

**‘Life as the End of Life’: Algernon Charles
Swinburne, Walter Pater, and Secular Aesthetics**

**Sara Lyons
Submitted for Ph.D. Examination**

ABSTRACT

This thesis elucidates the relationship between the emergence of literary aestheticism and ambiguities in the status and meaning of religious doubt in late Victorian Britain. Aestheticism has often been understood as a branch of a larger, epochal crisis of religious faith: a creed of ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ and a cult of beauty are thought to have emerged to occupy the vacuum created by the departure of God, or at least by the attenuation of traditional forms of belief. However, the model of secularisation implicit in this account is now often challenged by historians, sociologists, and literary critics, and it fails to capture what was at stake in Swinburne and Pater’s efforts to reconceptualise aesthetic experience. I suggest affinities between their shared insistence that art be understood as an independent, disinterested realm, a creed beyond creeds, and secularisation understood as the emptying of religion from political and social spheres. Secondly, I analyse how Swinburne and Pater use the apparently neutral space created by their relegation of religion to imagine the secular in far more radical terms than conventional Victorian models of religious doubt allowed. Their varieties of aestheticism often posit secularism not as a disillusioning effect of modern rationality but as a primordial enchantment with the sensuous and earthly, prior to a ‘fall’ into religious transcendence. I explore their tendency to identify this ideal of the secular with aesthetic value, as well as the paradoxes produced by their efforts to efface the distinctions between the religious and the aesthetic.

My argument proceeds through close readings that reveal how the logic of aestheticism grows out of Swinburne’s and Pater’s efforts to challenge and refashion the models of religious doubt and secularism established by a previous generation of Victorian writers – Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, and Alfred Tennyson – and situates this shared revisionary impulse within larger debates surrounding the idea of secularisation.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	p.5
Introduction	p.6
1. Parleying with Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold: Blasphemy, the Dramatic Monologue, and Swinburne's <i>Poems and Ballads, First Series</i>	p.30
2. 'Though Hearts Reach Back and Memories Ache': Melancholy, Religious Doubt, and Swinburne's <i>Strenuous Joy</i>	p.61
i. The Carpe Diem Religion: Tennyson's <i>In Memoriam</i> and Swinburne's Minor Decadent Poems	p.66
ii. 'The Darkness of these Beaches': Tennyson's <i>In Memoriam</i> , Swinburne's 'By the North Sea' and the Atheistic Sublime	p.85
iii. 'A Note of Rapture in the Tune of Life': Arnold's <i>Tristram and Iseult</i> , Tennyson's 'The Last Tournament', and Swinburne's <i>Tristram of Lyonesse</i>	p.113
3. 'A Secular, a Rebellious Spirit Often Betrays Itself': Pater's Early Aestheticism	
i. 'Without the Sound of Axe or Hammer': Pater's 'Diaphaneitè', Thomas Carlyle's <i>French Revolution</i> , and the Aesthetics of Unbelief	p.141
ii. 'Neither For God nor For His Enemies': Heresy and Disinterestedness in the Cultural Criticism of Arnold and Pater	p.163
iii. 'Experience Itself is the End': John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Aestheticism in Pater's 'Coleridge's Writings' and the 'Conclusion'	p.215
4. 'Inheriting its Strange Web of Belief and Unbelief': Walter Pater, George Eliot, and the Aura of Agnosticism.	
i. 'What Face is Behind it?': Pater's <i>Marius the Epicurean</i> , Art, and Agnosticism	p.238
ii. 'Only the Thorough Sceptic Can Be the Perfect Saint':	p.260

Altruism and Epicureanism in Pater's *Marius* and
George Eliot's *Romola*

Coda: Magic's Own Last Word, or, Pater and Swinburne at the Fin de Siècle	p.287
Bibliography	p.295

Acknowledgements

First, I am deeply grateful to Professor Catherine Maxwell. It is no exaggeration to say that she has been an ideal mentor, intellectually and personally. She has been extraordinarily generous and supportive, and conversation with her always made me return to work with renewed energy. I feel extremely lucky to have had the benefit of a supervisor whose work I admire so much, and she has made both Victorian literature and the academic world come to life for me in many ways. Thanks are also due to Nadia Valman and Andrew Eastham, who have been very encouraging and who have asked probing questions at critical stages.

I also wish to thank my family. Jack Lyons, Mark Bowyer, and Kate and Andre van Schaik have all been pillars of support despite the tyranny of distance. I also owe an enormous debt to Josh Edmonds, who had a large hand in making this enterprise possible.

Lastly, I am very grateful to Noah Moxham, for reading it all a heroic number of times, and for making these past four years very happy ones.

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous assistance of a Westfield Trust scholarship from Queen Mary, and an Overseas Research Student Award, both of which are gratefully acknowledged.

Introduction

It is often remarked that Victorian aestheticism was a ‘religion of art’.¹ It is a phrase whose appositeness owes everything to its ambiguity. It seems to imply that aestheticism was a secular phenomenon that elevated art at the expense of religion, or channelled religious forms and modes of feeling toward secular ends. And certainly aestheticism, or the concept of ‘art-for-art’s-sake’, was and is often defined as a rejection of the idea that art is answerable to religious criteria. As secular discourse often does, aestheticism presents itself as a realm of neutrality and freedom, a creed beyond the complications of creed. Yet the phrase ‘religion of art’ is sometimes used derisively, or with at least a shade of irony, since it implies that aesthetes did not manage to content themselves with art at all: rather, they engaged in a kind of idolatry, striving (properly or improperly, depending on the point of the view of the critic) to make art an adequate object for essentially religious impulses.² In other words, the phrase seems at once to imply art’s usurpation of religion, and the failure of the secular to be quite secular. Likewise, the phrase seems to honour the idea that art and religion are inseparable, even equivalent, while it also suggests that this relationship can in fact be teased apart, debased, or superseded.

