular thinkers in accommodating the possibility of God, the spiritual, and the soul with practical assumptions that deny divine intervention in history. Noel Annan suggests that, unlike their continental counterparts, these rationalists--along
with their more famous ones like Herbert Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and W. K. Clifford--refused to push materialism to its logical conclusions for political and social reasons [Annan 150-61]. (9-10)

Smith and Helfand place Wilde in this company. They also insist that he accepted Hegelian metaphysics and conclude that this "placed him, almost literally, worlds apart from Pater's intellectual and social ideas" (45). For them, Wilde's critical theories do not properly belong in the art-for-art's-sake camp. Rather they posit that his synthesis of Hegelian idealism and evolutionary theory constitutes "the unchanging first principles" of his work (42). In this interpretation Wilde's dialogues are not so much talk-for-talk's-sake as a dialectical journey towards the realization of the kingdom of Absolute Spirit on earth.

The influence of Hegel's peculiar genius is pervasive not only on nineteenth- but also on twentieth-century thought, and it would be strange if Wilde had remained totally unaffected by it. Yet a peculiarity of Smith and Helfand's argument is that while Hegelian idealism is a philosophy of continual motion, they argue that Wilde's intellectual development remained unchanged from around 1879 (the last confirmed entry in his notebooks) to the end of his career. While this is not impossible, I argue for a change in Wilde's thought from an absolutist and idealist position to a relativistic and materialist one. In my view, most of what Smith and Helfand have to say fits the early but not the later stage of Wilde's development.

Smith and Helfand also disagree with the view established by critics like Ellmann that Wilde should be seen as occupying a place at the end of a lineage running through Arnold and Pater, i.e. that Wilde's theories "represent what remained of Arnold's ideas and values after Pater's skeptical and philosophically acute mind had tested them," as Smith and Helfand succinctly put it (43). Instead, they align him with a writer I have argued he left behind, Ruskin. For them, Wilde "shared with Ruskin an idealist perspective and consequently an antimaterialist and antiutilitarian position in culture and politics" (13). By connecting him with Ruskin rather than Pater, they reduce Wilde to the role of a nostalgic
idealistic, a role that hardly fits the carefree acceptance of modern thought that characterizes
his later writings. After an analysis of Wilde's "Hélas!", the poem which prefaces his first
book, Smith and Helfand write that this poem "announces his constant theme, the creative
and critical efforts to establish a New Hellenism which represents an antithesis to the fallen
world of the present, at once a dialectical return to and advance forward from the golden
age of Greece" (37). Again a position which may hold for the early Wilde is made to cover
his entire career. I argue that in his Epicurean Aesthetic phase binaries like a fallen present
and a golden past lose their hold over him.

There is no denying the influence of Hegel on Wilde. But presenting Wilde as an
"evolutionary idealist" runs the risk of reducing his works, with their subtle twists and
turns, to sermons on the mystical philosophy of Absolute Spirit. Like most readers Smith
and Helfand see Gilbert as Wilde's mouthpiece, but if this is true their interpretation can
hardly be reconciled with Gilbert's statement that we "cannot go back to the philosopher,
and the mystic leads us astray" ("The Critic as Artist" 382). Smith and Helfand fault
Ellmann and others for not paying enough attention to what they see as Wilde's Hegelian
doctrine, but I believe Ellmann is still correct in saying that "Wilde writes his works out of
a debate between doctrines rather than out of doctrine" (Oscar Wilde at Oxford 27; qtd in
Smith and Helfand 230). "Contradictoriness was his orthodoxy" is another of Ellmann's
pithy, and Wildean, characterizations (Oscar Wilde 137).

My criticism of Smith's and Helfand's conclusions is not intended to lay to rest the
ghost of Hegel, but rather to place its Wildean manifestations in the context of the
scepticism I argue haunted him as much as Pater. In the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance,
Pater writes: "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and
courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel,
or of our own" (152). Here we have the undogmatic dogma of Epicurean Aestheticism. In
my view, this, rather than a master-disciple relationship, is the attitude that accounts for
Wilde's association with Hegel—an opinion borne out by the similarity to Pater's attitude and diction in Gilbert's description of the true critic:

He will realize himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. Through constant change, and though constant change alone, he will find his true unity. He will not consent to be the slave of his own opinions.

("The Critic as Artist" 393)

If Wilde is daring enough not to be the slave of his own opinions why would he care to be the slave of someone else's?

Another medium which Wilde finds particularly genial is the epigram. Although their energetic wit is likely to keep his sayings alive, an interesting theoretical point is raised by David Weir in his study Decadence and the Making of Modernism (1995). Identifying Pater as "the master of the aesthetic school," Weir calls Wilde "Pater's most truant student" and argues that by turning the master's subtleties into epigrams Wilde made aestheticism seem flat and formulaic (60). Weir's poor opinion of the epigram stems from his belief that it is a form belonging to the outdated rhetorical tradition of the eighteenth century. He goes on to quote Mario Praz's remark from The Romantic Agony that Wilde proves himself a late descendant of the eighteenth-century playwrights by making one pun after another (359; qtd. in Weir 69). Weir feels that the epigrammatic style "reveals a world-view hardly consonant with the changing reality of the nineteenth century. That is, an epigrammatic style possesses the qualities of succinctness, brevity, directness, and assurance, so that anyone who writes an epigram does so with an air of certainty and confidence" (69). Weir concludes by contrasting Pater's tentative flow of sentences with Wilde's "predictable finish" (69).

The epigram is certainly a form rooted in antiquity, but does it necessarily follow that it cannot express modern subject matter? A comparison between Wilde's and Nietzsche's use of the epigram may help answer that question. In the preface to Beyond
Good and Evil (1886) Nietzsche addresses the question of certainty and the "predictable finish" that bothers Weir. Nietzsche writes that there "are good grounds for hoping that all dogmatizing in philosophy, the solemn air of finality it has given itself notwithstanding, may none the less have been no more than a noble childishness . . ". (13). Yet the text that follows is filled with aphorisms, many of which have a Wildean ring to them, e.g. "There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena . . ." and "Our neighbour is not our neighbour but our neighbour's neighbour--thus thinks every people" (78, 86; cf. Mann, "Wilde and Nietzsche" 169-71). The example of Nietzsche shows that there is no a priori reason for regarding epigrams as unsuited to a discussion of modern problems. In his commentary on Beyond Good and Evil, R. J. Hollingdale warns against treating the aphorism in Nietzsche's work as the unit of "truth" (8). He recommends that each saying should be read in the context of Nietzsche's relativistic theory of truth.

Nietzsche's critique of Plato, for instance, is remarkably similar to Pater's views: "To be sure, to speak of spirit and the good as Plato did meant standing truth on her head and denying perspective itself, the basic condition of all life . . ." (Beyond Good and Evil 14). The relevance of Nietzsche to Pater and Wilde is that, like them, he applies his relativism to himself. For instance, Part One of Beyond Good and Evil is titled "On the Prejudices of Philosophers"--although Nietzsche regards himself as anti-dogmatic, he acknowledges that he is caught up in an old philosophical battle which turns his own work into a perspective, a bias, a prejudice. The merit of his philosophy is not the positing of answers but the posing of questions, "wicked, questionable questions" (15). For Nietzsche the moment philosophy begins to believe in itself it creates the world in its own image, a claim which has to be seen in the context of his own wicked and questionable philosophy of the Will to Power: "philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to 'creation of the world', to causa prima" (21). The subtitle of Twilight of the Idols (1888) plays on his demystification of philosophers, himself included: "How to Philosophize with
a Hammer." This half-playful, half-serious phrase suggests his view that power rather than reason is the driving force of life.

In accordance with Nietzsche's view that power is more important than reason, his work does not present a fully rational or coherent philosophical argument, a fact which is reflected in the style of such works as Twilight of the Idols and Beyond Good and Evil. Their short sections, sometimes consisting of only a single aphorism, are presented as moments of power. The tone varies from relentless scepticism to wild assertion. Each book, and indeed his whole work, is a clash of question marks and affirmations triggering intellectual and emotional flashes in its readers. Sometimes these conflicting energies cancel each other out, but at other times they unite to create aggregations of tremendous power, and the compactness of the aphorism makes it the perfect carrier of each individual "quantum of power."

Literary theorists have acknowledged that Nietzsche discovered new possibilities within the ancient form of the epigram (Will 376). Rather than seeing Wilde's use of the epigram as an example of a late descendant of an outmoded tradition, I believe it is more accurate to place him with Nietzsche as a writer revitalizing an old, absolutist form for modern, relativistic ends. Power, not knowledge, is the aim of Wilde's sayings. His collection of epigrams "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" (1894) enacts his subversive use of the epigrammatic form, a characteristic example being the following: "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves" (433). The implication is that the "wisdom" that will be offered in this series of epigrams is contradictory, hence subverting the standard definition of truth as non-contradiction. It follows that the assertive tone of other epigrams in the collection is undermined. Another technique of undermining the aura of finality associated with the epigram is humour: "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered" ("Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" 433). If anyone is tempted to take the first maxim too seriously the second shifts the tone from the pompous
to the absurd, thus bringing out the self-mocking elements latent in the first one. Yet it would be a mistake to regard these sayings as completely frivolous. A piece like "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" should not be approached in an overly literal manner, for the reason that it exists on that borderline realm between imaginative play and critical thinking that characterizes Wilde's work.

A few months after the publication of these epigrams Wilde was on the witness stand acting out his role in the legal spectacle that led to his downfall. The Marquess of Queensberry's lawyer, Edward Carson, asks him to respond to individual epigrams. For instance:

"Religions die when they are proved to be true." Is that true?--Yes; I hold that. It is a suggestion towards a philosophy of the absorption of religions by science, but it is too big a question to go into now.

Do you think that was a safe axiom to put forward for the philosophy of the young?--Most stimulating. (Hyde, The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde 123).

The response is vintage Wilde. Apart from its suave rudeness it suggests the motive behind his work, i.e. to be stimulating rather than truthful. Carson continues quoting epigrams at his witness: "If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out"? Wilde replies: "That is a pleasing paradox, but I do not set very high store on it as an axiom" thereby indicating the distance the Epicurean Aesthete keeps between himself and his work. "Is it good for the young?" asks the more literally minded Carson. Wilde replies: "Anything is good that stimulates thought in whatever age" (Hyde 123).

Wilde's tactic of "stimulating thought" by continually upsetting the tried and true is crucial to an understanding of not only his epigrams but his work in general. The consistency of his strategy is noteworthy. In the previous section I noted how by referring to "shallow shibboleths" he contests the conventional meaning of the word "shallow" and turns it against those who would censure his Epicurean Aestheticism for not being serious
enough. "Only the shallow know themselves" is one of the paradoxical epigrams from "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" (434). Wilde's play on the old know-thyself-formula upsets the common definitions of "shallow" and "knowledge." By associating one with the other, Wilde forces the reader to rethink the matter of shallowness and profundity, a revaluation that finds a parallel in Nietzsche's more grandiose revaluation of all values (cf. Twilight of Idols 21).

It seems fitting to end this discussion on another epigram from "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young"--"One should always be a little improbable" (434). By being just that Wilde reenacts his provisional view of art and life. The tone of his epigrams is often assertive, but Wilde's assertions reflect the certainty of the moment, rather than that of a fixed ideological position. Each epigram presents a point of view, sometimes serious, sometimes absurd. A text like "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" presents its readers with the amusing spectacle of clashing viewpoints, a show which entices them to enter upon an Epicurean Aesthetic journey from one wild, improbable perspective to another.

iii. The Epicurean Aesthetic Sense of History,
the Historian of Epicurean Aestheticism

A sense of belatedness is pronounced in Wilde. But rather than let it depress him, he turns it to his own advantage. From his vantage point at the end of the nineteenth century, he casts a glance over literary history and focuses on writers who are dedicated to the pursuit of style for its own sake and are thus allied to the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility. The casualness with which Wilde sketches the history of the aesthetic current to which he belongs is in keeping with the studied ease that characterizes the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament. It is typical of this sensibility to view history as a spectacle, and a requisite for a proper appreciation of the show is a certain unconcern along with a temporary suspension of moral judgements. Wilde writes:
I know that there are many historians, or at least writers on historical subjects, who still think it necessary to apply moral judgements to history, and who distribute their praise or blame with the solemn complacency of a successful schoolmaster. This, however, is a foolish habit, and merely shows that the moral instinct can be brought to such a pitch of perfection that it will make its appearance wherever it is not required. ("Pen Pencil and Poison" 339)

Wilde's point is inseparable from his sardonic tone and paradoxical style: the ideal of moral perfection that motivates the stodgy writer on history is parodied with the paradox of perfection that fails by overstepping the mark. For Wilde, a more dispassionate attitude is required not only for the enjoyment but also the evaluation of the past:

Nobody with the true historical sense ever dreams of blaming Nero, or scolding Tiberius or censuring Cæsar Borgia. These personages have become like the puppets of a play. They may fill us with terror, or horror, or wonder, but they do not harm us. They are not in immediate relation to us. We have nothing to fear from them. ("Pen Pencil and Poison" 339-40).

As opposed to the "eternal note of sadness" which Arnold hears echoing mournfully throughout ancient and modern history ("Dover Beach" 14), Wilde aspires to the Epicurean attitude cultivated by Lucretius, although fully aware of the noise of ignorant armies clashing on history's gloomy plain:

When the winds are troubling the waters on a mighty sea it is sweet to view from the land the great struggles of another man; not because it is pleasant or delightful that anyone should be distressed, but because it is sweet to see the misfortunes from which you are yourself free. It is sweet too to watch great battles which cover the plains if you yourself have no share in the danger. (De rerum natura 3: 35).
To achieve this state in relation to present events is not easy, but this makes reflecting on the distant past all the more comforting. The fact that past historical events cannot cause pain is the Epicurean basis for Wilde's appreciation of them. Another characteristic of Epicurean Aestheticism's relation to history is the association between the aesthetic and the scientific points of view. Wilde presents both as being distinguished by "disinterested curiosity"—the Arnoldian sounding phrase is used to link the "two cultures" Arnold wants to keep separate. For Wilde, historical characters "have passed into the sphere of art and science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval" ("Pen Pencil and Poison" 340).

Two examples of Wilde's insouciant scholarship are a letter to the editor of The Scots Observer in response to a hostile review of The Picture of Dorian Gray and the essay "Pen Pencil and Poison" from Intentions. In the case of the former, Wilde, in true Epicurean Aesthetic fashion, makes the best of a bad matter by turning the unfavourable review into a witty performance advertising his views on art. To refute the charge that since the subject-matter of The Picture of Dorian Gray is questionable its author is immoral, Wilde tells the editor that his reviewer has committed the "unpardonable sin" of confusing the personality of the artist with his subject-matter: "For this, sir, there is no excuse at all" (The Artist as Critic 248). Wilde's mock gravity and his strategy of turning the vocabulary of morals against a moralistic critic is an example of the Epicurean Aesthetic delight in paradox and wordplay. The separation of art and ethics is standard Aestheticism, but the Epicurean flavour of Wilde's stance is illustrated by his obvious delight in verbal jousting and his Epicurean conception of artistic motivation: "The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates" (The Artist as Critic 247). It is this delight which, in Wilde's view, should also be the main concern in the evaluation of art. In this Wilde, Pater, and De Quincey all follow Kant in regarding aesthetic judgements as a matter of pleasure or displeasure, not ethics or logic. In his letter Wilde establishes a link
between his own Epicurean Aestheticism and Keats's "Negative Capability," defined by Keats as the mental state when all considerations are overcome by the sense of beauty, which makes the artist capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason (261, 263). Wilde's focuses on the way Keats applies this theory to Shakespeare:

Of one who is the greatest figure in the world's literature since Greek days Keats remarked that he had as much pleasure in conceiving the evil as he had in conceiving the good. Let your reviewer, sir, consider the bearings of Keats's fine criticism, for it is under these conditions that every artist works. One stands remote from one's subject-matter. One creates it, and one contemplates it. The further away the subject-matter is, the more freely can the artist work. Your reviewer suggests that I do not make it sufficiently clear whether I prefer virtue to wickedness or wickedness to virtue. An artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter. (The Artist as Critic 248)

Again Wilde's manner echoes his matter. The chiasmus and alliteration in the phrase "whether I prefer virtue to wickedness or wickedness to virtue" followed by the deliberately shocking statement, later incorporated into the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray, that an artist has no ethical sympathies at all, illustrate key features of Wildean aesthetics. Ethical considerations are subordinated to the production of artistic effects, or as he puts it in his letter: "Iago may be morally horrible and Imogen stainlessly pure. Shakespeare, as Keats said, had as much delight in creating the one as he had in creating the other" (248).