¹ Leon Chai takes the phrase as the subtitle for his book on aestheticism (which he treats as both a Victorian and a modernist category); see *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Karl Beckson focuses on modernist writers but also discusses Oscar Wilde and Thomas Hardy in *The Religion of Art: A Modernist Theme in British Literature, 1885-1925* (New York: AMS Press, 2006). The phrase had Victorian currency; for example, in 1883, F. W. H. Myers distinguishes between aestheticism’s ‘religion of art’ and the ‘older and more accredited manifestations of the Higher Life’. See Myers, ‘Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty’, *Cornhill Magazine* 47 (1883), 213.

² This more derisory usage also had Victorian currency; for example, in 1876, a writer in the *Saturday Review* decries the emergence of a ‘religion of art independent of all theological restraints’, and names Algernon Charles Swinburne as the key offender, characterising him as the ‘passionate apologist’ for ‘an artistic religion of Paganism’. See ‘Christianity Between Two Foes’, *Saturday Review* 41 (1876), 326. Theodore Ziolkowski uses the phrase to characterise efforts to satisfy religious needs by means of art; see *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 53-82. For a more celebratory treatment of the nexus between aestheticism and faith, see Ellis Hanson’s *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

The ‘religion of art’ phrase is sometimes deployed in a way that makes aestheticism seem like a bit-player in a larger drama of secularisation: art, literature, or an Idealist cult of beauty fills the void created by the departure of God, or at least by the waning of traditional Christian forms of belief and authority.³ Yet characterising aestheticism as a surrogate for religion raises as many questions as it answers. As Michael Kaufmann points out, the argument that art or literature function as modern surrogates for religion often hinges on an ‘analogical paradox’:

To arrive at a final act of differentiation, [such] narratives must initially rely on a supposed similarity. That is, the larger trajectory of a secularization narrative aims at a final differentiation between the religious and the secular, between religion and literature. And yet along the way it must assert that the two are so similar that they are practically interchangeable: literature can replace religion with very little fanfare, very little conflict ... “Secular” literary culture, so goes the theory, is analogous enough to dogmatic religion to be able to replace, and then eventually oppose it. The initial act of identification in the replacement narrative enables a final and determinative act of differentiation.⁴

And to the extent that Victorian aestheticism is symptomatic of a process of secularisation, it is clearly a branch of the narrative which departs from any simple progressivist trajectory: in the 1890s, aestheticism’s ‘religion of beauty’ was often pivoted toward affirmations of the beauty of religion, and – sometimes in conjunction with the equally slippery cognate discourse, ‘decadence’ – became a viable language for charting prodigal journeys back toward faith, most notably toward Rome.⁵ Arguably, the religious turn that Victorian aestheticism took was no turn at all, only a re-efflorescence of the religious seeds always present in an artistic and cultural movement which drew so much of its inspiration from pre-Raphaelite paintings (themselves often poised controversially between the sacred

³ For instance, Chai writes, ‘all of Aestheticism might be said to emerge out of the twilight of a waning religious faith in the later nineteenth century’. See *Aestheticism*, ix.

⁴ Michael W. Kaufmann, ‘The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession’, *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007), 616.

⁵ For a study of the nexus between Catholicism, aestheticism, and decadence see Hanson, *Decadence*.

and the secular) and from the writings of Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, and whose genealogy is sometimes traced to the Oxford Movement.⁶ So by what acts of differentiation did aestheticism ever seek independence from religion? Given that it has often been understood – both in the Victorian age and by subsequent critics – as a cusp between the secular and religious, what ways of thinking about the secular did aestheticism enable, and in what senses did it constitute an experiment in secular aesthetics?⁷ To what extent did it understand itself not simply as a witness but as an agent of secularisation?

This thesis attempts a partial answer to those questions through a close study of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, writers who are conventionally regarded as the two seminal figures for Victorian aestheticism but who have rarely been studied alongside each other in detail. Both Swinburne and Pater have nonetheless enjoyed considerable scholarly attention over the last thirty years, and it seems newly possible to dispense with the rhetoric of critical embattlement which has often seemed a necessary preamble to any discussion of either writer. Yet the fact that Swinburne's rehabilitation has been somewhat slower and more uneven than Pater's – and the fact that Pater is conventionally paired with Oscar Wilde because of interest in the ways in which aestheticism rendered modern homosexual identity legible – have obscured the extent to which aestheticism emerged in their works as part of a complementary effort to formulate a vibrant alternative to established models of religious doubt and unbelief.

This was a common project partly because, while Swinburne and Pater seem to have known each other only slightly and were temperamentally very

⁶ Hilary Fraser suggests that Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde's aestheticism has a religious genealogy which stretches back to the Oxford Movement in *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); see 183-233.