There are many parallels between Epicurean Aestheticism and the poetry of Keats: his delight in the physical world, for instance, his dislike of poetry that has "a palpable design upon us" and his theory of Negative Capability (Keats 263). But if Wilde finds
parallels in Keats to his own aesthetic ideas it is in De Quincey that he finds an even closer ally. In the essay "Pen Pencil and Poison," Wilde pays tribute to the first Epicurean Aesthete. As in De Quincey's piece "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts" the subject of Wilde's text is a strange criminal: the essayist, artist, and poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. Not only does Wilde get much of his information on this character from De Quincey, but more importantly, the choice and handling of the subject-matter is obviously inspired by him. In his essay, De Quincey had argued that the bad matter of murder can be treated either from the point of view of morals or aesthetics: "Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey): and that I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it--that is, in relation to good taste" (13: 13). De Quincey introduces his readers to a realm where the imagination has much more freedom than it is generally granted in either the pulpit or at the Old Bailey. The same insistence on the freedom of art from moral constraints is summed up by Wilde in the following remark: "The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose." He adds: "There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be" ("Pen Pencil and Poison" 339).

Detachment and a taste for black humour characterize both essays; Wilde quotes with relish De Quincey's description of meeting Wainewright at a dinner given by Charles Lamb: "Amongst the company, all literary men, sat a murderer" (5: 246; qtd. in Wilde 324). The frisson produced by the presence of a murderer in the midst of literary men illustrates the type of effect Wilde himself is aiming for. An example of this sort of literary shock tactics is when Wilde momentarily lulls his readers into a false sense of calm by quoting a pastoral, Wordsworthian passage written by Wainewright. Then he observes:

However, we must not forget that the cultivated young man who penned these lines, and who was so susceptible to Wordsworthian influences, was
also, as I said at the beginning of this memoir, one of the most subtle and secret poisoners of this or any age. (333)

The combination of gravity and dark humour is decidedly De Quinceyan. The way both De Quincey and Wilde play not only with language but also with their readers' moral sense indicates the relationship of Epicurean Aesthetes to morality--the moral sense is made an element in the performance of elaborate aesthetic spectacles.

Like Mr Williams, who performed his murders impeccably dressed, Wainewright is a dandy, a collector of beautiful things and possessor of an exquisite library. Wilde writes:

One can fancy him lying there in the midst of his books and casts and engravings, a true virtuoso, a subtle connoisseur, turning over his fine collection of Marc Antonios, and his Turner's "Liber Studiorum," of which he was a warm admirer, or examining with a magnifier some of his antique gems and cameos. . . . (325)

The image of Wainewright examining old works mirrors the complex process of Wilde's text. As the critic Wainewright studies objects of art he is in turn being examined by another critic. "Pen Pencil and Poison" sets up a series of elaborate, dark reflections between the arts of writing, painting, and poisoning. The Kantian basis of Wilde's essay, the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement, is shared by Wainewright: "he never lost sight of the great truth that Art's first appeal is neither to the intellect nor to the emotions, but purely to the artistic temperament . . ." (326). Wainewright is a consummate stylist and is therefore deemed worthy of praise by a fellow Aesthete: "The highest praise that we can give to him is that he tried to revive style as a conscious tradition" (327). The parallels between Wilde and his subject continue. Wainewright is a "strange and fascinating figure that for a few years dazzled literary London, and made so brilliant a débüt in life and letters . . ." (338-39), a man who maintains his poise even after his life of crime lands him in prison: "I have been determined through life to hold the position of a gentleman," Wainewright says. "I have always done so. I do so still. It is the custom of this place that
each of the inmates of a cell shall take his morning's turn of sweeping it out. I occupy a
cell with a bricklayer and a sweep, but they never offer me the broom!" (337). His wit
brings to mind Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When a
friend reproaches the poisoner for murdering his sister-in-law he shrugs his shoulders and
replies: "Yes, it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles" (337).

The labyrinthine mirrorings of "Pen Pencil and Poison" extend beyond Wilde's text,
for its structure reflects the way De Quincey draws comparisons between art and murder
in "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts." The compositional principle keeping
the whole process from spinning out of control is also established by De Quincey: the
similarities between the monstrousness of a criminal mind and a writer "monstrous"
enough to consider murder as an art are held in check by the striving for an artistic effect
rather than an actual identification. The subtle difference may not be appreciated by
everybody. De Quincey knew that he might lose some of his readers, but the effect Wilde
later joins him in striving for is "to graze the brink of horror, and of all that would in actual
realization be most repulsive" (13: 71).

It is with this Epicurean Aesthetic proviso in mind that Wilde presents the bad, but
curiously interesting, matter of a subtle poisoner to stimulate his readers' sense of
disinterested curiosity. One of the aesthetic ironies of "Pen Pencil and Poison" is that
Wainewright ends his life as an opium-eater in a penal colony, a pale reflection of his more
famous contemporaries Coleridge, De Quincey, and Baudelaire. Wilde writes that "the
associate of Coleridge consoled himself by making those marvelous *Paradis Artificiels*
whose secret is only known to the eaters of opium. In 1852 he died of apoplexy, his sole
living companion being a cat, for which he had evinced an extraordinary affection" (338).
Wilde aestheticizes the death of Wainewright by setting up a series of intricate textual
reverberations between a poisoner and the first writer to consider murder a fine art; the
drug-habit both men shared with Coleridge; and the work by the admirer of cats,
Baudelaire, whose book *Les Paradis Artificiels* includes translations from De Quincey's
Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. Wilde's treatment of the matter indicates that Wainewright's existence can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon and, indeed, "Art has not forgotten him" as he notes towards the end of his essay. The dandified poisoner "is the hero of Dickens's Hunted Down, the Varney of Bulwer's Lucretia" (340). Wilde concludes that "it is gratifying to note that fiction has paid some homage to one who was so powerful with 'pen, pencil, and poison." True to form, Wilde concludes with an epigram: "To be suggestive for fiction is to be of more importance than a fact" (340). With uncharacteristic modesty he leaves out the fact that his own essay will help to keep alive the image of the subtle poisoner in this homage to the subtle stylist De Quincey.

iv. Dorian the Failed Epicurean

Another subtle, stylish exploration of crime is Wilde's "poisonous" novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray (serially published in 1890, extended version published in 1891). The Epicurean Aesthetic connection is evident from Lord Henry Wotton's extensive borrowings from the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance and the use of such key Paterian adjectives as "flame-like" and "comely" in its opening paragraphs. While I see this novel as a product of the specific type of Aestheticism Wilde shares with De Quincey and Pater, some critics regard it as illustrating the dangers of Aestheticism.

Given Wilde's insistence throughout his work that art must be free from the constraints of morality it is curious that influential Wilde scholars like Ellmann and Isobel Murray should treat The Picture of Dorian Gray as a warning against the separation of aesthetics and ethics. This is particularly strange since this reading goes against everything Wilde says in the preface to his novel, for instance: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (xxiii). But apparently it is not all, at least not according to Ellmann, for whom The Picture of Dorian Gray is "the aesthetic novel par excellence, not in espousing the doctrine, but in exhibiting the dangers" (Oscar Wilde 297). Is Wilde wiser than Wilde critics? Privileging the artist at
the expense of the critic would be exceptionally un-Wildean, but there can no harm in listening to what he has to say about his own work. "When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself" is another aphorism from Wilde's preface (xxiv), but according to Ellmann this is not the case. In support of his argument he offers an ingenious explanation: "In response to critical abuse, Wilde added the preface, which flaunted the aestheticism that the book would interdict. Dorian Gray is reflexive in the most cunning way, like its central image. . . . Wilde the preface-writer and Wilde the novelist deconstruct each other" (Oscar Wilde 297). Wilde's text is certainly reflexive and cunning, but the analogy with deconstruction can be pushed too far. Although nineteenth-century Aesthetes prefigure Deconstruction by problematizing the self, they do not throw the concept away as carelessly as Deconstructionists are apt to do. In my view, the compositional principle of The Picture of Dorian Gray is the same one employed in dialogues like "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying" where Wilde plays different points of view against each other, while simultaneously stage-managing these disagreements so as to remain in aesthetic accord with himself. In the novel the three main points of view are represented by Basil Hallward, Lord Henry Wotton, and Dorian Gray. It is in keeping with Wilde's disruption of preconceived opinions, his own included, that of these three the moralistic point of view should be allocated to the artist Basil, although artists are generally characterized by Wilde as being at the furthest remove from ethical concerns. Typically, though, this portrait of the artist as moralist is contained within a larger Epicurean Aesthetic frame.

Some of my disagreements with Ellmann's analysis hinge on how the term "Aestheticism" is defined. It is precisely to clarify the nature of Wilde's relativistic type of Aestheticism, and distinguish it from the absolutist variety, that I employ the term Epicurean Aestheticism. In his biography of Wilde, Ellmann makes the fruitful observation that for Wilde Aestheticism was not a creed but a problem and that exploring its ramifications provided him with the subject of his novel (Oscar Wilde 292). By
aestheticism Ellmann seems to mean what he calls the "icy aestheticism" preached by Gautier (292). Against this philosophy, with its religion of art and cold disdain of life, Wilde supposedly warns his readers that to live as an aesthetic object, outside of time, is to die (303). The matter is complicated by Ellmann's view that although Wilde did not subscribe to this type of Aestheticism he sometimes liked to pretend that he did (292). Evidence for that theory could be found in Wilde's statement that the moral Basil Hallward is what he thinks he is while the wicked Lord Henry Wotton is what the world thinks him (301). In my view the novel is a thoroughly aesthetic novel, but the Aestheticism that pervades it is not "icy" and timeless, but a type that is much more fluid and "timely"--its Aestheticism is Epicurean and relativistic, not Platonic and absolutist.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton is the leisurely advocate of pleasure. But who is Harry? Is he satanic, as the allusion to "Old Harry" might suggest, or can we perhaps have a little more sympathy for this "devil"? Critics like Murray think they see him for what he is, a snake who charms the innocent Dorian Gray with his theory of the "new Hedonism," a corrosive philosophy which leads directly to the young man's fall. "Drift beautifully on the surface, and you will die unbeautifully in the depths," is Ellmann's summary of the tale (Oscar Wilde 297). Murray analyzes Lord Henry's dangerous charm thus:

Lord Henry despises self-denial, conscience, guilt feelings, ideas of sin, all the elements that Arnold called Hebraism, "strictness of conscience", and Lord Henry calls "all the maladies of medievalism". Aspects of this view of life are further investigated by Wilde in "The Critic as Artist" and "The Soul of Man", and rejection of law, antinomianism, and advocacy of Individualism are permanent parts of his thought. This helps him to convey the attraction of Lord Henry, while he is honest in the novel in examining the consequences of the doctrine, so that if no human voice in the novel can stand against Lord Henry's, the objective or supernatural evidence of
the portrait remains to the end significant of the reality of sin and conscience. (xiv-xv)

This reading even appears to have Wilde's approval. Murray quotes from his response to a hostile review in the *St. James's Gazette* where he says that the book does contain a moral:

> And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, as most painters do, dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry Wotton seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. (The Artist as Critic 240)

The case seems closed, but the lines that follow give a devious twist to what has just been said:

> Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. Is this an artistic error? I fear it is. It is the only error in the book. (240-41)

In a later letter, this time to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, Wilde withdraws the uncharacteristic, if playful, admission of an artistic error on his part: "My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism. It is poisonous if you like, but you cannot deny that it is also perfect, and perfection is what we artists aim at" (247). In the same letter he clarifies his view of the relationship between the moral and aesthetic components of the work:

> The real moral of the story is that all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment, and this moral is so far artistically and deliberately suppressed that it does not enunciate its law as a general principle, but
realises itself purely in the lives of individuals, and so becomes simply a
dramatic element in a work of art, and not the object of the work of art
itself. (246)

Wilde does not try to deny the moral dimension of life, but he insists that in works of art it
must always be subservient to aesthetic aims. In other words, he aestheticizes morality.
The idea of morality as a "dramatic element" in a work of art is elaborated in a letter to the
editor of the Scots Observer:

It was necessary, sir, for the dramatic development of this story to
surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. Otherwise
the story would have had no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this
atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the
artist who wrote the story. (248)

The word of the author, especially such a slippery author as Wilde, is certainly not the last
word on any text, but his stated "intentions" suggest the aesthetic, as opposed to the
moralistic, view a critic can take of The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is not surprising that
Pater should be the first to take this view of his fellow Epicurean Aesthete's novel. In his
review, Pater warns against confusing vulgar sensualism with "true Epicureanism." The
latter, he writes, "aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire
organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and
righteousness, . . . is to lose, or lower, organization, to become less complex, to pass from
a higher to a lower degree of development." Although Pater has some reservations about
the book, he concludes that it shows that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly ("A
Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde" 36-37). Like his more flamboyant pupil, Pater, in his quietly
subversive way, accepts morality on aesthetic, rather than ethical grounds. To lose the
moral sense is to be simple and obvious, and that, according to Epicurean Aesthetes, is to
be dull and inartistic.
Wilde's novel plays with both forms of hedonism, i.e. "mere sensualism," or Cyrenaicism, and Epicureanism. Those who interpret the book in moralistic terms see only the former and make much of the purity of Dorian before he comes into contact with Lord Henry (Murray xiii). But the "pre-lapsarian" Dorian is not as innocent as many like to think. Before the two men meet, Basil describes Dorian to Lord Henry:

As a rule, he is charming to me, and we sit in the studio and talk of a thousand things. Now and then, however, he is horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain. Then I feel, Harry, that I have given away my whole soul to some one who treats it as if it were a flower to put in his coat, a bit of decoration to charm his vanity, an ornament for a summer's day. (The Picture of Dorian Gray 11-12)

Dorian does not really need Lord Henry to tempt him. He has already fallen. Wilde's subtle tampering with the myth of the fall and categories of good and evil, indicate that his story is not the flat morality tale it is sometimes made out to be (e.g. Hough 202). In the same way that there is a tendency to exaggerate the goodness of Dorian, the badness of Lord Henry is often overemphasized. He is certainly no angel, but he is not a devil either. Basil tells him: "You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose." To which Lord Henry responds in true Wildean fashion: "Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know . . ." (4). When Dorian asks him about his opinions on murder he answers: "Oh! anything becomes a pleasure if one does it too often. . . . That is one of the most important secrets of life. I should fancy, however, that murder is always a mistake. One should never do anything that one cannot talk about after dinner" (213). Although ruthlessly sardonic, this is no more an invitation to murder than De Quincey's "On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts."

Lord Henry advises Dorian to "cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul" (20). The attempt to sensualize the spirit and spiritualize the
senses suggests a reconciliation between spheres which Platonic Aesthetes insist on keeping separate. The sense of equilibrium indicated by Lord Henry's advice suggests the "harmonious development" that Pater sees as the distinguishing feature of the Epicurean temperament. Dorian is a failed Epicurean because he only pays attention to the easier half of the maxim. Suffering from pangs of conscience after having killed Basil, he repeats the saying to himself: "Yes, that was the secret. He had often tried it, and would try it again now. There were opium-dens, where one could buy oblivion, dens of horror where the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new" (184). The portrait Basil paints of him, with its ability to show the state of his moral being, offers him the perfect opportunity to refine his senses in accordance with this peculiar "moral barometer." This, however, he fails to do. It is important to note that Dorian admits that it is not Lord Henry, but he himself who is ultimately responsible for his behaviour. As he laments that he does not dare to tell Basil the real reason why he hides the picture, he acknowledges this: "Basil would have helped him to resist Lord Henry's influence, and the still more poisonous influences that came from his own temperament" (119). The character who should have the strongest motive for blaming Lord Henry does not do so in this instance, although after Dorian has become tired of his life of debauchery he blames everything on Lord Henry's poisoning him with a book. But Harry is too shrewd to be excessively upset: "My dear boy, you are really beginning to moralize. You will soon be going about like the converted, and the revivalist, warning people against all the sins of which you have grown tired" (218). As for suppressing books we need only recall Algernon's line from The Importance of Being Earnest: "Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't read. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read (1.128-30).

If Lord Henry's influence is dangerous, it is because his ideas--or to be more precise, the ideas from Pater's "Conclusion"--can easily be misinterpreted by those who do not share the Epicurean outlook. Such ideas are dangerous in the same way that all ideas
are potentially dangerous. Pater is somewhat concerned by this and makes an effort to distinguish between his Epicureanism and less refined versions of hedonism. In Marius the Epicurean, the work intended to deal more fully with the "poisonous" ideas in the "Conclusion," he reminds the reader that the saying "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 at the table" (83)--Pater's concern is always balanced by his criticism of those who do not possess his refined sensibilities. The founder of Epicureanism responded to criticism of his philosophy by stressing that the true Epicurean does not choose the largest amount of food, but the most pleasant ("Letter to Menoeceus" 24). When it comes to pleasure the true Epicurean prefers quality to quantity. A contrast between Marius and Dorian suggests that if Marius the Epicurean is a novel that explores a character whose ideas and sensations exemplify the Epicurean Aesthetic temper, The Picture of Dorian Gray is an Epicurean Aesthetic portrait of a character who fails to live up to that sensibility.