⁷ Some critics take the secular orientation of aestheticism as a given. For instance, Angela Leighton remarks that aestheticism was 'almost always impure, [and] unconformingly materialist and secular in its outlook'. Yet it is not clear if Leighton simply conceives of secular materialism as a non-conformist stance in the period, or understands the secularism of aesthetes to be unconventional in some way. See Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.

different, they emerged from the same intellectual milieu. As children, they were profoundly influenced by the devout high Anglicanism of their respective mothers (though Swinburne later denied that he had ever been ‘a theist’); both lost their faith while undergraduates at Oxford, where they were near contemporaries (Swinburne went up to Balliol in 1856; Pater to Queen’s in 1858).⁸ Both were tutored by Benjamin Jowett, the Regius Professor of Greek who was one of the contributors to the scandalous and pivotal *Essays and Reviews* (1860), a volume that argued in favour of a liberalised interpretation of Christianity. Yet what Gerald Monsman has noted of Pater is also true of Swinburne: the liberalised Christianity then stirring controversy at Oxford seems only to have sharpened their scepticism.⁹ Both were members of ‘Old Mortality’, an exclusive student discussion club with a radical sensibility; both became known among their peers for being provocative critics of religion; and both were avidly reading the same French authors (Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Victor Hugo) from whom they would derive the kernel of their shared ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ position.¹⁰ Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was published before either of them began their careers, but on the whole, there is only oblique engagement with evolutionary theory and with the age’s scientific debates more generally in their works; while neither writer laments that science is unweaving the rainbow, there is an effort to sustain a strategic distance from its discourses.¹¹ Each would produce a book early in his career – Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads, First Series*

⁸ For these biographical details, see Gerald Monsman, *Walter Pater* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1977), 17-47; and Rikky Rooksby, *A. C. Swinburne: A Poet’s Life* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), 24-25 and 45-63. Swinburne claimed that he was never a theist in 1875; see his letter to E. C. Stedman in *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, eds. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 471.

⁹ Monsman, *Pater*, 23.

¹⁰ For discussions of the influence of French writers on Swinburne and Pater, see Charlotte Ribeyrol, ‘A Channel Passage: Swinburne and France’, in *A. C. Swinburne and the Singing Word: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*, ed. Yisrael Levin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 107-122; and Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 113-151. Leighton discusses the French origins of the ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ slogan; see *On Form*, 32-36.

¹¹ Jonathan Loesberg gives a good account of this strategic distance in relation to Swinburne in *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 13-14.

(1866); Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) – which became a *succès de scandale* because of its mixture of sensuality, irreligion, and stylistic virtuosity, and which would define their reputations not only for their contemporaries but also for subsequent generations of readers. Aristocratic privilege enabled Swinburne to remain impenitent in the face of public censure; Pater, the lower-middle-class don, made his accommodations with the Oxford establishment (though his career would be partially stymied by an intramural scandal over his love affair with a male student).¹² The degree of mutual influence has never been closely appraised, though we know that Swinburne enjoyed Pater's early essays (some of which were reprinted in *The Renaissance*), and was gratified when Pater told him that he considered Swinburne's own critical prose a key influence.¹³ Both writers are often thought to have disavowed their aestheticist positions almost as soon as they became notorious for them: Swinburne in the name of a more idealistic and politically coherent form of secularism in his volume in celebration of the Risorgimento, *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871), and later for the sake of alcoholic detox in Putney, where – according to a now-exploded critical orthodoxy – he produced mostly lacklustre poetry; Pater's position became more opaque as his prose became more byzantine, though he clearly grew more sympathetic toward Christianity, and troubled by his reputation as an immoralist.¹⁴ But reading their 'art-for-art's-sake' positions as merely the opening gesture and their subsequent careers as long exercises in recantation depends upon a narrow understanding of aestheticism. Swinburne and Pater originally developed their varieties of aestheticism partly in order to critique and enrich what each found impoverished in contemporary conceptions of religious doubt and unbelief, and neither writer abandoned this complicated enterprise. Indeed, both men were in many ways loyal to their original visions, though they continuously sought ways to refine and expand upon them.

¹² On this scandal, see Billie Inman, 'Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William H. Hardinge', in *Pater in the 1990s*, eds. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 1-20.

¹³ Swinburne received a presentation copy of *The Renaissance*. See Catherine Maxwell, *Writers and Their Work: Swinburne* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006), 82.

¹⁴ For analysis of Pater's later receptivity to Christianity, see Monsman, *Pater*, 102-104.

Insofar as aestheticism struck Pater and Swinburne's contemporaries as a form of secularism, it seemed a peculiarly improper one. There is some irony in the fact that the young journalist who would become one of the age's most prominent freethinkers (as well as a liberal statesman) wrote the first and perhaps the most influentially damning review of *Poems and Ballads, First Series*.¹⁵ Scholars routinely use John Morley's highly quotable invective – Swinburne 'revealed to the world a mind all aflame with the feverish carnality of a schoolboy over the dirtiest passages in Lemprière' and had cast himself as the 'libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs' – to illustrate the tenor of the controversy the volume stirred, no doubt because, taken out of context, such phrases sound suggestive of the overheated prudery of Victorian culture.¹⁶ The logic behind Morley's reaction to *Poems and Ballads* is best grasped in relation to the terms in which he later celebrated Pater's *Renaissance*:

... this more recent pagan movement is one more wave of the great current of reactionary force which the Oxford movement first released ... it is equally a protest against the mechanical and graceless formalism of the modern era, equally an attempt to find a substitute for a narrow popular creed in a return upon the older manifestations of the human spirit, and equally a craving for the infusion of something harmonious and beautiful about the bare lines of daily living. Since the first powerful attempt to revive a gracious spirituality in the country by a renovation of sacramentalism, science has come. The Newmanite generation in Oxford was followed by a generation who were formed on Mr. Mill's Logic and Grote's Greece. The aesthetic spirits were no longer able to find rest in a system associated with theology. Then Mr. Ruskin came, and the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and Mr. Swinburne and Mr. Morris, and now lastly a critic like Mr. Pater, all with faces averted from theology, most of them indeed blessed with a simple and happy unconsciousness of the very existence of the conventional gods. ... But here is Mr. Pater courageously saying that love of art for art's sake has most of the true wisdom

¹⁵ Swinburne's friend and biographer Edmund Gosse thought that Morley's notice sparked the furor. See Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 150-152. Clyde K. Hyder is sceptical of Gosse's account, but it seems plausible that Morley's vituperative *tour de force* inspired other critics. See Hyder, *Algernon Swinburne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), xvii.

¹⁶ John Morley, 'Mr. Swinburne's New Poems', *Saturday Review* 22.562 (1866), 145-147.

that makes life full. The fact ... that a serious writer should thus raise aesthetic interest to the throne lately filled by religion, only shows how void the old theologies have become.¹⁷

At first sight it is curious that Pater's book, which evinced such an obvious kinship with Swinburne's aestheticism (and which, like *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, provoked a scandal because of its neo-pagan materialism) should receive Morley's praise where Swinburne's received his blame. This apparent inconsistency can be explained in terms of Morley's sensitivity to the politics of Victorian religious doubt. As would become clear in his 1874 liberal polemic, *On Compromise*, Morley was committed to the secularisation of society, yet believed it was an ideal which could be realised only if freethinking intellectuals pursued it prudently. One of the major themes of *On Compromise* is the imperative for unbelievers to adhere to codes of civility and moral responsibility without merely sacrificing their beliefs on the altar of convention. The essay as a whole manifests ambivalence toward 'the historic, semi-conservative and almost sympathetic quality, that distinguishes the unbelief of today from the unbelief of a hundred years ago': on the one hand, Morley urges secularists to compromise, 'to move very slowly, to bow to the conditions of the *status quo*, to practice the very utmost sobriety, self-restraint and accommodation'; on the other, he looks back wistfully to the Enlightenment *philosophes*, and gibes at the 'flaccid latitudinarianism' of Victorian culture.¹⁸

Soon after he reviewed Swinburne's volume, Morley became the editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, which he transformed into a bellwether of literary liberalism and scientific thought. As Gowan Dawson notes, the *Fortnightly* was the 'periodical of choice for [T. H.] Huxley, [John] Tyndall, [W. H.] Clifford, and many other leading exponents of evolution and scientific naturalism', as well as for the notable 'aesthetic' writers of the 1870s: William Morris, Pater, Dante Gabriel Rossetti – and Swinburne.¹⁹ The fact that Swinburne and Morley

¹⁷ John Morley, 'Mr. Pater's Essays', *Fortnightly Review* 13.76 (1873), 476.

¹⁸ John Morley, *On Compromise* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 83, 130-131, 93, and 103.

¹⁹ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17.

developed a warm professional relationship in the years immediately following Morley's hatchet job – coupled with the fact that Morley could, seven years later, write approvingly of Swinburne as an anti-theological 'aesthetic spirit' – seem to measure both Swinburne's affinities with and distance from the more respectable liberal wing of Victorian secularism. In his capacity as editor, Morley frequently had to wrangle with Swinburne over the vehemence of his anti-Christian positions, and one wonders if Morley's own ideal of responsible unbelief crystallised partly under the pressure of editing Swinburne:

I find myself in a thrice confounded strait. I shall most assuredly get into a fiendish scrape with my masters, print-masters and public, if I print that ugly sentence about the 'edible and potable' God, and that yet more *sanglant* utterance ... <illegible> wind up about Christ and John Wilkes. I have ever found you so kind and considerate as to my awkward difficulties, but I venture to urge you to be as merciful as you are strong – and to leave out (or soften) the mocking edge of that closing sentence ...²⁰

With reference to the two changes of phrase in your article on Shelley. Of the second – the place of Bayne's god – I cannot speak; I cannot remember touching it ... The other alteration – the limitation of the opinion of the evil wrought by Xianity to Shelley – I made, because I assumed that you meant no more than this; and because, if you meant no more, it was as well to avoid a phrase calculated to shock or displease even a majority of unbelievers.²¹

The fact that Morley immediately embraced Pater as an exemplar of his own model of liberal secularism while he perceived Swinburne as a threat to the respectability of that same program is intelligible insofar as Pater's aestheticism had a progressive and recognisably humanist orientation, while Swinburne's was to some extent the product of what he himself later characterised as a youthful 'turbid nihilism' (though in *Songs Before Sunrise*, he would proselytise on behalf of secular humanism more explicitly than Pater ever did, and this thesis will question the extent to which terms such as 'nihilism' or 'pessimism' are in fact

²⁰ [Morley to Swinburne, May 23, 1880], *Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. 2, edited Terry Myers (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), 221-222.