The nature of Dorian's failure is revealed, for instance, in a discussion with Lord Henry. The topic is marriage: "I'm don't think I am likely to marry, Harry," says Dorian. "I am too much in love. That is one of your aphorisms. I am putting it into practice, as I do everything that you say" (46). This is his fatal flaw: Dorian never learns the importance of doing nothing and discussing everything. Unlike Lord Henry he seems not to have read "The Critic as Artist" with its celebration of elegant inaction, e.g. "When a man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet" (361). The exquisite sins Lord Henry discusses lose their elegance when performed by Dorian: by doing rather than being the younger man "falls" from a contemplative to an active stage. If Dorian is a puppet, it is not Lord Henry who is pulling on the strings, but his own preference of action over contemplation. From the aesthetic, as opposed to the moralistic, point of view Lord Henry's role in the novel represents intellectual disinterestedness and the free play of the mind on any subject
whatsoever—the Arnoldian virtues whose Epicurean potential is developed by Pater and Wilde.

Edouard Roditi points out that the relationship between Lord Henry and Dorian cannot really be written off as that between a satanic tempter and innocent victim:

Lord Henry, Wilde's perfect dandy, expounds to Dorian a paradoxical philosophy of dandyism which shocks Basil Hal[l]ward but appeals to the young narcissist. In the passion of his self-love, Dorian Gray distorts this doctrine and becomes a fallen dandy, corrupting all those who accompany him along his path and murdering his conscience, Basil Hal[l]ward; finally, in self-inflicted death, Dorian meets the punishment of excessive self-love.

(124)

Dorian's punishment is quite literally self-inflicted. Roditi throws into relief the contrast between Lord Henry and Dorian by concluding that the former never acts and therefore never falls (124). Dorian's "fall" is his inability to understand Harry's philosophy of pleasure and intellectual play. The boundary between theory and practice is not always clear-cut, however. Lord Henry admits deriving pleasure from influencing Dorian, but paradoxically their association starts with his stating the conflict between influence and the individualism with which he influences Dorian. Basil warns Dorian against the bad effect Lord Henry supposedly has on his friends. (The charge is surely undermined by Basil's immunity from it, as testified by his incessant moralizing.) Dorian immediately becomes curious and asks Harry whether he really is such a bad influence as Basil asserts. Lord Henry responds:

"There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral--immoral from the scientific point of view."

"Why?"

"Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues
are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of some one else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him." (17)

To influence other people is to interfere with their self-development. Dorian is fascinated by Lord Henry's "low musical voice" (17). Dorian becomes a distorted echo of Lord Henry's music, a bad actor botching a script that was written to be enjoyed rather than acted out.

If Dorian is a failed Epicurean, is Lord Henry a successful one? To leave that question open remains one of the novel's important achievements. Lord Henry may be called a fop and a cynic, but even if one were to give him more positive labels he would probably not like it. Asked to give a definition of himself he retorts: "To define is to limit." He even tries to resist the royal title "Prince Paradox": "From a label there is no escape!" (194). Yet his resistance to definitions does not stop him from being a critic. Indeed his upsetting of conventional meanings makes him a rather good one. Those who dismiss his bewildering philosophy as inconsequential nonsense might consider his shrewd comment on Victorian philanthropy. When the problem of London's East End is brought up he remarks: "It is the problem of slavery, and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves." But when asked what he proposes to change he answers: "I don't desire to change anything in England except the weather. . . . I am quite content with philosophic contemplation" (40).

This is a crucial point. Rather than seeing Lord Henry as the embodiment of evil, it is more fruitful to interpret him as suggesting the contemplative temper Wilde shares with Pater and De Quincey. In the poem "Theoretikos," Wilde borrows a phrase from Pater indicating the reflective speaker's need to keep a certain distance between himself and the world. He wants to be "[n]either for God, nor for his enemies" (14). This is the same purposeless purpose Pater finds in Botticelli's Madonnas, who appear to be "neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies" (The Renaissance 37; Ellmann, Oscar Wilde 72-73). In both Pater and Wilde the reluctance to take sides suggests the shifting ground of their
relativism: uncertainty. To suggest an aesthetic way of dealing with this condition is one of the preoccupations of their art: "I never approve, or disapprove, of anything now," says Lord Henry. "It is an absurd attitude to take towards life" (73). Lord Henry's relativistic suspension of judgement is closely related to his posing, and given his aesthetic view of life, it is fitting that the term "posing" should come from art. While the moralistic artist Basil complains that Lord Henry's cynicism is simply a pose he replies: "Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know" (4). Harry knows the importance of not being earnest and delivers his epigram with laughter. He is never quite serious, because for him nothing is ever quite true (8, 79). His assumption should be applied to his own playing at evil, an act that holds an endless fascination for Wilde. For instance, Lord Henry's pretending to be wicked is similar to Lord Darlington's attitude in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), that is before he becomes melodramatic in the second act. Lady Windermere remarks on his pretending to be worse than he actually is, to which he responds urbanely: "We all have our little vanities, Lady Windermere." When she inquires why he makes that his special one he replies: "Oh, nowadays so many conceited people go about Society pretending to be good, that I think it shows rather a sweet and modest disposition to pretend to be bad" (1.48-57). Continuing with his logic of perspective and paradox Lord Darlington finds that the benefits of posing is that no one takes him seriously:

LADY WINDERMERE: Don't you want the world to take you seriously, then, Lord Darlington?

LORD DARLINGTON: No, not the world. Who are the people the world takes seriously? All the dull people one can think of, from the Bishops down to the bores. (1.57-64)

For Lord Henry and Lord Darlington, playing at badness opens up an eminently unpractical space of contemplation, as admirably useless as art itself, according to Wilde,
who in the preface to the novel flaunts the Kantian paradox that art's purpose lies in its lack of purpose: "All art is quite useless" (xiv).

Instead of being a renunciation of Lord Henry's theories, as critics like Murray argue, Wilde's novel is much rather an exploration of disinterestedness and intellectual play. Paradoxically, it is in the spirit of this playfulness that Lord Henry is not always a perfect example of "true Epicureanism." If he were, the novel would be in danger of turning into propaganda for a certain philosophy, even if that philosophy were Epicurean Aestheticism, and hence be out of tune with its own undogmatic dogma. Rather than promote a certain moral or fixed system, Wilde is much more interested in suggesting modes of viewing the world. Experience is turned into a show, as not only the world, but also the self are transformed into stages on which individuals are both players and spectators: "We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us," says Lord Henry (101). "Spectacle"--the word that served De Quincey and Pater so well continues its performance in Wilde's texts.

Too much emphasis on the moral of Wilde's tale obscures the role relativism, with its perspectival logic, plays in this novel. The drama of The Picture of Dorian Gray is as much created by points of view as it is by its plot. It is fitting that a novel with "picture" in its title should be concerned with perspective. This is illustrated, for instance, by the episode involving the actress Sibyl Vane. Dorian watches Sibyl and is in turn watched by Harry. Critics like Roditi who complain about the lack of depth in her and other characters from "low life" judge the novel by realist standards which are at odds with Wilde's deliberate playing with stock characters and aesthetic surfaces (118-20). Realism is certainly not Wilde's aim. Lord Henry's description of the novel he would like to write (but probably never will since he is too fond of reading books to care to write them) gives an indication of the spirit in which Wilde's novel can be interpreted: "I should like to write a novel certainly, a novel that would be as lovely as a Persian carpet and as unreal" (42). To complain about the artificiality of Wilde's novel is to miss its artistry.
Dorian falls in love with the actress, of course—love, incidentally, being a phenomenon Lord Henry sees as purely a question for physiology. The association of science and Aestheticism is developed further by the disinterested nature of Lord Henry's curiosity about Dorian. Both Basil and Harry are fascinated by the young narcissist—the homoerotic aspects of the novel have recently been given detailed attention by critics like Jonathan Dollimore and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—but when Harry learns that Dorian has fallen for an actress he is not at all peeved. On the contrary. He is pleased, for it makes Dorian more interesting (56). As Dorian rushes out to chase the object of his desire, Lord Henry's heavy eyelids droop and he begins to think: the contrast between Dorian's rash actions and Harry's Epicurean contemplation is clear. Lord Henry, as is his wont, starts to analyze and discriminate among his impressions. His unromantic aid to reflection is science: "He had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import" (56). The aesthetic appropriation of science is a crucial component of Epicurean Aestheticism. We have seen that Harry appears to be quite content with philosophic contemplation. Elaborating on this point, he says:

But, as the nineteenth century has gone bankrupt through an over-expenditure of sympathy, I would suggest that we should appeal to Science to put us straight. The advantage of the emotions is that they lead us astray, and the advantage of Science is that it is not emotional. (40)

Lord Henry watches Dorian with a dispassionate, clinical gaze. Dorian is a "wonderful study"—the word choice suggests both pictorial composition and the scientific case-study, as John Wilson Foster observes in a recent essay on Wilde and science (333). In the same way that Harry watches Dorian watching Sibyl, the reader is invited to watch Harry watching Dorian watching Sibyl.

An Epicurean Aesthetic reader is likely to see The Picture of Dorian Gray as just that—a picture portraying the chiaroscuro of beauty and ugliness. When Dorian's servants
break into his secret room they find hanging upon the wall an exquisite painting of their
master in all his youth and beauty. On the floor is a dead old man with a decayed face
(224). From a moralistic point of view the ending symbolizes the reality of the soul and the
abject failure of hedonism. From an aesthetic point of view, however, this conclusion
simply returns the reader to the beginning. The novel opens and closes with a beautiful
picture, the hideous marks on the corpse indicating the stages of corruption the reader has
been led through without harm. "Death and vulgarity are the only two facts in the
nineteenth century that one cannot explain away," says Lord Henry (212). What cannot be
explained cannot be escaped. Rather than try to escape, Wilde makes the best of a bad
matter by aestheticizing corruption on the principle that, when viewed from an unusual
angle, decay can be more fascinating than progress (The Picture of Dorian Gray 195). In
his portrait of a failed Epicurean Wilde invites the reader to view life and death, beauty
and ugliness, with the stylish detachment that characterizes the Epicurean Aesthetic
sensibility.

v. The Importance of Being a Detached Dandy

I have argued that it is Wilde's stylish experimentation with conflicting points of view that
saves The Picture of Dorian Gray from being the flat morality tale it is often made out to
be. In a direct rejection, not only of Victorian sentimentality but also of Romantic
ideology, Lord Henry observes that the nineteenth century is suffering from too much
sympathy. The cure, he suggests, is science: "The advantage of the emotions is that they
lead us astray, and the advantage of Science is that it is not emotional" (40). A positive
attitude towards science, combined with an association between notions of aesthetic and
scientific disinterestedness, is a central feature of Epicurean Aestheticism. If Pater politely
picks Coleridge apart, Wilde turns the tables on Wordsworth. At the end of the eighteenth
century, Wordsworth denounced the "meddling intellect" with its "Science and Art" in
favour of "heart"; at the end of the nineteenth Wilde suggests that it is time the heart's
spontaneous overflow be treated with a dose of science and art. "We murder to dissect," laments Wordsworth ("The Tables Turned" 4: 25-32). Wilde taunts true Romantics by drawing uncanny parallels between vivisection and aesthetics: "You cut life to pieces with your epigrams," says Dorian to Lord Henry, who in his aesthetic appropriation of the methods of science "had begun by vivisecting himself, as he had ended by vivisecting others" (The Picture of Dorian Gray 56, 97). As is generally the case with Wilde's epigrams, the tone of this line is calculated to startle rather than persuade. Ultimately, its nihilistic connotations are themselves subverted by the narrator's conclusion that Harry's "inhumane" investigations reveal that compared with human life nothing else is of any value (56). The conflict between emotion and intellect is a perennially open question in aesthetics, but at the end of the nineteenth century Epicurean Aesthetes cultivate detachment at the expense of passion as a means of finding value in a world where certainties, including those of past aesthetic theories, seem to be melting into air.

The dandy is Wilde's most graceful symbol of the attempt to deal nonchalantly with modern life. The social comedies that follow The Picture of Dorian Gray add to the Wildean collection of idle talkers: the new specimens include Lord Darlington from Lady Windermere's Fan (1892), Lord Illingworth and Mrs Erlynne from A Woman of No Importance (1893), and Lord Goring from An Ideal Husband (1895). Although social comedy might appear to be the perfect medium for Wilde, its highly stereotypical conventions clash awkwardly with the unconventional philosophy of his dandyism. In these three works, the dandies have brilliant moments, but the sense of calm sophistication they represent is ultimately sacrificed by Wilde for sentimental closure. Peter Raby states the case succinctly when he writes that in the social comedies the "balance between the witty and the earnest, and their two respective languages and codes, emerges as Wilde's most taxing dramatic problem" (xi). As long as form loses out to feeling we cannot talk of truly Epicurean Aesthetic plays. It is only with The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) that Wilde solves the problem of the relation between wittiness and earnestness. He does
so by inventing a new genre with a work which is not dominated by one brilliant talker, but whose entire structure has been dandified.

The emergence of Wilde's Epicurean Aesthetic comedy can be traced by analyzing the role of dandyism in his social dramas. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to examine Wilde's model of dandyism and the way it represents a relativistic development of an older brand. The contrast helps illuminate the Epicurean Aesthetic attitude and the way it differs from Platonic Aestheticism, represented here by Baudelaire. Both Wilde and Baudelaire agree in celebrating the dandy's main occupation: he does nothing. But for Baudelaire, inaction represents an idealistic revolt against a materialistic age. His dandy is an expression of the spiritual side of humanity: "In every man, at every hour, there are two simultaneous postulations, one toward God and the other towards Satan." In Baudelaire's vocabulary spirituality and animality are synonymous with God and Satan, respectively (My Heart Laid Bare: Personal Journals 259; see also "The Painter of Modern Life" 420). In this scheme, dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in a decadent age: "Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy." For Baudelaire, the "specific beauty of the dandy consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakable determination to remain unmoved. . . ."

Behind the cold surface lives "a burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 420-22). Baudelaire's aesthetic engagement with modernity obviously influenced Pater and Wilde. Furthermore, his own admiration for De Quincey shows the links between Baudelairean aesthetics and Epicurean Aestheticism, but the crucial difference lies in Baudelaire's Platonic yearnings. He writes: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 403). A move in emphasis from idealist immobility to materialist contingency illustrates the shift from Platonic to Epicurean Aestheticism.
If the Baudelairean dandy is proudly ancient in his rejection of the materialistic aspects of modern life, the Wildean dandy is "on excellent terms" with the world (e.g. The Picture of Dorian Gray 178). The significance of this unabashedly worldly and anti-nostalgic aspect of Wilde's Aestheticism is borne out by the fact that the phrase is used in relation to four of his dandies, Lord Henry, Lord Illingworth, Lord Goring, and Algernon Moncrieff. For Wilde, dandyism is a rising, rather than a setting, sun. This is evident from Lord Illingworth's aggressively modern advice to his son:

You want to be modern, don't you, Gerald? You want to know life as it really is. Not to be put off with any old-fashioned theories about life. Well, what you have to do at present is simply to fit yourself for the best society. A man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world. The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule. (A Woman of No Importance 3.49-55).

The speech brings together important elements of Wildean dandyism, including traces of Paterian vocabulary and a subtle Darwinistic reference to the survival of the "socially fittest." "Exquisite" is one of Pater's favourite adjectives. Wilde turns it into a noun for the consummate manipulators of their own image, the dandies. The original dandies of the Regency period counted themselves among the "Exclusives," the term British high society used to refer to its own members (Gagnier, Idylls of the Marketplace 68, 70). The Regency dandies' adoption of the label highlights the rigid, anti-democratic nature of their dandyism. Although only a "natural aristocrat" himself, Baudelaire also sneers at the "rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level . . ." ("The Painter of Modern Life" 422). The Epicurean Aesthetic development of dandyism is foreshadowed in the most famous Regency dandy, Beau Brummell. He did not inherit a position in high society: he created it by a skillful manipulating of aristocratic forms and rituals (Idylls of the Marketplace 67-70). But in Brummell's time, the dandies' strict ethos of individuality and independence crumbles when it comes to money. They
accept patronage from the aristocracy, after all. Hence, the early dandies supplemented, rather than threatened, the aristocratic society of their time. In a more democratic age, Wilde predicts a real shift in the balance of social power, as the exquisite manipulators of form rise at the expense of exclusive, authentic aristocrats. With Wilde the hierarchical, anti-democratic tendency of Baudelaierean dandyism is exchanged for more relativistic tactics. As the absolutism inherent in an aristocratic system begins to fall apart, social survival comes to depend more on the fit of a coat and the turn of a phrase than on noble lineage.

Significantly, Wildean dandyism does not exempt itself from its own relativistic strategies. For Baudelaire, dandyism is "the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 420). The line describes perfectly the dandies' complex relation to society. Their reliance on it makes them simultaneously insiders and outsiders: they require the dullness of others as a foil for their originality. But for Baudelaire, the dandies are not merely elegant. They are symbols of a protest, however laconic, against utilitarian values. Baudelaire is at pains to exonerate dandyism from any embarrassing association with a materialist society. He writes: "Contrary to what a lot of thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 420). Like the Symbolists he inspired, Baudelaire is an idealist. For him clothes are a material manifestation of mind. Wilde, however, is materialist, and in his aesthetics clothes have no connection with spirituality. One of Baudelaire's definitions of dandyism is that it is "the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 420). Wilde realizes that the originality Baudelaire praises is the creation of a pose, not a reflection of spiritual essences. Wilde's obsession with style needs to be seen in the context of his relativistic claim that "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" ("The Decay of
Lying" 305). An example of Wilde's deviousness is the way he uses absolutist vocabulary to promote relativism. For Wilde, a "trivial" matter like fashion deserves to be treated "seriously" precisely because it refers to nothing except itself ("The Decay of Lying" 313). His aesthetics cannot be separated from his relativistic philosophy and vice versa. In De Profundis, he writes: "I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art . . . (194).

The development of Wilde's aesthetics is reflected in his social comedies. His Epicurean Aesthetic attitude is formed by 1891 with the publication of Intentions, but it is only in 1895 with The Importance of Being Earnest that he comes up with a truly successful dramatic expression of it. At first sight, Lord Goring from An Ideal Husband (1894) appears to the perfect Wildean dandy. But in spite of his brilliance he is ultimately overpowered by convention and melodrama. In the stage directions he is described as follows:

Enter Lord Goring in evening dress with a buttonhole. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion. One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it. He is the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought. (212)

The notion that the essence of modernity lies in its malleability is also suggested by Wilde's description of Phipps, the Ideal Butler: He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life, history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form (212). Lord Goring has a "well-bred, expressionless face" and "plays with life" (171). Butler and lord represent "the dominance of form," and since style is the only thing that matters in Wilde's universe, the dandy's clothes are just as important as his thoughts. To place an equal emphasis on dress and ideas indicates the Epicurean Aesthetic concern with material elegance. For Epicurean Aesthetes, to dress poorly is a failure to live up to their stylish philosophy, and to be dull is a failure to live up to their philosophical style. Wilde's dandies express themselves equally through buttonholes and epigrams. Although the epigram is
traditionally a form that lends itself to absolutism, I have shown how Wilde subverts it to suit his own relativistic aims. The paradox, however, is firmly associated with an interest in aesthetic structure and verbal play rather than argument (Behler 876). A few examples will show how the dandy’s verbal tricks are employed in the disinterested interest of relativistic aesthetics. Throughout An Ideal Husband, Lord Goring’s father keeps showing up at inopportune moments. The son comments: "Really, I don’t want to meet my father three days running. It is a great deal too much excitement for any son. . . . Fathers should be neither seen nor heard" (4.14-17). By giving a twist to the "children should be seen and not heard" formula and applying it to a parent, Wilde shows up the ridiculousness of a phrase that may seem perfectly reasonable to many members of the audience. By taking stock phrases and opinions, and testing them in different contexts Wilde plays with perspectives, creating the exhilarating sense of indeterminacy that will become the shifting basis of The Importance of Being Earnest.

The dandyish aesthetics of Epicurean Aestheticism have life’s formlessness as their foil. An example of this comes at the end of an interchange between Lord Goring and Sir Robert Chiltern. Lord Goring suggests having a talk with Lady Chiltern in an attempt to lessen the blow of her finding out that her husband’s wealth and impeccable political career is based on the selling of state secrets. Chiltern, the "ideal" husband from whom the play takes its title, is less than optimistic. He fears that nothing will change Lady Chiltern’s views. At this stage in the play, Lord Goring is still relatively uninfected with the rampant melodrama erupting all around him. Unruffled, he echoes Lord Henry’s clinical detachment: "Well, at the worst it would simply be a psychological experiment." Chiltern responds in true melodramatic fashion: "All such experiments are terribly dangerous." The content of Lord Goring’s answer reflects the chaos on which Wilde’s elegant artifices are built, but his tone indicates the desire to handle oneself with style in the face of such difficulties: "Everything is dangerous, my dear fellow. If it wasn’t so, life wouldn’t be worth living" (2.26-31). Epigram, paradox and relativism coalesce in Lord Goring’s
pronouncements on fashion, which, in accordance with the dandyish logic of Epicurean Aestheticism, modulate easily into statements about the nature of truth:

LORD GORING You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

PHIPPS Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

PHIPPS Yes, my lord.

LORD GORING (putting in new buttonhole) And falsehoods the truths of other people. (3.7-15)

Not only fashion, but also truth, is relativized. Wilde's elegantly flippant maneuvering from one viewpoint to another produces the sense of intellectual and aesthetic vertigo that characterizes his best work. In accordance with the Epicurean Aesthetic dictum that one should never succumb to facile orthodoxies, not even one's own, Wilde has Lord Goring actually turn against the dandy's weapon of choice, the paradox itself. When his father complains that there is too much sympathy in the world Lord Goring sympathizes with this view: "I quite agree with you, father. If there was less sympathy in the world there would be less trouble in the world." This only incenses the old man: "That is a paradox, sir. I hate paradoxes." Again the son subverts his father's authority by agreeing with him: "So do I, father. Everybody one meets is a paradox nowadays. It is a great bore. It makes society so obvious" (3.139-44). In accordance with the undogmatic dogma of Epicurean Aestheticism the power of paradox is subverted by a paradox.

With such impeccable relativistic credentials the claim that Lord Goring only appears to be the perfect Wildean dandy may seem strange. His stance, however, is in direct opposition to the sentimental drive of the play. Wilde may claim that Lord Goring masters modern life by making it, but Lord Goring himself is finally mastered by melodrama. When pitted against the figures who threaten the comfortable, but false, existence of the Chilterns--the blackmailing Mrs Cheveley and Baron Arnheim, with his
"terrible" influence and "philosophy of power" (2.90)--Lord Goring succumbs to the words and actions of melodrama. He calls the Baron a "Damned scoundrel" and strikes a table just in case his friend does not get the point when he proclaims: "Robert, you must fight her. You must fight her" (2.227-28).

Lord Goring outwits Mrs Cheveley (to whom, incidentally, he had once been engaged), but by defeating his former lover in the name of respectability he, and his creator, turn against the brilliant image that has just been presented to the audience, as the subversive dandy transforms himself into a conservative agent protecting polite society from its inelegant past. The dandy loves poses and artifices, but it is surely a lapse of taste to rescue a hypocritical politician suffering from an acute case of what Wilde's fellow dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, diagnosed as the "life-lie" (The Wild Duck 476). In the last act of An Ideal Husband, Lord Goring, and Wilde, commit an unpardonable sin against themselves when the dandy is described as "pulling himself together for a great effort, and showing the philosopher that underlies the dandy" (241). Not only is a great effort utterly unseemly in a dandy, but the following speech, in which he rescues Lord Chiltern once more by persuading his wife not to hold him to his promise of giving up politics, is so conservative as to make his ultra-Tory father sound like a radical. Lord Goring's lines include the following:

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman's life revolves in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progress. Don't make any terrible mistake, Lady Chiltern. A woman who can keep a man's love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them. (4.454-60).

A modern reader may be tempted to take all this as ironic, but the stage directions are unambiguous. In the interchange between Lady Chiltern and Lord Goring the lady is "startled" (4.433), "troubled and hesitating" (4.461) while the fallen dandy speaks "with
deep feeling in his voice" (4.473). The implication that all along a serious Lord Goring has been hiding behind a mask of triviality ruins the previous relativistic impression that matter and manner, style and philosophy, cannot be separated. Hence, in the final act of the play hierarchy and rigid binary logic are reinstated by the figure who had previously subverted it. Considered as a whole, therefore, the play falls outside the range of what can legitimately be termed Epicurean Aestheticism. It might, of course, be argued that on the basis of the principle of never succumbing to orthodoxies, it is precisely this turning against its own relativistic principles that makes it Epicurean Aesthetic. But even the flexibility of relativism has its limits.

If *An Ideal Husband* fails to live up to the standards of Epicurean Aestheticism, *The Importance of Being Earnest* more than makes up for it. The main problem with the social comedies preceding this work is that in them the symbol of Wilde's relativistic aesthetics, the dandy, gets tangled up in outworn, sentimental conventions. The situation parallels the trouble Wilde got himself into when he tried to use the fairy tale to treat modern problems. In both instances, modern ideas push against ancient structures with aesthetically unsatisfying results. It is only when Wilde finds a form which reflects his relativistic aesthetics that this problem is solved. The solution to his problem with the fairy tale was a new genre, the "relativistic parables" he called "Poems in Prose." The solution to his dramatic problems is also a new genre that one might call the "relativistic farce." But although the majority of critics praise Wilde's new genre, it took them a long time to begin to understand the nature of this new species of comedy, as Patricia Flanagan Behrendt has noted. Recently, critics like Ian Gregor and Donald Ericksen have suggested that the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest* derives from the fact that in it Wilde "finally creates a world in which the dandy is no longer an outsider" (Behrendt 168). The dandy is no longer an outsider in this play, because the world Wilde creates there is built according to the relativistic principles of Epicurean Aestheticism. Rather than have the dandy defeated by old structures, Wilde finally dandifies the structures of social comedy.
Wilde characterized his play as "exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy" (More Letters of Oscar Wilde 196). If any one line from the play summarizes this work, it is Lady Bracknell's phrase: "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (3.164-65). The dandy is the master of surfaces, but whereas in An Ideal Husband Wilde had abandoned the "triviality" of the dandy for the "seriousness" of the philosopher in order to provide conjugal bliss in the Chiltern household, in The Importance of Being Earnest dandyism reigns supreme. Even the most formidable symbol of society, Lady Bracknell, lives by dandyish principles. When promoting her nephew Algernon as a suitable husband for Cecily, she says: "Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?" (3.211-14). Lady Bracknell's daughter, Gwendolen, puts the same idea into an epigram: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (3.28-29). In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde had presented a similar idea: "It is style that makes us believe in a thing--nothing but style" (316). Wilde's playful lamenting over the decay of lying is that the liar is the "very basis of civilized society," for "the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure." Art welcomes the liar with open arms "knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style . . ." ("The Decay of Lying" 305). As had been the case with De Quincey and Pater, Wilde feels that the manner of viewing, the point of view is crucial in constituting the real. This has a radical metaphysical effect, leading to such radical claims as the one from "The Decay of Lying" that the "nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac" (309). In the dialogue, such statements have their theoretical underpinnings in Wilde's relativistic epistemology. In the dialogue, Wilde's mouthpiece, Vivian, claims that the Impressionists changed the climate of London. His companion, Cyril, is not quite convinced, but Vivian encourages his friend to consider the matter from a "scientific or a metaphysical point of view": 
For what is nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. ("The Decay of Lying" 312)

The emphasis on the brain suggests the materialistic side of Wilde's Aestheticism. It is important to note that Wilde is not suggesting that art creates things out of nothing, or as Vivian observes: "There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them" (312). It is by drawing our attention to the raw material of nature, exaggeration and selection, that art can be said to invent things. The facts do not change, but our view of them does. To be aware of the facts we must experience them, and since the empirical is the realm of the possible rather than the necessary, reality is never fully within our grasp. Here the parallels between Epicurean Aestheticism and science become clear. This is the "philosophical conception of the relative" that Pater saw had been "developed in modern times through the influence of the sciences of observation" (Appreciations 66).

In Epicurean Aestheticism relativism becomes almost synonymous with style. In The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde dramatizes the theoretical discussion in his critical dialogues, including the existential vertigo created by the implication of his idea put forward in "The Decay of Lying" that truth may only be a matter of style (305). This unsettling opinion is made light of in the play. In the Epicurean Aesthetic spirit of not taking one's own position too seriously Wilde pokes fun both at Pater and at his own extensive borrowing of Paterian ideas and language by working lines from Pater into a scene between Jack and Gwendolen. Gwendolen, whose ideal is to marry a man called Ernest, thinks she has finally found her man in Jack.

GWENDOLEN My own Ernest!

JACK But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?
GWENDOLEN But your name is Ernest.

JACK Yes, I know it is. But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me then?

GWENDOLEN (glibly) Ah! that is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculations has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them. (1.388-96)

In his "Preface" to The Renaissance, Pater writes that the aesthetic critic has no need to trouble himself with such abstract questions as what beauty is in itself, or its relation to truth or experience, "metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere" (xxx). Wilde shares Pater's anti-essentialism, and he continues his forerunner's work even when he is making fun of him.

For Wilde, uncertainty adds excitement to experience. For instance, when Jack has explained to his friend Algernon why his name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country he concludes: "That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple." Algernon responds: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!" (1.208-11). It is important to note that the relationship between Jack and Algernon parallels that of the talkers in the critical dialogues. One character is always less earnest, and hence cleverer, than the other.

Although both Jack and Algernon are wonderfully ridiculous, Algernon is both smarter and more dedicated to triviality than Jack, who believes himself to be more respectable than his friend. Although neither of them lives according to traditional values, Jack still clings to conventional notions of right and wrong, while for Algernon everything is an open question. This is illustrated by the following exchange.

ALGERNON Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

JACK Oh, that is nonsense!
ALGERNON It isn't!

JACK Well, I won't argue about the matter. You always want to argue about things.

ALGERNON That is exactly what things were originally made for.

JACK Upon my word, if I thought that, I'd shoot myself. (1.591-601)

Only Algernon, and Wilde, can take the triviality of life seriously. The tone of Wilde's play is indicated by the subtitle, "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." At the outset, the stability of everyday notions is undermined. The mocking tone indicates that high seriousness is not quite healthy and is in dire need of a dose of triviality. Wilde says that his delicate bubble of a play has its own philosophy. When asked what that philosophy might be, he responds: "That we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" (More Letters 115). Wilde parodies the gravity of the problem play by making earnestness, the cornerstone of Victorian society, a problem in his drama. Jack constantly has to escape the pressure of maintaining a high moral tone with his ward, Cecily, since "a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness . . ." (1.203-5). Every time he does this he lays particular stress on Cecily's German lessons: "Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious!" she tells her governess, Miss Prism. "Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well" (2.11-14).

One of the amazing things about The Importance of Being Earnest is how it is simultaneously about everything and nothing. While remaining exquisitely trivial it manages to deal with such sombre issues as death, money, marriage, religion, class, identity, and truth. The play is held together by the Epicurean Aesthetic emphasis on pleasure. When Jack shows up Algernon asks him "What brings you up to town?" Jack replies: "Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?" (1.38-40). What brings Jack up to town, continues to bring people to see Wilde's play. Pleasure is the key word in Wilde's aesthetics, and the "trivial" concern with pleasure is inseparable from the
"serious" issues dealt with in the play. Jack continues his greeting with the snide remark: "Eating as usual, I see, Algy!" Algernon replies stiffly: "I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock" (1.41-43). This exchange is an example of the way frivolous elements are interwoven with grave ones in Wilde's Epicurean Aesthetic treatment. The scene illustrates Wilde's relativism: the same activity, eating, is considered vulgar from one point of view, but from another, it is the height of sophistication. Things shift according to the style in which they are presented. The characters seem to be locked in private worlds, each world often poised on no more than a word, to borrow a phrase from Ellmann (Oscar Wilde 281). Lady Bracknell asks Dr Chasuble: "Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?" Dr Chasuble answers somewhat indignantly: "She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability." Lady Bracknell concludes: "It is obviously the same person" (3.315-19). The theme of identity provides Wilde with comic and philosophical material for his drama. Like Jack/Ernest, Miss Prism is and is not "the same person." The referent is the same. But different signifiers create two diametrically opposed people. This proliferation of realities, with its suggestion that everything can be endlessly debated, creates a sense of giddiness which evokes the metaphysical uncertainty to which Epicurean Aestheticism is a response. Being an Epicurean Aesthetic enterprise, however, The Importance of Being Earnest makes comic capital out of chaos.

Jack's and Algernon's relation to town and country reflects the relativistic theme and structure of the play. Both characters want pleasure and freedom from boring relatives, in Algernon's case, and from self-imposed respectability, in Jack's case. Jack invents Ernest; Algernon has Bunbury. Jack, who lives in the country, escapes to town, while Algernon, who lives there, does most of his Bunburying in the country. That each man's home becomes the locus of the other's holiday demonstrates the relativistic symmetries of Wilde's aesthetics. In themselves, town or country are neutral. It is only in relation to each other that they acquire meaning. Style and relativism become almost
synonymous for Wilde, in the sense that everything becomes a matter of relations. This applies not only to town and country, but to humans as well.

The "dehumanized" aspect of The Importance of Being Earnest has led to charges of heartlessness. These were first voiced by Bernard Shaw, who writes:

... I, who had praised [Wilde's] first plays handsomely, had turned traitor over "The Importance of Being Earnest." Clever as it was, it was his first really heartless play. In the others the chivalry of the eighteenth century Irishman and the romance of the disciple of Théophile Gautier . . . not only gave a certain kindness and gallantry to the serious passages and to the handling of the women, but provided that proximity of emotion without which laughter, however irresistible, is destructive and sinister. In "The Importance of Being Earnest" this had vanished; and the play, though extremely funny, was essentially hateful. ("My Memories of Oscar Wilde" 95-96)

Shaw is right, to a degree. There is something heartless about this play, but it is the type of coldness that accompanies a certain type of humour like, for instance, Wilde's or De Quincey's. This issue touches on the development of Wilde's Epicurean Aestheticism. I have referred to Epicurean Aestheticism as a shift away from Romanticism, a moment which starts with De Quincey's associating art and murder, and continues by Wilde's associating art and dissection. It is a tribute to the sophistication of Wilde's play that it actually anticipates its critics on the issue of heartlessness. Towards the end of Act Two it looks as if Jack and Algernon will not be able to marry Gwendolen and Cecily. In his despair Algernon begins to eat muffins. Earnest as usual, Jack is not amused: "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless." Algernon replies: "Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly" (2.809-13). The joke is spun out. Jack takes the muffin dish from
Algernon, who offers him tea-cake: "I wish you would have tea-cake instead. I don't like tea-cake." Jack's pride is hurt:

JACK Good heavens! I suppose a man may eat his own muffins in his own garden.