²¹ [Morley to Swinburne, May 15, 1869], *ibid.*, vol.1, 161.

applicable to Swinburne's work).²² It is not difficult to perceive why the blasphemies, dark eroticism, and sheer playfulness of Swinburne's volume seemed so egregious to Morley. Swinburne clearly confounded Morley's identification of atheism with rationality, and seemed to make a mockery of his own desire to defend a secular eudaemonism: 'It is a good thing to vindicate passion, and the strong and large and rightful pleasures of the sense, against the narrow and inhuman tyranny of shrivelled anchorites. It is a very bad and silly thing to try to set up the pleasures of sense in the seat of the reason they have dethroned'.²³ As Dawson has demonstrated, prominent Victorian scientists as well as freethinking radicals continuously had to contend against the association of unbelief with immorality in general and sexual immorality in particular.²⁴ In explicitly conflating unbelief with perverse pleasure, Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads, First Series* violated not simply traditional Christian sensibilities but the emerging protocols of respectable secularism.

The nature of this double violation is partly a matter of style or aesthetics. Morley's initial hostility to Swinburne was partly an aversion to the excesses of his style: 'libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs' obviously pastiches Swinburne's mellifluousness, specifically his habits of assonance and alliteration. Given that Pater's prose was also often condemned as florid and morally suspect by Victorian critics, it may seem surprising that his style should be markedly more acceptable to Morley than Swinburne's. Yet Pater's critiques of Christianity tend to be pointillistic, constructed through erudite allusion, telling juxtapositions and ellipses, and fine qualifications. In other words, Pater's style could seem as if it conformed to Morley's ideal of judicious, high-minded unbelief. Nonetheless, I would suggest that Pater's *Renaissance* caused a scandal partly because it pushed the polite discourses of religious doubt to their limits, exploiting the insinuating power of euphemism and turning the formal constraints placed upon critiques of Christianity into an occasion for aesthetic connoisseurship. Morley appears to detect this almost parodic quality when he notes that Pater's style contains 'the

²² Swinburne, [letter to Stedman], *Major Poems*, 471.

²³ Morley, 'Swinburne', 145.

²⁴ Dawson, *Darwin*, 1-25.

germs of possible excess', and suggests that Pater only delivers himself from the 'peril of ... effeminate and flaccid mannerism' on account of his overarching 'scrupulosity' and 'reserve'.²⁵ One might turn this formulation around and say that the elaborate 'reserve' that writers were obliged to display when they wished to critique Christianity could itself be exploited as a richly ambiguous literary 'mannerism' – that is, it could become an aesthetic end in itself. Pater seems self-conscious about this possibility in the opening passage of his first published essay, 'Coleridge's Writings' (1866), which begins its attack on Coleridge's Christian transcendentalism by welcoming 'the spectacle of the reserve of the elder generation exquisitely refined by the antagonism of the new'.²⁶ In other words, the stylistic 'reserve' of the elder generation does not pass away but is rather perfected as something beautiful in itself under the pressure of new, subversive ideas. (Morley later commented privately that he was so much in sympathy with what he took to be Pater's effort to beautify secularism that he was willing to pardon Pater's 'transgressions', though he did not specify what these transgressions were: he was probably referring to the volume's homoerotic undercurrents, though perhaps also to a more general apprehension that Pater's variety of secularism courted some of the same risks that Swinburne's did.)²⁷

Morley was being fanciful when he suggested that Pater and Swinburne embody 'simple and happy unconsciousness of the very existence of the conventional gods': both writers remain preoccupied by Christianity throughout their careers. Yet the phrase captures one of the fantasies they share: casting off the legacy of Christian (and Platonic) transcendentalism, and returning to a pagan enjoyment of the earthly. Every reader of Pater and Swinburne knows that they call for a rehabilitation of the senses, and that they often declare their passion for the transient; yet where modern literary criticism has tended to construe this primarily as a call for more expansive and liberated conceptions of sexuality, Victorian readers also construed it as an effort to cast secularism in peculiarly

²⁵ Morley, 'Pater', 471-472.

²⁶ Pater, 'Coleridge's Writings', *Westminster Review* 29.1 (1866), 106.

²⁷ Quoted in Franklin E. Court, *Pater and His Early Critics* (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1980), 77.

seductive terms.²⁸ There is something discordant about discussing the ‘secular’ – a category which invokes the commonsensical, the transparent, things-in-their-facticity – in terms of fantasy, and one might object that when Pater and Swinburne idealise a lost Hellenic wholeness, or try to retrieve a pagan appreciation of the beauty of the material world, it is a lost religious fullness that they are yearning for, albeit one conceived in opposition to Christianity. Yet Pater and Swinburne’s ‘paganism’ often demands to be read as a form of secularism insofar as they generally celebrate paganism for its vindication of what the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor would call a ‘closed’ or self-sufficient immanent frame: that is, an ideal of human flourishing that is conceived without reference to the transcendent, or to anything beyond or higher than the human and the natural. As Taylor notes, there is a distinctive strand of modern anti-religious thinking which understands the ‘human good as in its very essence sensual, earthly; whoever identifies a transcendental goal departs from it, betrays it’.²⁹ This logic forms a powerful current in both Swinburne and Pater’s works. More specifically, they often identify the pagan with a primordial capacity to find mortal life in the world sufficient unto itself, prior to a ‘fall’ into theological abstraction, melancholy Christian inwardness, and, as Pater puts it, the ‘crucifixion of the senses’.³⁰ A *locus classicus* for this mode of secularism is this passage from Pater’s ‘Winckelmann’ essay:

It has been sometimes said that art is a means of escape from ‘the tyranny of the senses’. It may be so for the spectator; he may find that the spectacle of supreme works of art takes from the life of the senses something of its turbid fever. But this is possible for the spectator only because the artist in producing those works has gradually sunk his intellectual and spiritual ideas in sensuous form. He may live, as Keats lived, a pure life; but his soul, like that of Plato’s false astronomer, becomes more and more immersed in

²⁸ For discussions of aestheticism as a mode of sexual liberation, see Richard Dellamora’s *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), as well as the essays collected in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 547.