ALGERNON But you have just said it was perfectly heartless to eat muffins.

JACK I said it was perfectly heartless of you, under the circumstances.

That is a very different thing. (2.825-30)

For once, Algernon is outwitted by Jack, whose reasoning is momentarily in tune with the perspectival logic of this play: things only hold true from a particular standpoint. However, Algernon quickly recovers from his momentary lapse into common consistency and becomes his old flippant self: "That may be," he grants his opponent. "But the muffins are the same" (2.831). He seizes the muffin-dish from Jack. The fight over the muffins continues until, by a reversal typical of this play, Algernon is in a position to exclaim: "Jack, you are at the muffins again!" (2.860). Things have been turned upside-down, with the gluttonous guest accusing his host of gluttony.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, everything is played with. The play is "heartless" in the sense that it lives up to Pater's aphorism that all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music: like music this drama is about patterns, tone and tempo, rather than emotion, issues, and action. Wilde even plays with his former over-dramatic dramas. An important part of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility is a cultivated detachment towards everything, including oneself. Wilde can afford to make fun of his earlier plays after he has overcome their limitations with his relativistic farce. *The Importance of Being Earnest* parodies *A Woman of No Importance*, as critics like Raby have shown (xviii). The variation on the title is the obvious clue. The issues of orphans and the identity of the orphan Gerald, which are responsible for much of the melodrama in the earlier play, are travestied in the later one. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the language of melodrama
finds a powerful mouthpiece in Hester, a young American, who acts as a counterpoint to the old-world corruption and hypocrisy reigning in the country manor in which the play is set. She exclaims: "If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded. Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don't punish the one and let the other go free. Don't have one law for men and another for women" (2.296-300). Raby observes that Hester is Wilde's attempt to create modern women as independent as Ibsen's characters, but since he had not found a vocabulary to express their inner life he is forced to rely on conventional terms (xviii). Hester's sentiments may be fine, but the sentimentality is hard to take. Not only is Hester a moralist; she is an orphan as well, and the play ends with the two orphans, Hester and Gerald, finding each other. In The Importance of Being Earnest, the same moralistic language is presented only to be laughed at. When Miss Prism produces the famous handbag, Jack thinks he has finally found his mother. He embraces her: "Mother!" Miss Prism recoils in indignant astonishment.

MISS PRISM Mr Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. (The Importance of Being Earnest 3.395-401)

He tries to embrace his "mother" again. Miss Prism is still more indignant. Wilde is heartless enough not only to make fun of orphans, but also of his own earlier creations, as Hester's earnest line is emptied of importance in The Importance of Being Earnest.

This play is absurdly trivial and completely lacking in emotion, but to reject it for those reasons is to judge it according to the rules which Wilde is subverting. In The Importance of Being Earnest, all that exists is surfaces—hard and glittering facades created by the fascinating and hilarious standpoints which distort things to such an extent that they
create, rather than reflect, reality. Miss Prism is an example of this, as I have shown. Furthermore, in her name can be found a clue to Wilde's relativistic method: when put between an object and an observer a prism disperses one entity into many, a phenomenon which symbolizes the function of style. Wilde's treatment of his characters is highly stylized. Never very realistic to begin with, they become more and more like bits in a kaleidoscope. In Act Two, this aspect of the play comes to the fore with the audience discovering that, like Gwendolen, Cecily wants to marry a man called Ernest. The interchange between Algernon and Cecily is a prismatic variation on the talk in Act One between Jack and Gwendolen. After ascertaining that Cecily is unswerving in her preference for the name, Algernon rushes away to the rectory in order to arrange a christening. Again the action is a repetition, for earlier Jack was seen going in the same direction. The behaviour of Wilde's characters is ludicrous, but the stylization of their speech and the choreographing of their movements creates brilliant patterns out of absurdity. For instance, when Gwendolen and Cecily first meet they like each other so much that merely upon hearing Cecily's name Gwendolen exclaims: "I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong" (2.549-50). However, when they think they are both engaged to Ernest, they turn against each other, with Gwendolen claiming that she disliked Cecily from the start: "My first impressions of people are invariably right" (2.701). In accordance with the farcical logic of the play, Gwendolen can retain her principle and break it too. Only the shift in the phrasing from "never wrong" to "invariably right" suggests the way things can turn into their opposites at a moment's notice. Jack and Algernon arrive on the scene, and although the women find out that they are not engaged to the same man, they also discover that neither is named Ernest. The women put their arms around each other's waists, in spite of the fact that they had been at each other's throats a few moments earlier. Paralleling the way the men had run in the same direction, the women are now literally united against the men. In Wilde's
dizzying world, two become one as easily as the characters forget what they have just said.

Wilde's extreme stylization of his material reaches a new height in the last act. The women have to tell their lovers that they cannot marry them, since they are not called Ernest. After all, there are principles at stake. Their solution is to speak in unison. This is an "excellent idea," as Gwendolen is quick to point out, not only because she "nearly always speak[s] at the same time as other people," but also because at this stage both the women and the men have been reduced to formal functions. Gwendolen beats time with an uplifted finger, as the women address the men: "Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!" (3.50-51). Wilde's signature phrase "That is all" suggests that he gives his blessing to the characters' decision to be patterns rather than people. Wilde's power lies in his treating everything, including his own phrases, with elegant disrespect. The "insuperable barrier" is removed when the men respond—in unison, of course: "Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon" (3.50-1). The women are totally won over when they hear that their lovers are prepared to go through this fearful ordeal for their sake:

GWENDOLEN  How absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes! Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned, men are infinitely beyond us.
JACK  We are! (Clasps hand with Algernon)
CECILY  They have moments of physical courage of which we women know absolutely nothing.
GWENDOLEN (to Jack)  Darling!
ALGERNON (to Cecily)  Darling! (3.60-7)

Wilde's method of taking a male-chauvinist phrase and making it silly by putting it in an unusual context, shows the critical edge of his triviality. Never being totally serious has the advantage of never being completely trivial. The patterning continues with Cecily echoing Gwendolen, and a man being addressed by "Darling!" by a woman and a woman being
addressed "Darling!" by a man. The couples fall into each other's arms. Then Lady
Bracknell approaches, and they separate in alarm.

The characters' absurd dance continues with handbag, perambulator and
manuscript "of more than usually revolting sentimentality" playing their parts (3.339-40).
In the end, Jack comes to the shocking conclusion that throughout the play he has been
telling the truth. His name really is Ernest: "Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to
find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you
forgive me?" (3.463-65). She can, for she feels sure that he will change. The play ends
with couples falling into each other's arms, including Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism, who
seem to have gotten caught up in the excitement. "At last!" rings out three times. Only
Lady Bracknell remains detached. "My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of
triviality." Jack replies: "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first
time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest." The audience knows he has done
no such thing. The self-reflexive repetition of the title and the final tableau underline
Wilde's point that the vital thing in matters of importance is not earnestness but style.
Chapter IV

The Last Act?--Enter Stoppard

What becomes of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility after 1895? In my view, it disappears from Wilde's work after the disastrous results of what even he admitted was his "absurd action" against the Marquess of Queensberry (De Profundis 158). The sombre tone of De Profundis and The Ballad of Reading Gaol is very different from the Epicurean exuberance of The Importance of Being Earnest. From a biographical point of view, De Profundis is certainly a fascinating document revealing obsessive facets of Wilde's personality very different from his sophisticated dandy persona. But this exposure of his weaknesses and lack of detachment is precisely what stops De Profundis from being an Epicurean Aesthetic text. In this matter Wilde is his own best critic. In "The Critic as Artist," he stresses one of the central characteristics of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament: "To art's subject-matter we should be more or less indifferent. We should, at any rate, have no preferences, no prejudices, no partisan feeling of any kind" (299). De Profundis is anything but detached. Addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas, or "Dear Bosie" as Wilde calls him, the work is one long sigh of love. Wilde may accuse Douglas of being coarse, blinded with hate, and entirely lacking in imagination (168), but he is obviously still in love with him. The piece begins with Wilde's lamenting that the two ever met, but ends with an invitation to continue the relationship. De Profundis is a testament to Wilde's love-hate relationship with Douglas. As Wilde's own Epicurean Aesthetic principles suggest, his lack of composure precludes him from playing gracefully with his subject matter.
In addition to Wilde's disastrous obsession with Douglas, *De Profundis* reflects the devastating impact of the public humiliation he had to endure during and after the trials. A symptom of Wilde's trying to cope with his crisis is the development of a "Christ Complex." In Wilde's self-help mythology he and Jesus become the supreme individualists, able to transform common reality by the power of their extraordinary personalities. Both have their days of glory, but eventually both are punished for transgressing society's oppressive rules. From the point of view of psychology, all this is understandable, but from an aesthetic viewpoint, Wilde's identification with Christ is sentimental and embarrassing. Sentimentality and lack of detachment are the two main factors that mar his prison writings. The tearful refrain of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that "each man kills the thing he loves" is the most obvious example (37). In his Epicurean Aesthetic days, Wilde would have been the first to mock such high-Victorian earnestness.

If Epicurean Aestheticism does not survive in Wilde himself, is it perhaps to be found in the Modernists? It has become standard practice to treat the Aesthetes and Decadents of the nineteenth century as forerunners of Modernism, as the titles of two studies indicate: F. C. McGrath's *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (1986) and David Weir's *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995). This approach has its merits, but whether or not intended by the critics, it tends to turn the Aesthetes and Decadents into honorary Modernists, making them almost, but never quite, as good as the real thing. In my writing I have deliberately refrained from comparing De Quincey, Pater, and Wilde to the Modernists. Although there are certain obvious similarities, such as the pursuit of art for art's sake, I believe Epicurean Aestheticism has more in common with Postmodernism than Modernism. The title of Jonathan Loesberg's 1991 study *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man* suggests the parallels between Aestheticism, Postmodernism, and Poststructuralism which critics have now started to explore. These three movements revel in aesthetic surfaces at the expense
of what might be considered more pressing matters—a practice which inevitably leads to charges of irresponsibility, relativism, nihilism, political quietism, etc (Loesberg 5).

Of course, many of these charges have been laid against Modernism, a fact which illustrates the vexed issue of the distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism. The complex nature of the problem is expressed succinctly by David Antin's relativistic maxim: "From the modernism you choose you get the postmodernism you deserve" (qtd. in Altieri 792). To complicate matters even further, it might even be questioned whether the distinction is worth making at all. What Postmodernist trick has not already been performed by James Joyce, the Dadaists, or, for that matter, Laurence Sterne? I will, however, mention one argument in favour of distinguishing between Modernism and Postmodernism. Writing in an era following the great achievement of high Modernism seems to have a peculiarly unsettling effect on contemporary authors. Ennui haunts the late twentieth century no less than the late nineteenth century, a fact which brings out a significant parallel between the two periods.

Wilde and his contemporaries stand in a similar relation to the Romantics as the Postmodernists do to the Modernists. The turns of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries have much in common: mild millennial angst, cynicism, scepticism, obsession with style, a studied world-weariness, a sense of belatedness, and a disbelief in universals, just to name a few. Lady Bracknell's line from The Importance of Being Earnest sounds just as relevant today as it was when the play was performed in 1895: "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (3.165-66). Viewed through Postmodernist eyes, Modernism seems somehow too noble, too heroic, too concerned with myth and the power of art. Pater and Wilde, with their blasé acknowledgement that art's only purpose lies in its lack of purpose, appear much closer to Postmodernist demythologizing of high art in favour of explorations of aesthetic surfaces. Postmodernists tend to question the serious tone of much Modernist art. The less earnest tendency of Postmodernist art results in an ironic stance towards the idealist, quasi-religious aspirations of high Modernism, as well as a more relaxed attitude
towards commercialism and popular culture. Another issue which links Epicurean Aesthetes like Pater and Wilde to certain Postmodernist writers is their openness to the discourse and discoveries of science. While Modernists like T. S. Eliot and Yeats see science as a vulgar threat to true culture, Postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and Tom Stoppard are intrigued by scientific developments (cf. the use of the concept of entropy throughout Pynchon's work and Stoppard's use of quantum physics in his plays Hapgood and Arcadia).

I see the work of Stoppard as an example of the reemergence of the Epicurean Aesthetic sensibility in our time. The obvious text to start with here is the very Wildean play Travesties, aptly characterized by Stoppard as a "huge artifice" (Hayman, "First Interview with Tom Stoppard" 6). Travesties (1974) is set in Zurich during the First World War, and features James Joyce staging Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. At the same time, Lenin and the Dadaist Tristan Tzara were also living in Zurich. With history playing such famous personages into his hands, Stoppard is delightfully perverse in making an obscure British consular official, Henry Carr, the central character of his play.

Before we take a closer look at Travesties, it is worth noting how Stoppard consistently makes comic capital out of presenting famous fictional and historical characters from the point of view of near nonentities. The best-known example is, of course, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1967). This technique is directly linked to the relativism that I see as a distinguishing feature of Epicurean Aestheticism.

Stoppard's relativism is made more explicit in Jumpers (1972; rev. ed. 1984), a comedy about the intellectual crisis of a philosophy professor and the mental breakdown of his wife, Dotty, a retired music hall star. Like Wilde's, Stoppard's talent lies in merging the trivial and the serious. In one scene, Dotty makes fun of her husband's philosophical anxiety: "You bloody humbug!--the last of the metaphysical egocentrics! You're probably still shaking from the four-hundred-year-old news that the sun doesn't go around you!" (65). But suddenly, her mood changes:
Well, it's all over now. Not only are we no longer the still centre of God's universe, we're not even uniquely graced by his footprint in man's image. Man is on the Moon, his feet on solid ground, and he has seen us whole, all in one go, little-local and all our absolutes, the thou-shalts and the thou-shalt-nots that seemed to be the very condition of our existence, how did they look to two moonmen with a single neck to save between them? Like the local customs of another place. Because the truths that have been taken on trust, they've never had edges before, there was no vantage point to stand on and see where they stopped. (65-66)

The theme of Dotty's lament is expressed more succinctly on the first page of Stoppard's novel Lord Malquist and Mr Moon (1966): "Nothing," says the Earl of Malquist, "is the history of the world viewed from a suitable distance" (8). It has not escaped the notice of critics that Lord Malquist is a Wildean creation: "his epigrams, his clothes, his horse-drawn carriage and his outlook belong gloriously to the 1890s..." (Hayman 48). But Stoppard's successful career as a dramatist shows that the relevance of Wilde's type of Aestheticism extends beyond the late nineteenth century. An excerpt from an interview with Stoppard shows to what extent Wilde's manner is congenial to him. When asked about the relation of art and politics, Stoppard replies:

One of the impulses in Travesties is to try to sort out what my answer would be in the end if I was given enough time to think every time I'm asked why my plays aren't political, or ought they to be? Sometimes I have a complete comical reaction, and I think that in the future I must stop compromising my plays with this whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness. I should have the courage of my lack of convictions. ("First Interview" 2)

Stoppard playfully presents the Aesthetes' viewpoint and concludes with a paradox--Wilde would have approved. Stoppard's resemblance to Wilde is not limited to flourishes of wit
and paradox, as an examination of *Travesties* bears out. The Importance of Being Earnest is more than an important element in *Travesties*. It is integral to its structure, as Neil Sammells's analysis of the two plays reveals:

The structure of Wilde's play is that of travesty: Jack's proposal to Gwendolen is played again, and travestied, by Algy and Cecily; Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack in Act One reappears in a different form in her haranguing of Miss Prism. Similarly, individual scenes are themselves structured by travesty with one voice restating and confounding the other. (383)

Sammells shows how Stoppard foregrounds the form of Wilde's work, and he concludes that it is precisely according to the principle of travesty that Stoppard's "huge artifice" assembles itself (383).

Given the intertextual aspect of *Travesties*, it is fitting that the play should begin in a library. Three writers are hard at work: Joyce is writing *Ulysses*, Lenin is working on a book on imperialism, and Tzara is drawing words from a hat. The first hint of Stoppard's use of Wilde's text is the clever recycling of names from The Importance of Being Earnest. The librarian's name is Cecily, and Joyce's assistant and Carr's sister, is called Gwendolen. Such deliberate blurring of the fictional and the real shows that, like Wilde, Stoppard is more interested in creating aesthetic patterns than depicting realistic characters and situations. Yet Stoppard shows off his mastery of style by making the library scene simultaneously absurd and realistic. Tzara is the first to speak. He does not appear to make much sense,¹ but he is reading a Dadaist poem, after all: "EE1 ate enormous appletzara / key diary chef's hat he'lllearn oomparah!" (18). He continues for two more lines. Then Cecily enters, admonishing the patrons to be quiet. No one takes any notice.