³⁰ Pater, ‘Winckelmann’, *Westminster Review* 31.1 (1867), 106. Pater excised this phrase when the essay appeared in *The Renaissance*.

sense, until nothing else has any interest for him. How could such a one ever again endure the greyness of the ideal or spiritual world? The spiritualist is satisfied in seeing the sensuous elements escape from his conceptions; his interest grows, as the dyed garment bleaches in the keener air. But the artist steepes his thought again and again into the fire of colour. To the Greek this immersion in the sensuous was indifferent. But Christianity, with its uncompromising idealism, discrediting the slightest touch of sense, has lighted up for the artistic life, with its inevitable sensuousness, a background of flame. ... It is hard to pursue that life without something of a conscious disavowal of the spiritual world; and this imparts to genuine interests a kind of intoxication.³¹

This reaches beyond a critique of Christian asceticism. Even a Christianity more hospitable to the sensuous (and Pater's later work emphasises that Christianity is in fact a sensuous faith) would not answer to the logic here, since Pater insists that art derives its power from *pure* immersion in sense, and as such, is antagonistic toward the possibility of another, spiritual realm. Pater's metaphor works to insist that Christianity is just another colour in humanity's palette of sense: it aims to transcend sense, but in so doing, manages only to be 'grey' or 'bleached'. Even the spectator who fancies that art allows him to escape from sense is disabused (he is just having his senses soothed, not leaving them behind); and for artists, Christianity's pallor simply adds fuel to the general 'fire of colour' (though it is hard to say if this 'background of flame' is a holy fire or the flames of hell). Pater's career as a whole may be understood as a comprehensive effort to vindicate the perspective of Plato's 'false astronomer', or to insist on the thoroughly sensuous nature of all perception (and late in his career, Pater suggested that Plato himself was a false astronomer, devoted to the sensuous and the this-worldly after all.)³² But there is a twist in the argument; where for the Greeks immersion in sense was unmediated, artists of the Christian era perform a 'conscious disavowal of the spiritual world' in order to achieve the same effects. Pater seems to cast aside Christian and Platonic transcendentalism as something

³¹ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111.

³² For discussion of Pater's 'sensuous' Plato in *Plato and Platonism* (1893), see David W. Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 168-174.

without ‘interest’, but there is a profound investment in perpetuating the argument between the Christian and the pagan, the spiritual and the worldly, since the ‘conscious’ nature of the disavowal is at least partly what allows for intoxication, now artists have lost a Hellenic sense of the world’s immediacy. This contradictory movement is typical of both Pater and Swinburne’s aestheticism: first, the religious is banished in the interests of a pure experience of the aesthetic; second, the friction between the secular and the religious is re-inscribed as the essence of art. In other words, their aestheticism is nourished by the question it apparently neutralises.³³

Pater and Swinburne also identify a ‘pagan’ perspective with art far more promiscuously: their aestheticism is, in part, a sweeping effort to claim that such a radical love of the worldly for its own sake is discernible in all great art, even where it is repressed or disavowed. Such claims produce a paradox: the secular is identified with all that is intuitive, familiar, and vividly real; and yet it is also imagined to be an exotic and deeply buried idea, one that requires careful excavation (as well as urgent advocacy). It is this paradox, I suggest, which underpins Pater and Swinburne’s ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ position. The near-tautological assertion that art has – or *should* have – no purpose beyond or higher than itself often functions as an assertion about the autotelism of secular life, its completeness-onto-itself. Like the ‘art-for-art’s sake’ catchphrase, this mode of secularism often hovers between an assertion about the way things are and an assertion about the way things should be: on the one hand, art has always – if secretly – sought its own, aesthetic ends, though it has been yoked to other purposes; on the other, art should renounce all its false aspirations and be satisfied with its status as art.

The secularising burden the art-for-art’s-sake phrase often carries similarly tends to shuttle between a description, a prescription, and an optative trope: sometimes Pater and Swinburne invoke a purely immanent conception of existence as if simply registering an intransigent reality; sometimes it takes the form of an assertion that we ought to find earthly life enchantment enough; at

³³ Ibid., 268.

others it appears as a wistful suggestion that, if only we could renovate our perceptions, or make ourselves more properly receptive, all the ecstasy religion promises in transcendent terms would be available here and now. Tracing this (sometimes knotted) logic across Pater and Swinburne's work, this thesis emphasises the extent to which aestheticism had ambitions to be not simply a philosophy of beauty but something like a philosophy of happiness, and it tends to catch both writers in their more blithe and joyful moods. Of course, this is not to suggest that darker and more melancholic currents are absent from their work; nor is it to suggest that they never articulate desires for something beyond the limitations of secular existence. (Indeed, one might detect a longing for transcendence in the elaborate ways both writers often deny or reconfigure such longings.) Yet the effort to cast the secular in terms of pleasure and fulfillment is a dense and continuous thread in both their works. It is discernible even in some of the most apparently despairing visions conjured in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, where Swinburne's sadomasochistic poetics enable him to perform a kind of perverse version of the rational loss-and-gain calculations that the Victorians so often liked to make when belief and unbelief were in the balance; his early poems work not simply by negation, but insist that there is a complex pleasure, a higher vitality, or strange consolation to be found even in what seems most inimical about a purely secular understanding of things.³⁴ Likewise, even when Pater attempts a rapprochement with Christianity in the latter part of his career, it is with a remarkably sun-lit and hedonic conception of the secular, rather than with the more familiar Victorian model of unbelief as a type of 'freezing reason', with which he compares the attractions of Christianity.³⁵