¹ However, ingenious critics argue that Tzara's words are the phonetic equivalent of a limerick in French. The first line would read, "Il est un homme, s'appelle Tzara." For a review of the criticism see Delaney 63-64, 167-69.
Next we hear Joyce talking without making too much sense, which, paradoxically, also makes sense for he is dictating to Gwendolen the first three lines of the "Oxen of the Sun" episode from *Ulysses*, (a fitting choice for the opening for a play about style, since that chapter merges a birth with the evolution of literary styles). The effect of Joyce's dictation is made even more bizarre by Gwendolen's repeating the lines as she writes and the care she takes in transcribing this apparent nonsense:

JOYCE: Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa!
GWEN: Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa!
JOYCE: Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa!
GWEN: Likewise thrice?
JOYCE: Uh-hum. (18)

The patterning effect is reflected in such minute details as the fact that Joyce's "Uh-hum" is the third "Uh-hum" in the passage.

The emphasis on the number three continues. After first being exposed to the anti-art of Dada, and then the complex art of Joyce, the audience is presented with a third type of discourse, as Lenin's wife, Nadya, comes into the library to inform her husband that a revolution has just broken out in Russia. Here, finally, the audience might reasonably expect the "language of real life." However, unfortunately for an English-speaking audience, the conversation is in Russian: "Bronski prishol. On s'kazal shto v'Peterburge revolutsia!" (19). One might interpret this scene as Stoppard's little joke at the expense of realism; it is only natural that the Lenins should be speaking in their native language. In the printed version, Stoppard is considerate enough to supply a translation, which gives the reader a better opportunity of grasping the relativistic point he is making. For those who do not speak Russian the "language of real life" makes about as much sense as a Dadaist poem or an obscure passage from *Ulysses*. Stoppard drives his point home by having Nadya respond "Da--da" to one of Lenin's questions (20). The affirmative "yes--yes," with all its positive connotations, is also the byword of nonsense.
Next, Travesties shifts from a dramatization of the relativism inherent in The Importance of Being Earnest to more deliberate echoes of Wilde's play. The stage now belongs to Carr as a very old man, still living in Zurich, reminiscing about the days when he played Algernon in Joyce's production of Wilde's comedy. Most of Travesties is under the erratic control of Carr's memory, prejudices, and fantasies. Scenes and phrases are repeated and distorted as Carr's memory skips, jumps, or gets stuck in a groove like a needle on a gramophone record (27). An example of this is the repetition of an exchange about "newspapers and telegrams." (In the original London production of Travesties the shift to Stoppard's variation on Wilde's drama was indicated by having Old Carr play the piano very badly, a nice touch, since The Importance of Being Earnest opens with Algernon playing the piano, "not accurately" but "with wonderful expression," [1.3-5]).

Carr is a dandy like Algernon, and, like him, Carr has a manservant. "Quite a weighty presence," is Stoppard's description of the valet Bennett, which is as it should be, since his Wildean ancestors are Lane from The Importance of Being Earnest and Phipps from An Ideal Husband. Like Wilde, Stoppard delights in the comic possibilities of a master and servant relationship. The situation takes a bizarre turn, when in response to his master's repeated inquiry whether there is anything of interest in the newspapers and telegrams, Bennett tells him that a revolution has just broken out in Russia. Bennett's account comes complete with Marxist jargon:

CARR: Really? What sort of revolution?
BENNETT: A social revolution, sir.
CARR: A social revolution? Unaccompanied women smoking at the Opera, that sort of thing? . . .
BENNETT: Not precisely, sir. It is more in the nature of a revolution of classes contraposed by the fissiparous disequilibrium of Russian society.

(29)
Carr still does not get it, thinking that the masters have revolted against the "insolent rapacity of its servants" (29). Bennett, it turns out, has been helping himself to his master's champagne. In this he is only following the tradition established by his Wildean forerunner, Lane. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the exchange between master and servant is as follows:

ALGERNON Oh! ... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.
LANE Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.
ALGERNON Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information. (1.17-18).

Stoppard incorporates his travesty of the Russian revolution into his reworking of Wilde's text. Carr tells his servant:

(parenthetically, Bennett, I see from your book that on Thursday night when Mr. Tzara was dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed. I have had previous occasion to speak to you of the virtues of moderation, Bennett: this time I will only say, remember Russia). (29)

The comedy of Carr's misunderstanding of the Russian revolution is related to the playful dramatization of the tension between relativism and absolutism that I consider the central issue of *Travesties*. From Carr's point of view, it makes perfect sense that the masters should revolt against the intolerable greed of their servants.

Like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Stoppard's play is a relativistic farce. His choice of setting is worth noting. While the First World War rages in the neighbouring countries, there is peace in Switzerland. With its neutrality, clocks, and stability it is a symbol of order in a chaotic world. Carr tells Bennett:
Desperate men who have heard the clocks strike thirteen in Alsace, in Trieste, in Serbia and Montenegro, who have felt the ground shift beneath them in Estonia, Austro-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, arrive in Switzerland and after a few deep breaths find that the ringing and buzzing in their ears has regulated itself into a soothing tick-tock . . . (26)

The reference to men feeling the ground shift beneath them brings to mind Pater's characterization of modernity as an era when everything seems to melt under our feet (The Renaissance 152). While Carr sees Switzerland as a bulwark against chaos, Stoppard smuggles uncertainty into his speech by having Carr acknowledge that although the ground there may be "steady as an alp" it is "invariably sloping" (26). But it is typical of Stoppard to focus on the comic, rather than the tragic, side of the situation, for Carr continues: "Tonight I incline to the theatre" (26). And as befits a dandy, he gives Bennett detailed instructions on what he intends to wear for the event (26). When Carr first asks Bennett whether there is anything of interest in the newspapers and telegrams he has brought, the servant confirms Stoppard's hints that even the ground of Switzerland inclines towards relativism:

The Neue Zuricher Zeitung and the Zuricher Post announce, respectively, an important Allied and German victory, each side gaining ground after inflicting heavy casualties on the other with little loss to itself. (26)

Obviously Allied and German interests, respectively, influence the Swiss media. The elegant symmetry of Bennett's detached and ironic observation is exemplary of the Epicurean Aesthetic connection between Stoppard and Wilde.

The Wildean parallels continue with Bennett announcing the arrival of Tristan Tzara. Stoppard relishes the fortuitous historical accident that the name of the actor who played Jack to Carr's Algernon in Joyce's production was, in fact, Tristan:

CARR: How are you, my dear Tristan? What brings you here?
TZARA: Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring anyone anywhere?

(TZARA, no less than CARR, is straight out of The Importance of Being Earnest.)

CARR: I don't know that I approve of these Benthamite ideas, Tristan. I realise they are all the rage in Zurich--even in the most respectable salon, to remark that one was brought there by a sense of duty, leads to terrible scenes but if society is going to ape the fashions of philosophy, the end can only be ruin and decay.

TZARA: Eating and drinking, as usual, Henry? I have often observed that Stoical principles are more easily borne by those of Epicurean habits.

As was the case with his Epicurean Aesthetic predecessors, the key word in Stoppard's aesthetics is pleasure. When asked by an interviewer whether he feels a conflict between the demands of the literary and the theatrical, Stoppard responds: "I like theatre, I like showbiz, and that's what I'm true to" ("First Interview" 8). It is this unabashed dedication to entertainment and pleasure which allows him to present complex ideas and still make them work effectively as theatre. First, Carr critiques the topsy-turvydom of a Benthamite society in which talk of duty leads to dreadful scenes, then Tzara criticizes his critique, as Stoppard lets his characters play ping-pong with various intellectual arguments and philosophies ("First Interview" 12).

In this instance, Tzara scores points off Carr, but it would be a mistake to declare him the winner. Stoppard plays for the sake of playing. His dedication to the pleasure of "showbiz" detaches him from commitment to any particular philosophy. Instead, he presents the audience with the spectacle of various conflicting viewpoints: Joyce (art), Tzara (anti-art), and Lenin (politics). His commitment to noncommitment suggests
Stoppard's kinship with the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament. He describes the writing of *Travesties* as follows:

> What I was trying was this. What I'm always trying to say is 'Firstly, A. Secondly, minus A.' What was supposed to be happening was that we have this rather frivolous nonsense going on, and then the Lenin section comes in and says, 'Life is too important. We can't afford the luxury of this artificial frivolity, this nonsense going on in the arts.' Then he says, 'Right. That's what I've got to say,' and he sits down. Then the play stands up and says, 'You thought that was frivolous? You ain't seen nothin' yet. . . . That was the architectural thing I was after. ('First Interview' 10)

In interviews, Stoppard has voiced his reservation about Marxist orthodoxy, but in the "huge artifice" of the play, Lenin's point of view is just as important as a viewpoint which is much closer to Stoppard's personal preference, i.e. Joyce's. But significantly, not even Joyce escapes travesty. In the Zurich production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Joyce cast Carr as Algernon. In *Travesties* Stoppard casts Joyce as the dreaded Lady Bracknell. Stoppard's irreverence is helped by the remarkable coincidence that Joyce and Lady Bracknell share a first name, Augusta—"a little known fact," Tzara informs the audience (42). (Joyce's middle name should have been Augustine, but a clerical error made him Augusta.)

Although Stoppard, like Joyce, is a superb craftsman, he is not quite comfortable with the Joycean ideal of the artist as hero:

> I have a love-hate relationship with this mythical figure of the dedicated writer. Isn't there a line in *Man and Superman* about using mother's milk for ink? About 51 per cent of me views this figure with utter contempt and about 49 per cent with total admiration. I also have 51 per cent contempt for the artist who is very serious about himself and ploughs a lonely furrow
and occasionally a few pages are released to the millions, and 49 per cent admiration. ("Second Interview with Tom Stoppard" 139).

The way Stoppard expresses his reservations about the heroic artist points to his own alternative version of art. His talk of probability and the quantification of his opinion illustrates how a mythic view is replaced by an Epicurean Aesthetic appropriation of scientific discourse.

In *Travesties*, Joyce is the symbol of the mythic artist, and Stoppard's "49 per cent admiration" is conveyed by an imaginary exchange between Carr and Joyce: "And what did you do in the Great War?" Carr flings at the writer. Joyce replies: "I wrote *Ulysses*. What did you do?" All that Carr can do is mutter: "Bloody nerve" (65). Stoppard admires Joyce's nerve, but cannot resist making fun of him as well. Apart from casting him as Lady Bracknell, Stoppard pokes fun at Joyce by pointing out the parallels between Carr's rewriting of his private life and Joyce's avenging himself on Carr by turning him into a foolish, minor character in *Ulysses* (*Travesties* 12). These jokes at the expense of the high-priest of Modernism indicate that Stoppard shares Pater's idea of never being satisfied with the orthodoxies of others. That he is not totally satisfied with his own is indicated by his 49 per cent admiration for what he dislikes. Again, Stoppard's own comments are helpful.

In an interview with the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, he observes:

But I must make clear that, insofar as it's possible for me to look at my own work objectively at all, the element which I find most valuable is the one that other people are put off by--that is, that there is very often no single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, that
is the last word. ("Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas" 6-7)

That Stoppard conducts this infinite debate with joyful style rather than dour angst confirms his Epicurean Aesthetic credentials. "What I try to do," he says, "is to end up by contriving the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or perhaps even high comedy" ("Ambushes for the Audience" 7). His choice of The Importance of Being Earnest as a point of reference for Travesties is particularly fitting, since Stoppard's play continues, and elaborates on, the relativistic farce originated by Wilde.

In Travesties, one of the ways Stoppard celebrates the marriage of the play of ideas and farce is by having Joyce's and Lenin's manuscripts exchanged by mistake. The switch parallels the way Miss Prism mixes up an infant and a manuscript in Wilde's play. The resolution of this confusion provides the climax in both dramas. In Travesties, Gwendolen is in the role of Miss Prism. Joyce interrogates à la Lady Bracknell:

JOYCE: Miss Carr, did I or did I not give you to type a chapter in which Mr. Bloom's adventures correspond to the Homeric episode of the Oxen of the sun?

GWEN: Yes, you did! And it was wonderful!

JOYCE: Then why do you return to me an ill-tempered thesis purporting to prove, amongst other things, that Ramsay MacDonald is a bourgeois lickspittle gentleman's gentleman? (96-97)

This revelation is accompanied by "Oops!" and "Aaahs!" from the characters. Joyce thunders: "Miss Carr, where is the missing chapter???" (97). Here Carr interjects, for he is the one who has received Joyce's chapter by mistake:

CARR: Excuse me--did you say Bloom?

JOYCE: I did.

CARR: And is it a chapter, inordinate in length and erratic in style, remotely connected with midwifery?
JOYCE: It is a chapter which by a miracle of compression, uses the gamut of English literature from Chaucer to Carlyle to describe events taking place in a lying-in hospital in Dublin. (97)

Carr concludes: "It is obviously the same work" (97). The dialogue is, of course, patterned on Dr Chasuble's and Lady Bracknell's conversation about Miss Prism. Stoppard's reworking of the scene is a prime example of the Epicurean Aesthetic connection: Pater's relativism is put into dramatic form by Wilde and continued by Stoppard.

_Travesties_ ends with all the characters embracing. Then period music is heard, the light changes and all of a sudden there is a formal, short dance sequence. The stage directions specify that the effect should be a complete dislocation of the play (97). Stoppard's insistence on dislocation, a spectacle at the expense of realistic characterization, again shows his links with the Epicurean Aesthetic atomization and materialist patterning of experience. Like particles of matter, the characters come together, turn in a dance, and disperse. Carr and Cecily disappear with the others, but reappear as husband and wife, Old Carr and Old Cecily. Her memory is much more reliable than his, and she protests that his entire account is mostly a fabrication. Carr's response suggests the spirit of the work: "Oh, Cecily. I wish I'd known then that you'd turn out to be a pedant!" (98). In the world of _Travesties_, aesthetics is more important than accuracy. Stoppard invites the audience to enjoy the spectacle of Carr's inventing great times from a past in which he only played a minor role. The play draws to a close. What is left of the fading light is now on Carr. He has the last word, reminiscing still, but also trying to draw some conclusions:

Great days . . . Zurich during the war. Refugees, spies, exiles, painters, poets, writers, radicals of all kinds. I knew them all. Used to argue far into the night . . . I learned three things in Zurich during the war. I wrote them down. Firstly, you're either a revolutionary or you're not, and if you're not
you might as well be an artist as anything else. Secondly, if you can't be an artist, you might as well be a revolutionary . . .

I forget the third thing.

(BLACKOUT.) (98-99)

The confused nature of Carr's conclusion suggests that learning something is not the point of Stoppard's play. Revolutionary politics (Lenin), apolitical art (Joyce), and revolutionary anti-art (Tzara) are some of the ideas that Stoppard plays off each other in his drama. Should art be revolutionary or detached? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Instead of giving a direct answer, Stoppard constructs his drama according to the relativistic principles of Epicurean Aestheticism, as an analysis of Carr's final words demonstrates. Carr has not learned anything. Neither has the audience. As an Epicurean Aesthete, Stoppard is only committed to "showbiz." But his brand of "showbiz" is a sophisticated one, inviting us to derive pleasure from highly intellectual pursuits. In his last speech, Carr tackles the relation between art and revolution. His first point places the revolutionary above the artist: if one can't be a revolutionary one might as well be an artist as anything else. The second point turns the hierarchical placement of revolutionary over artist on its head by saying that if one cannot be an artist one might just as well be a revolutionary. The non-closure of the debate is reinforced by Carr's forgetting the third point. Stoppard's strategy is that of saying both A and minus A. The inconclusive conclusion of Travesties illustrates that "revolutionary" and "artist" are not absolute terms, but relative to the other elements of the system in which the artist and the revolutionary are understood. That each system is a prism, rather than the embodiment of truth, is what the huge prism of Travesties delights in showing.

Mental acrobatics of this sort presuppose a keen interest in philosophical issues. Stoppard shares with De Quincey, Pater, and Wilde a familiarity with the intellectual currents of their times, particularly the rise of relativism at the expense of absolutism. In De Quincey, we see the beginning of the Epicurean Aesthetic response to the confusion
created by this event, an attitude that is developed further by Pater and Wilde, and finds a late twentieth century proponent in Stoppard. It is significant that the four of them are all critics and reviewers as well as creative writers. While many Platonic Aesthetes look down on such manifestations of modernity as journalism (e.g. Mallarmé, "The Book" 691), Epicurean Aesthetes use them for their own ends. Stoppard's review of Paul Johnson's book *Enemies of Society* is a fine illustration of his Epicurean Aesthetic position. Stoppard maintains a tone of detachment, erudition, and playfulness as he observes the battle between relativism and absolutism. He writes:

Johnson is a polymath historian as well as an outstanding journalist. He is an intellectual affronted by unreason, and a moralist affronted by relativism. At the intersection of these arcs there was liable to be a historically based, highly readable and demystifying critique of our confused times, and *Enemies of Society* is it. ("But for the Middle Classes" 677)

The mildly sardonic title of Stoppard's review refers to Johnson's assertion of the correlation between a healthy middle class, on the one hand, and freedom and growth, on the other. Stoppard is sympathetic to many of Johnson's views, but he cannot help having a bit of fun at his expense. Stoppard's image of relativism and absolutism as two intersecting arcs, demonstrates the Epicurean Aesthetic strategy of aestheticizing philosophical problems. By articulating contemporary dilemmas with geometrical metaphors, he succeeds in lending elegance to our confused times.

Stoppard maintains his light, sophisticated touch in spite of Johnson's labelling Stoppard himself as one of the "enemies of society." Because Johnson's accusation leads the reviewer to explain his position, the review is particularly valuable as an insight into Stoppard's art. Johnson's charge stems from his premise that mimesis is the proper function of art. This "eccentric premise" as Stoppard puts it (677), works for certain periods, but gets Johnson into trouble when he tries to deal with modern art. Stoppard summarizes Johnson's thesis:
The argument is that the enemies of society wittingly or (in the case of artists) unwittingly disorientate man by withholding or distorting information about him. Thus, one of Francis Bacon's "screaming pope" pictures is compared with a Goya and found to be pernicious: for the painting does not say who the pope is or why he is screaming, whereas Goya's picture, "The Third of May 1808" declares its moral attitude to an intelligible event. But it is precisely the unanswered questions which gives Bacon's picture the power to make us think beyond the technical expertise of the painter. (677)

Stoppard's response to Johnson is a clue to his own methods: a carefully arranged clash of unanswered questions supplies much of the energy of his dramas. Like De Quincey, Stoppard makes a division between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power, between truth claims which are intended to teach readers and aesthetic play which is intended to give them pleasure. Stoppard's version of this distinction is as follows: "But surely the chief mistake is to apply 'true or false' criteria to art at all. Johnson's case is that 'if art undermines the common certitudes, it lowers morale and makes external assaults more deadly" (677). But can artists really be blamed for the confusion of modern times? Stoppard points out that there is a confusion between agent and symptom here. "Which are we artists?" he asks, and with characteristic wit he continues:

The pronoun brings me to literature and to the theatre: Stoppard, says Johnson, is one writer who distorts the picture; not, like Pinter or Beckett, by withholding information, but by providing an excess of it, mostly in elliptical form. Johnson is generous about the plays but, more in sorrow than in anger, accuses them of reinforcing the view that reality is an illusion, or at best an uncertain or relative state, and that certitudes are not to be expected in life. (677)
Now, as Stoppard has pointed out, the decline of certainty cannot be blamed entirely on artists. It is part of the current cultural climate. Artists could, however, be asked to fight against it. But in Stoppard's case his Aestheticism stops him from doing so, and the basis of his stand is the Kantian distinction between morality and aesthetics, the distinction on which Aestheticism must rest. Stoppard interjects Wildean flippancy into his response to Johnson's charges of relativistic crimes against society:

Now the most widespread misapprehension about playwrights (apart from the misapprehension that they have access to unlimited free tickets to their plays) is that they set out to say something and then say it, in short that a play is the end product of an idea. (677)

When under attack for triviality Stoppard refuses to make amends. His frivolous parenthesis suggests that the only thing he is truly committed to is noncommitment. However, this stance does not stop him from appreciating Johnson's absolutist position, since Stoppard's restless intellect makes him wary of all orthodoxies, relativistic as well as absolutist ones.

Like Wilde's Henry Wotton, he does not like being labelled, not even as the Prince of Relativism. In order to escape from Johnson's label he even goes as far as saying, "Left to myself, I subscribe, as I have indicated, to Johnson's view about what is true and what is false, to objective truth and to absolute morality" (677). The qualified nature of this statement is worth noting. "Left to myself"--but those who live at the noisy intersection of absolutism and relativism are rarely left to themselves. In Stoppard's universe each absolutist answer is rebutted, while the rebuttal is always open to refutation: "My plays," says Stoppard, "are a lot to do with the fact that I just don't know" ("Ambushes for the Audience" 13). For Epicurean Aesthetes, not knowing is one of the bad matters of modern life. Rather than claim that the artist has a privileged access to a Platonic realm that will dispel all their insecurities, they see art as existing on the borderline between the intellect and the imagination. Following Kant, they argue that art is not about whether something is
true or false. For them, art is a matter of pleasure and displeasure, not logic. Stoppard writes:

Johnson appears to think that because Travesties does not present "real" events in Zurich in 1917, it follows from that that I do not believe in real, truthful history. But I do. My intellect tells me so. But art is not the child of pure intellect, it is equally the child of temperament. That is why it is art.

(677)

It is the mingling of intellect and temperament which gives the works of Epicurean Aesthetes their special flavour. Their art deals with highly intellectual issues, but never at the expense of pleasure.

It is important to note that the non-committal nature of Stoppard's aesthetics does not mean that he has no personal convictions. Again the precept is set by Kant. No one could be more earnest than Kant when it came to the search for truth, but for him art is a separate matter. The attacks of writers like Johnson have provoked Stoppard to declare some of his private views. Arguably these charges have led him to write three plays with overtly political themes: Professional Foul (1978), Every Good Boy Deserves Favour (1978), and Squaring the Circle (1984), published together in one volume in 1984. But in Stoppard's case, there is no conversion from apolitical Aesthete to committed artist. In my discussion of De Quincey, Pater, and Wilde, I have shown that the nature of their brand of Aestheticism is supple enough to deal with political questions. Stoppard's introduction to the edition of his three political plays explains how his handling of the narrative voice in Squaring the Circle is informed by the principles of his relativistic aesthetics. Squaring the Circle is a television film about the struggle of the Solidarity movement in Poland under General Jaruzelski. Stoppard explains how the difficulty of telling fact from myth led him to creating a narrator with "acknowledged fallibility" (Squaring the Circle 10). Stoppard makes it clear that the narrator's views are the author's own, but the built-in fallibility
provides a relativistic framework which expresses the "qualified reality" which Stoppard says he has been worrying about creating since he started to write (11).

A sense of reality as qualified and uncertain, rather than absolute and unchanging, is central to the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament. The Epicurean Aesthetic response to this situation includes engaging with the "unpoetic" subject of science and drawing parallels between aesthetic noncommitment and the impassiveness of the scientific gaze. It is revealing to note the similarities in the critical reaction to the work of Wilde and Stoppard. We have seen how Shaw complained about the heartlessness of The Importance of Being Earnest. In Stoppard's case, Michael Coveney admits the brilliance and audacity of Travesties, but can see little point in it: "I find that a lack of any dramatic accumulation in the play induces a response of indifference" (3; qtd. in Sammells 377). Kenneth Tynan feels that there is something both sterile and arbitrary in the enterprise (109; qtd. in Sammells 377). Stoppard is repeatedly criticized for writing from the head rather than the heart. This characteristic of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament is prefigured by a comment made by Lionel Johnson about Wilde, whom he charges with having "a cold scientific intellect" (Yeats, Autobiographies 285). Johnson's remark crystallizes the difference between Platonic and Epicurean Aestheticism. The Roman Catholic Johnson is very much a Platonist, and his proudly ancient mind senses something threatening in Wilde and labels it "scientific." Although, to him, this is a swear-word, the appellation suggests the crucial difference between Platonic and Epicurean Aestheticism.

Neither Lionel nor Paul Johnson would be pleased by Stoppard's Hapgood (1988). The play is a good example of an aesthetic engagement with science, in its mingling of quantum physics with a spy thriller. A physicist named Kerner—who is also a double, and possibly triple, agent--claims that "the act of observing determines reality" (12). Kerner's name and his reference to the Uncertainty Principle evoke Werner Heisenberg, whose work is obviously among the sources of Stoppard's view of science.
Heisenberg is famous for emphasizing the subjective element in scientific experiments. He stresses that it is an inescapable element in the description of atomic events, since "the measuring device has been constructed by the observer, and we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (58). Yet it must be emphasized that quantum theory does not mean that objectivity is completely replaced by relativity. When dealing with objects or processes on a comparatively large scale, the concepts of common sense and classical physics hold. It is only in the region of the very small that these concepts begin to crack (Heisenberg 164). However, this element of ambiguity in physics, which, after all, is frequently seen as the fundamental scientific discipline (Papineau 319-20), is what fascinates artists like Stoppard. One reason for this interest is offered by a dandyish criminal from John Banville's novel The Book of Evidence:

I took up the study of science in order to find certainty. No, that's not it. Better say, I took up science in order to make the lack of certainty more manageable. Here was a way, I thought, of erecting a solid structure on the very sands that were everywhere, always, shifting under me. And I was good at it, I had a flair. It helped, to be without convictions as to the nature of reality, truth, ethics, all those big things--indeed, I discovered in science a vision of an unpredictable, seething world that was eerily familiar to me, to whom matter had always seemed a swirl of chance collisions. (18)

It is this version of science, rather than scientific realism, that appeals to writers like Stoppard. The need for order is not lacking in these writers, but they accept the contingency of their patterning, something which finds a fittingly paradoxical expression in the image of a solid structure built on shifting sands. The connection between the suspension of ethical imperatives and considerations of true and false in art, finds a correlative in the willingness of theoretical physicists to suspend their common-sense convictions about the nature of reality. This view of art and science presupposes a certain
heartlessness—what Lionel Johnson, speaking of Wilde, labels as "a cold scientific intellect" and Banville's character calls "a certain cold gift" (18).

In *Hapgood*, Kerner gives a concise summary of the revolutionary discoveries of quantum physics. Atomic experiments have shown that the absolutes of Newtonian physics break down at the particle level. Kerner explains that a particle's movements cannot be anticipated because it has no reasons. It defeats surveillance because when you know what it's doing you can't be certain where it is, and when you know where it is you can't be certain what it's doing: Heisenberg's uncertainty principle; and this is not because you're not looking carefully enough, it is because there is no such thing as an electron with a definite position and a definite momentum; you fix one, you lose the other, and it's all done without tricks, it's the real world, it is awake. (48) Heisenberg himself describes how what is known as "The Copenhagen Interpretation of Quantum Theory" led to solutions that even the experimenters themselves found difficult to accept:

I remember discussions with [Niels] Bohr which went through many hours till very late at night and ended almost in despair; and when at the end of the discussion I went alone for a walk in the neighboring park I repeated to myself again and again the question: Can nature possibly be as absurd as it seemed to us in these atomic experiments? (42)

It is particularly fitting that the setting of these lonely walks and strange musings should have been the land of melancholy Danes like Hamlet and Søren Kierkegaard.

Trying to live with indeterminacy means acknowledging the limitation of any physics that claims to be absolute. What the new rules of quantum physics appear to mean is that fundamental parts of nature are not determined absolutely, but only in a statistical or probabilistic way (Lindley 12). It is this upsetting news that provoked Einstein's famous remark that God does not play dice, or as Stoppard has Kerner observe:
It upset Einstein very much, you know, all that damned quantum jumping, it spoiled his idea of God, which I tell you frankly is the only idea of Einstein's I never understood. He believed in the same God as Newton, causality, nothing without a reason, but now one thing led to another until causality was dead. Quantum mechanics made everything finally random, things can go this way or that way, the mathematics deny certainty, they reveal only probability and chance, and Einstein couldn't believe in a God who threw dice. (49)

Kerner's parallel between Newton and Einstein is justified on the basis that both thinkers shared a belief in a completely deterministic universe. Einstein may have been the father of the theory of relativity, but he could not abide chance: "As always, he wanted a strict form of determinism to be at the bottom of the most fundamental question, and, as always, he wanted the arbiter of this scientific determinism, the judge of which universe is the right and the only one, to be 'God'..." (Lindley 12). By "God" Einstein does not mean a divine being, but rather a guiding principle that can only allow what is right and proper to exist (Lindley 12).

In his play Arcadia (1993), Stoppard continues the Epicurean Aesthetic tradition by dramatizing the paradigm shift from certainty to indeterminacy. The work is a late twentieth-century variation on Pater's distinction between absolutist and relativistic thought. Stoppard shows himself to be a true heir of the Epicurean Aesthetic temperament by his ability to view the crumbling of classical order with an eye for the picturesque qualities that can be found in the fragments that remain. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle stipulates that an observer must choose between fixing the position or the velocity of an electron. Both cannot be had with absolute accuracy. In Arcadia, Stoppard creates a similarly disorienting effect by keeping the location of the play constant while making the time of the action fluctuate between past and present. The Epicurean quality of the piece is indirectly indicated by one delighted reviewer's response that in Arcadia Stoppard serves
up yet another intellectual stew (Lahr 111). The culinary metaphor is drawn from the programme notes where Stoppard reveals that his recipe includes "a seasoning of chaos and a pinch of thermodynamics following a dash of quantum mechanics" (qtd. in Lahr 111).

In the stately country manor, Sidley Park, a thirteen-year-old doubter named Thomasina asks her tutor, Septimus, a question:

THOMASINA: Septimus, what is a carnal embrace?

SEPTIMUS: Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef.

THOMASINA: Is that all?

SEPTIMUS: No . . . a shoulder of mutton, a haunch of venison well hugged, an embrace of grouse . . . caro, carnis; feminine; flesh. (1)

One of the reasons the tutor is not forthcoming with a more orthodox definition is that he has just been indulging in a carnal embrace in the gazebo with Mrs Chater, the wife of a poet who is also a resident at Sidley Park. Mingled with these entertaining frivolities are more serious issues. The year is 1809. Sir Isaac Newton's physics reigns supreme and all is right with the world, which appears to be as reasonable and predictable as clockwork. The sense of enlightened order is perfectly expressed by Alexander Pope's flattering depiction of Newton: "Nature, and Nature's laws, lay hid in Night, / God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light" (1-2).

But in the midst of this neo-classical paradise, symbolized by the elegant symmetries of the Arcadian garden in which Sidley Park stands, Thomasina begins to ask questions that will lead to chaotic results. The talk of carnality which opens the play evokes the theme of the fall from innocence to experience. Ironically, by exercising her inquisitive mind Thomasina is acting on what Kant defined as the battle-cry of the Enlightenment: "Have courage to use your own reason!" ("What Is Enlightenment?" 262). Impending change is symbolized by the plans of the landscape architect Richard Noakes,
who has been hired by Thomasina's father, Lord Croom, to transform the garden in accordance with the latest fashion, the picturesque style. Lady Croom is bewildered by the gothic irregularities that are replacing the classical calm, only to be told that irregularity is among the chief principles of the new style (12). This is one of the countless allusions to Heisenbergian indeterminacy and chaos theory, the relativistic trends that threaten Newtonian absolutism.

The theme of the garden is one of the many links between past and present in Arcadia. In Scene Two, which takes place in 1989, we meet Hannah Jarvis, who has come to Sidley Park to research a book on landscape and literature. Her study is intended to demonstrate her theory of the fall from the Eden of Enlightenment to what she refers to as the "whole Romantic sham" (27). The "history of the garden says it all, beautifully," she says. "There's an engraving of Sidley Park in 1730 that makes you want to weep. Paradise in the age of reason. By 1760 everything had gone--the topiary, pools and terraces, fountains, an avenue of limes--the whole sublime geometry was ploughed under by Capability Brown" (27). Noakes completed the process that is summarized archly by Hannah as the "decline from thinking to feeling" (27). Hannah's classical temperament is juxtaposed with that of Bernard Nightingale, a cocky Byron scholar who has also come to Sidley Park in search of material. Bernard is hell-bent on proving his sensational, and shaky, theory that the reason Byron suddenly left England in 1817 was that he had killed Ezra Chater in a duel at Sidley Park.

Scene Two takes place in the same room and on the same sort of morning as Scene One (15). Such patterning of experience is a dominant feature of Arcadia. Scene Three, for instance, opens with Thomasina studying at a large table and Septimus reading a newly arrived letter while Jellaby, the butler, is waiting for a reply to the letter he has just delivered. "We have seen this composition before," Stoppard informs us in the stage directions (35). It is, indeed, a repetition of a situation in Scene One. The table at which Thomasina sits is the play's most important prop. It includes books, papers, and various
other objects associated with characters in both the past and the present. Stoppard's stage direction specifies: "During the course of the play the table collects this and that, and where an object from one scene would be an anachronism in another (say a coffee mug) it is simply deemed to have become invisible. By the end of the play the table has collected an inventory of objects" (15). The steady accumulation of objects points to a major theme in *Arcadia*: the relentless passage of time. Stoppard is masterful at mingling day-to-day matters with abstract scientific ideas, as illustrated by the following exchange between the quick-witted Thomasina and her tutor:

THOMASINA: When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. Indeed, the pudding does not notice and continues to turn pink just as before. Do you think that is odd?

SEPTIMUS: No.

THOMASINA: Well, I do. You cannot stir things apart.