To emphasise that Pater and Swinburne's aestheticism was an effort to cast secularism in terms of desire and pleasure is in a sense only to echo their most virulent contemporary detractors: for instance, in 1879, W. S. Lilly claimed

³⁴ The gains-and-losses idea, given currency by the title of John Henry Newman's 1848 novel, is such a common motif that Robert Lee Wolff adopts it as the title of his comprehensive study of Victorian novels of faith and doubt. See *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London: John Murray, 1977).

³⁵ Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Pearson and Longman, 2007), 469.

that they were ‘evangelists’ for a ‘sentimental materialism’: the ‘mawkish and unwholesome jargon of aestheticism’, with its ‘Circean spells’ and ‘deification of the flesh’, was transparently reducible to this ‘gospel’, whose effect was to at once degrade and efface the human: ‘the *man* vanishes, and you have instead a “creature more subtle than any beast of the field, but likewise cursed above any beast of the field”’.³⁶ In a similar vein, Harry Quilter decried the aestheticism of Pater and Swinburne as a ‘gospel of intensity’ which exploited the religious doubt of the age and made it the occasion for ‘pure sensuousness’, albeit sensuousness of a peculiarly cultured variety.³⁷ Quilter emphasised that the ‘new Renaissance’ they sought to inaugurate under the aegis of aestheticism was in fact entirely ‘melancholy’ – the ‘gospel of intensity’ induced only ‘self-consciousness [about] a miserable, thwarted, and limited existence’.³⁸ Strikingly, such critics find ‘aestheticism’ immoral not simply because of its glorification of pleasure, nor simply because it seems atheistic, but because its hedonism recasts in desirable terms something understood as irreducibly painful – the loss of religious belief. Such critics register aestheticism’s ambitions to provide something akin to religious enchantment and inspiration in secular terms – hence the attacks not merely on its sexual or religious improprieties, but on its sentimentality, its spells, its ‘gospel’ – and seek to underline the doomed nature of any such effort.

The Victorian ‘crisis of faith’, once a convenient stock phrase in studies of the period, is increasingly hard to deploy without rhetorical embarrassment. The Victorian ‘crisis of faith’ narrative forms a crux within contemporary debates over the concept of secularisation both in literary studies and in the fields of history and sociology, though scholars have only recently begun to reappraise Victorian literature in the light of challenges to the ‘secularisation thesis’ (the theory that modernity inevitably leads to the decline of religion). Contesting prior accounts of the Victorian age as a period marked by the ebbing of the ‘Sea of Faith’ and the ‘disappearance of God’, such reappraisals have underscored the vitality and

³⁶ W. S. Lily, ‘The New Gospel’, *Time* 1 (May 1879), 173 and 175.

³⁷ Harry Quilter, ‘The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 42.251 (1880), 392.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 400.

diffuseness of Victorian religion, and emphasised that secularisation did not entail the decline of faith so much as the prismatic diversification of the forms of belief (including the emergence of new secular beliefs).³⁹ Reading Victorian literature without assuming that the period witnessed the decline of religion in any simple sense entails an effort to hold contradictions together, and to sustain a double perspective that William McKelvy evokes memorably:

It was the best of times and the worst of times for religion; it was the age of Darwin and the age of Newman, an age that begins to draw to an end when we can imagine an esoteric reader in a London flat making his way through Nietzsche, basking in the roseate twilight of the idols, while down on the street the Salvation Army, with brass artillery thundering, wins yet another celestial victory.⁴⁰

Yet sustaining this perspective also creates complications insofar as many prominent Victorians believed that they *were* beholding the inexorable decline of religion – and this belief, typically framed as a melancholic one, was itself often both rendered and understood as an extension of a writer’s faith, or as a quasi-religious compensation for their lack of faith. Charles LaPorte suggests that we take such Victorian intimations of religion’s decline with a pinch of salt: they attest to the ‘Victorians’ impressions of secularisation rather than to secularisation *per se*, and when, in ‘Dover Beach’, Arnold thinks he can hear ‘the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the ‘Sea of Faith’, he is perhaps only hearing the sound of his ‘own ear pressed against a seashell’.⁴¹ Yet there is no need to dismiss Arnold’s vision as false testimony because too many portentous assertions about the death of God have been extrapolated from it: there is no insoluble

³⁹ The retreat of the ‘Sea of Faith’ is Arnold’s metaphor for the Victorian religious crisis in ‘Dover Beach’ (1867). Books which situate their readings of Victorian literature in relation to critiques of the secularisation thesis are appearing regularly. See for example Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Devon Fisher, *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature: Conservatism, Liberalism, and the Emergence of Secular Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); and Charles LaPorte’s *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

⁴⁰ William McKelvy, *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 16.