SEPTIMUS: No more you can, time must needs run backward, and since it will not, we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangeable, and we are done with it for ever. (4-5)

Later, however, Septimus grants that there is something odd about this process. In the last scene, he is reading a prize essay of the Scientific Academy in Paris and realizes that his young pupil's speculations have anticipated the ideas in the paper. Septimus recounts to Thomasina that the French writer "demonstrates the equation of the propagation of heat in a solid body. But in doing so he has discovered a heresy--a natural contradiction of Sir Isaac Newton" (81). In the background can be heard the noise of Noakes's steam engine transforming what is left of the pristine geometries of the garden into the irregular geometries of the picturesque style. The symbolic function of Noakes's
machine is to allude to the fact that the second law of thermodynamics was discovered through experiments with the efficacy of steam engines. The law, discovered in 1824 by the Frenchman Sadi Carnot, stipulates that heat will flow only from hot to cold (Knight 163-64; Lindley 30-31). Later in the century, the German Rudolf Clausius invented the word "entropy" to describe his deductions from the second law of thermodynamics:

A system with low entropy has a lot of energy that can be turned into work, and Clausius showed that the second law of thermodynamics was equivalent to the stricture that entropy must always increase. Heat will always pass from a body at high temperature to one at a lower temperature, and the flow of heat can be made to work an engine of some sort. But as heat flows, temperature is equalized and no more work can be obtained. The entropy of the final system, two bodies at the same temperature, is higher than it was for the system of one hot and one cold body. (Lindley 31)

Over the course of the play, the brilliant Thomasina comes to the same conclusions long before Carnot and Clausius. Another chilling conclusion, which gains more and more prominence as Stoppard's play progresses, is that as the Industrial Revolution gathered momentum, heat was turned into mechanical work at an accelerating rate, thus increasing the entropy of the universe (Lindley 31).

After reading the article from Paris, Thomasina thumps the book down on the table and exclaims: "Well! Just as I said! Newton's machine which would knock our atoms from cradle to grave by the laws of motion is incomplete! Determinism leaves the road at every corner . . ." (83). When Noakes enters the room some time later from his work in the garden, Thomasina announces that there is "bad news from Paris" (86). He has no idea what she is talking about. She hands him a diagram on heat exchange she has been working on: "It concerns your heat engine," she explains. "Improve it as you will, you can never get out of it what you put in" (86). Exit Noakes, thoroughly baffled. Even Septimus
does not understand his pupil. He points out that the article from France only dealt with heat in solid bodies. It did not mention steam engines nor determinism. Thomasina has noticed these things "by the way" and states the implications of thermodynamics for the Newtonian view of the universe: "Newton's equations go forwards and backwards, they do not care which way. But the heat equation cares very much, it goes only one way" (87). This means, first, that Newton's deterministic view of the universe is flawed and, second, that Noakes's "Improved Newcomen steam pump" (85) can never be improved to perfection.

This is bad news not only for steam engines, but for everyone and everything everywhere, as Thomasina's late twentieth-century descendant, Valentine Coverly, explains. He uses the word "odd" to describe the process governed by the second law of thermodynamics. By having him do so, Stoppard weaves together past and present, for this was the word Thomasina herself used when pondering the same process (5). Valentine tells Hannah:

VALENTINE: Your tea gets cold by itself, it doesn't get hot by itself. Do you think that's odd?

HANNAH: No.

VALENTINE: Well, it is odd. Heat goes to cold. It's a one-way street. Your tea will end up at room temperature. What's happening to your tea is happening to everything everywhere. The sun and the stars. It'll take a while but we're all going to end up at room temperature. (78)

Near the end of the last act, Septimus says to Thomasina: "So, we're all doomed!" "Yes," she responds cheerfully (93). At this point in the play the dialogue between past and present is dramatized by having characters from both periods on the stage at the same time. Doubled by time, Septimus and Valentine study Thomasina's diagram of heat exchange. Valentine explains to Hannah that Thomasina "saw what things meant, way
ahead, like seeing a picture" (93). What she realized was that the film cannot run backwards. This thought chips away at the absolutism of Newtonian physics:

VALENTINE: Heat was the first thing which didn't work that way. Not like Newton. A film of a pendulum, or a ball falling through the air backwards, it looks the same.

HANNAH: The ball would be going the wrong way.

VALENTINE: You'd have to know that. But with heat--friction--a ball breaking a window--

HANNAH: Yes.

VALENTINE: It won't work backwards.

HANNAH: Who thought it did?

VALENTINE: She saw why. You can put back the bits of glass but you can't collect up the heat of the smash. It's gone. (93)

If Newton had been right about everything, there would be no room for scientific advancement. Thomasina's tutor recognizes that the science of thermodynamics is an improvement on Newtonian physics, but this need not necessarily be good news. Septimus observes wryly: "So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow old. Dear me" (93). Human beings and Noakes's Improved Newcomen steam engine are caught in the same trap.

In Arcadia, Thomasina subjects Newtonian absolutism to a two-pronged critique. From one side, determinism feels the pinch of thermodynamics, from another it senses the sting of chaos theory. Both represent advancement in scientific understanding, but these improvements are simultaneously a fall. According to Valentine, the practical result of the emendation of classical physics is that the "future is disorder" (48). For Epicurean Aesthetes, however, there is no turning back. The shadows have grown too long, the light too solemn for that, as Pater would say (The Renaissance 147). Pater traced the rise of relativism to the physical sciences; by engaging with science Stoppard continues the
Epicurean Aesthetic tradition in a late twentieth-century context. In Arcadia, Stoppard conveys the vicissitudes involved in the pursuit of knowledge by subtle gestures that nudge the reader into making associations between knowing and falling. Here the classic forbidden fruit, the apple, serves him well. At the end of Scene Two, Valentine's brother, Gus, enters from the garden and offers Hannah an apple. Their sister, Cloé, had predicted that Gus was in love with Hannah. The gift confirms her theory. The episode is Stoppard's subtle way of alluding to the Apple of Knowledge.

When Scene Three opens the apple has been added to objects on the table, where it joins a mathematical primer, an old-fashioned theodolite, pens, papers, and other items of learning. The association of the apple with these items hints at the story of Newton's Apple. The theme of the apple is made explicit in the seventh, and last, scene when young Cloé proves that precociousness runs in the Coverly family. She tells Valentine: "The universe is deterministic all right, just like Newton said, I mean it's trying to be, but the only thing going wrong is people fancying people who aren't supposed to be in that part of the plan." Valentine observes: "Ah. The attraction that Newton left out. All the way back to the apple in the garden." He pauses and then echoes Septimus's remark from Scene One on their ancestor's equally original speculations: "Yes, I think you're the first person to think of this" (73-74).

As legend has it, Newton was musing in a garden when he saw an apple falling from a tree: the event inspired his idea of universal gravitation (Westfall 154-55). The association of the apple with knowledge is elaborated further by Stoppard when he has Thomasina chance upon chaos theory by plotting the apple leaf and deducing its equation (37). Her work is preserved in notebooks which are later found by Valentine. At first he cannot believe that a teenage girl could have been able to break away from classical paradigms and discover the very method that he is using in his own research. He tells Hannah:
When your Thomasina was doing maths it had been the same maths for a couple of thousand years. Classical. And for a century after Thomasina. Then maths left the real world behind, just like modern art, really. Nature was classical, maths was suddenly Picassos. But now nature is having the last laugh. The freaky stuff is turning out to be the mathematics of the natural world. (44-45)

The bizarre mathematics Thomasina discovers is a manifestation of the shift from determinism to indeterminacy--from absolutism to relativism, to use Pater's vocabulary. Thomasina's "New Geometry of Irregular Forms" (43) parallels the changes Noakes, whom she dubs "the Emperor of Irregularity" (85), is bringing about in the garden.

Valentine finally accepts that Thomasina has discovered the rudiments of chaos theory. "Where chaos begins, classical science stops," writes James Gleick in Chaos: Making a New Science (3). The paradoxical new science of chaos breaks away from deterministic paradigms and posits instead that the behaviour of certain systems (like the weather or water dripping into a waterwheel) is governed by an "orderly disorder" (Gleick 15). A map of such a system displays a kind of infinite complexity. It always stays within certain bounds, never running off the page, but never repeating itself, either. Valentine shows Hannah these fractal shapes on his computer--shapes that, on the one hand, signal pure disorder, since no point or pattern of points recur, but whose infinite complexity, on the other hand, signals a novel kind of order (Gleick 30, 53). This strange process, and the altered sense of nature's possibilities opened up by chaos theory, is described by Valentine as follows:

The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. It's how nature creates herself, on every scale, the snowflake and the snowstorm. It makes me so happy. To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing. People were talking about the end of physics. Relativity and quantum looked as if they were going to
clean out the whole problem between them. A theory of everything. But they only explained the very big and the very small. (47-48)

In his analysis of relative thought, Pater remarks how in the flux of time things may pass into their opposites (Appreciations 66). This can be applied to the way the formerly unorthodox theory of relativity and quantum mechanics have now fused into a new orthodoxy: the Grand Unified Theory, also known as a "theory of everything," whose most famous proponent is Stephen Hawking (Gleick 7). In Arcadia, Stoppard presents chaos theory as the relativistic arc that intersects the absolutist arc of the "theory of everything."

One of the many ingredients in Arcadia is Pierre Simon de Laplace, whose name has become a byword of the determinism of classical physics. In the last scene, Cloë and Valentine are discussing determinism, just as Thomasina and Septimus had done in Scene One:

VALENTINE: There was someone, forget his name, 1820s, who pointed out that from Newton's laws you could predict everything to come—I mean, you'd need a computer as big as the universe but the formula would exist.

CLOË: But it doesn't work, does it?

VALENTINE: No. It turns out the maths is different. (73)

The different mathematics Valentine refers to provides the basis for chaos theory, whose advocates argue that twentieth-century science will be remembered for three things: relativity, quantum mechanics, and chaos (Gleick 5-6). "Relativity eliminated the Newtonian illusion of absolute space and time; quantum theory eliminated the Newtonian dream of a controllable measurement process; and chaos eliminated the Laplacian fantasy of deterministic predictability" (Gleick 6). Valentine is definitely one of the passionate promoters of chaos theory:
We can't even predict the next drip from a dripping tap when it gets irregular. Each drip sets up the conditions of the next, the smallest variation blows prediction apart, and the weather is unpredictable the same way, will always be unpredictable. When you push the numbers through the computer you can see it on the screen. The future is disorder. A door like this has cracked open five or six times since we got up on our hind legs. It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong. (48)

Valentine is happy at the thought of not knowing, whereas most scientists would probably feel the opposite, regardless of the fact that Laplace's ultra-determinism is no longer considered fashionable. Gleick remarks shrewdly on this paradox in the scientific community:

In these days of Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty, Laplace seems almost buffoon-like in his optimism, but much of modern science has pursued his dream. Implicitly, the mission of many twentieth-century scientists--biologists, neurologists, economists--has been to break their universes down into the simplest atoms that will obey scientific rules. In all these sciences, a kind of Newtonian determinism has been brought to bear. (14)

But absolutism is not confined to the scientific community. One of characteristics of the Epicurean Aesthetic temper is a rejection of the easy opposition between science and literature. Stoppard's dramatization of the tension between absolutism and relativism applies to the study of literature as well. A case in point is the fun he has at the expense of Bernard's theory that Byron killed a fellow poet in a duel at Sidley Park. All of Bernard's evidence is circumstantial. When Hannah asks him why there is nothing in Byron's letters to substantiate Bernard's speculations, he responds undaunted: "There is a platonic letter which confirms everything--lost but ineradicable, like radio voices rippling through the
universe for all eternity" (57). Bernard's sense of certainty will later prove to be his downfall. Stoppard's dig at an overconfident Platonist echoes Pater's relativistic critique of absolutism. For Epicurean Aesthetes, the idea of absolute certainty is no longer tenable.

Like his fellow Epicurean Aesthetes, Stoppard explores the parallels between literature and science. After Bernard goes public with what he thinks is a sensational literary discovery--"Bonking Byron Shot Poet," reads one tabloid's headline--Hannah remarks: "It can't prove to be true, it can only not prove to be false yet." Pleased, Valentine observes: "Just like science" (74). The possibility of refutation is a feature that Stoppard's sceptical mind values in science. The following observation from his review of Paul Johnson's book can easily be applied to his own writings: "... Johnson, taking his text from Karl Popper, is particularly merciless with closed-circuit systems which explain everything and are irrefutable only in the tactical sense that they avoid the possibility of refutation" ("But for the Middle Classes" 677).

In Arcadia, Bernard is assigned the role of absolutist fool. When the more tentative Valentine expresses doubts about Bernard's theory, the literary scholar reacts by getting into a tirade against science: "Oh, you're going to zap me with penicillin and pesticides. Spare me that and I'll spare you the bomb and aerosols" (61). Poor Valentine is made to answer for the entire scientific enterprise. Stoppard is refreshingly blunt in his analysis of what lies at the bottom of the quarrel between the humanities and the sciences. This becomes evident as Bernard continues to vent his frustrations on Valentine: "How did you people con us out of all that status? All that money? ... I'd push the lot of you over a cliff myself. Except the one in the wheelchair, I think I'd lose the sympathy vote before people had time to think it through" (61). Just prior to this, Stoppard has worked a Wildean references to "seriousness" and "triviality" into the dialogue--the hilarious allusion to Stephen Hawking is a good example of Stoppard's delightful practice of mixing the two. Bernard's rant continues: "Is the universe expanding? Is it contracting? Is it standing on one leg and singing 'When Father Painted the Parlour'? Leave me out. I can expand my
universe without you. 'She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.' For Bernard, Byron will suffice. With offensive politeness Bernard attacks the value of the research Valentine has been doing at Sidley Park: "What is it that you're doing with grouse, Valentine, I'd love to know?" (61). The scientist turns to his sister in dismay and disbelief: "He's not against penicillin, and he knows I'm not against poetry." Furthermore, we learn that Valentine has given up on his research.

Stoppard's sympathy with science is demonstrated by his reversal of the stereotypes of the humanist and the scientist. Bernard is overbearing and rash, while Valentine is gentle and cautious. When Hannah asks Valentine why he has given up on his project he responds: "Too much noise. There's just too much bloody noise!" Earlier he has explained to Hannah that "noise" is a scientific term for distortion or interference, but the comment applies also to his frustration with the rampant scientific and personal problems that he is faced with. Arcadia is ruled by the second law of thermodynamics: the characters' energy is dissipated in frantic activity that leads nowhere in particular. They are caught in a web of natural laws—that "magic web," as Pater calls it, "woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network, subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world" (The Renaissance 148). For Pater and Stoppard, the second law of thermodynamics is one of those central forces of the world. Pater writes: "Natural laws we shall never modify, embarrass us as they may; but there is still something in the nobler or less noble attitude with which we watch their fatal combinations" (The Renaissance 149). While Platonic Aesthetes try to break away from the uncomfortable implications of scientific discoveries, Epicurean Aesthetes accept them, but are still determined to face the material world with style.

In Arcadia, Stoppard continues the Epicurean Aesthetic engagement with science by dealing with a question the theorists of chaos ask: "Above all, in a universe ruled by
entropy, drawing inexorably toward greater and greater disorder, how does order arise?" (Gleick 7). In the play's opening scene, Thomasina is thirteen years old. The last time we see her is the night before her seventeenth birthday. It is the final night of her life. The latter part of the play is filled with intimations of her death in a fire that breaks out at Sidley Park. At the end of Scene Six, Septimus burns letters in the flame of a spirit lamp (72). In Scene Seven, Septimus enters with an oil lamp and Thomasina enters with a candle, which she then blows out (91). Later, after Septimus has lit the candle again, he asks her to be careful with the flame (96). The conclusion of Thomasina's brief, brilliant existence may be seen as a subtle reflection of Pater's musings on the flame-like nature of life. Pater notes: "This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways" (The Renaissance 150). The burning of the hard, gem-like flame cannot be maintained forever. In the end, it will consume itself. Thomasina's last act is an elegant gesture that contrasts with the gathering gloom: she wants Septimus to teach her to waltz. "I cannot be seventeen and not waltz," is her delightfully frivolous reason (91). Luckily, a Polish count is playing the piano in the next room. Before they dance, Septimus ponders her diagram with its melancholy implication that the world is like a "wooden stove that must consume itself until ash and stove are as one, and heat is gone from the earth" (65). In the context of these musings, her desire to dance takes on a symbolic poignancy. When Septimus realizes that the universe must cease and grow cold, she remarks: "Yes, we must hurry if we are going to dance" (94).

Septimus and Thomasina are not the only ones dancing. In the last moments of Arcadia Stoppard sets up a dialogue between past and present with his technique of having the cast doubled by time. This effect is made more intriguing by having the characters in the present dressing up in Regency clothes for a fancy dress ball. As Thomasina and Septimus waltz, Gus comes forward and invites Hannah to dance. Dressed up, he looks resplendent. After a moment's hesitation she accepts. They dance, rather
awkwardly, while Septimus and Thomasina continue to dance fluently. Eden may be permanently closed, but the piano music with which *Arcadia* concludes points to the opening of a realm of Epicurean Aesthetic play.

The juxtaposition of the polished Regency era and our own more anxious age is an elegant example of Epicurean Aestheticism. The modern couple's variation on the dance of the nineteenth-century couple evokes the paradoxical mingling of randomness and repetition which characterizes chaotic systems. Like atomic particles, the dancers form beautiful, evanescent patterns. By engaging with science, Stoppard risks being affected by the negative implications of concepts such as entropy and indeterminacy, but like De Quincey, Pater, and Wilde he maintains his stylish composure when faced with the flux of experience. After Septimus has understood the consequences of his pupil's discoveries of entropy and chaos theory, the tutor reflects sadly: "When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore" (94). "Then we will dance," is Thomasina's Epicurean Aesthetic response.
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