⁴¹ LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 3.

contradiction between understanding Victorian culture as substantially religious and understanding it as pervaded by doubt and anxieties about religion's decline, at least insofar as many Victorians construed such doubts and anxieties as pious, and they attest powerfully to how much Victorian culture valued religion. As Lance St John Butler observes, 'The avowedly religious discourse of the Victorians is shot through with ... doubt, while the avowedly unreligious or antireligious discourse of the period is shot through with metaphysical assumptions, and with vocabulary and imagery that betray the cultural pervasion of religion'.⁴²

Much recent work on religion and secularisation in literary studies is informed by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, partly because he provides ways of drawing lucid yet complex distinctions between the secular and the religious.⁴³ Taylor carefully distinguishes between two types of 'secularisation'. The first he defines as the 'emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres', a phenomenon he regards as salutary and as a development partly internal to the logic of Christianity itself.⁴⁴ Taylor emphasises that this type of secularisation may take place while a given society remains broadly religious, though belief is rendered a private matter, and God is driven from the public square. To point out that this type of secularisation was occurring across the nineteenth-century, though gradually and unevenly, is uncontroversial. Throughout the period, the state moved toward secularisation largely by virtue of demands for religious

⁴² St John Butler, *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 6-7.

⁴³ While I focus on the nebulous boundaries between the secular and the religious in the Victorian period, particularly as they were encoded in Victorian 'doubt', my underlying assumption about the difference between the two conforms to Taylor's distinction between 'closed' and 'open' immanent frames (a 'closed frame' identifies the good with the human and the this-worldly, without reference to the transcendent; an 'open frame' entails the perception that the good is 'inextricably linked to God, or to something ontically higher [transcendent]'). See *A Secular Age*, 544. Critics often flatten distinctions between the religious and secular in order to contest the secularisation thesis, but as Dominic Erdozain has argued, this often impoverishes discussion and inadvertently confirms the thesis by emptying out the religious as a meaningful category. See Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 16.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 2.

toleration: 1828 saw the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, relieving Dissenters from civic disabilities (Catholics were emancipated the following year); the requirement that students at Oxford and Cambridge subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles upon matriculation was abolished in 1851; and Jews could enter the House of Commons from 1858. Yet freedom of religion and freedom from religion were not coterminous: it was not until 1886 that Charles Bradlaugh – after having been elected as the member for Northampton four times – was allowed to take up his seat as the first avowed atheist in parliament.⁴⁵ Perhaps most crucially for my purposes, the Oxford that Swinburne and Pater attended was very much wandering between worlds: while Anglican orthodoxy was no longer required of students, it was still required of dons. (Pater would be elected as a Fellow of Brasenose college in 1864 during the first wave of non-clerical fellowships, although Oxford and Cambridge fellowships remained closed to non-Anglicans until 1871.) Pater and Swinburne’s insistence upon the autonomy of art, its proper independence from other spheres and types of knowledge, was as much a product of the partial and confusing secularisation they encountered at Oxford as it was the exotic fruit of their mutual interest in French literature. The notion of art as a neutral sphere, committed only to its own disinterested laws, has often been understood by modern scholars as an alibi for something else – as an escapist flight from economic or political realities, or, more recently, as an effort to engage politics, especially the politics of sexuality or gender, in alternative terms.⁴⁶ Yet the idea of ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ was also quite explicitly a petition for the type of secularisation I have sketched above in relation to art – with the twist that art, particularly literature, was more usually conceived in the period as one of the semi-private realms in which religion could find sanctuary as its presence in the public sphere was increasingly contested.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ For an account of this process of state secularisation, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9-13.

⁴⁶ For a survey of trends in scholarship on aestheticism, see Nicholas Shrimpton, ‘The Old Aestheticism and the New’, *Literature Compass* 2.1 (2005), 1-16.

⁴⁷ Colin Jager argues that literature came to be understood as a sanctuary in this way in the Romantic period: literature began to serve ‘not as an alternative to religion’ but rather

Taylor also analyses secularisation in its more nebulous sense – that is, the question of what happens to religious belief under the conditions of modernity. In his view, secularisation does not refer to the disintegration of religion (though he acknowledges that religion has declined), but rather to a ‘nova effect’: new positions, both religious and secular, proliferate, and all positions become ‘fragilised’ and open to contestation.⁴⁸ Taylor is also interested in what it feels like to be secular. He suggests that across the spectrum of secular and religious positions, modern people often experience the ‘malaise of a disenchanted world’.⁴⁹ Where the premodern self was porous, open to ‘enchantment’ – that is, to the influence of transcendent spirits and moral agencies, both good and bad – the modern self is ‘buffered’ by its rationality, and largely impervious to such influences; at its most secular, it ‘see[s] itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things’.⁵⁰ Taylor actually discusses Pater’s work in passing. Glossing the ‘Conclusion’ to the *Renaissance*, he classifies Pater’s aestheticism as one of the ““subtler languages” of post-Romantic literature’ which, rather than sustaining the indeterminate stance toward religious possibility that such language can afford, repudiates ‘transcendent object[s]’ and underscores that all aspirations are ‘fulfilled at the level of experience’.⁵¹ This seems an accurate assessment of the ‘Conclusion’, yet it overlooks the extent to which Pater’s essay runs against the grain of Taylor’s larger thesis: Pater identifies the lack of a transcendent object not with rational self-mastery but with a radically porous self, and he claims that it is at least possible to find this condition both fulfilling and enchanting, albeit ‘enchanting’ from within a purely immanent frame. Taylor’s identification of secularisation with disenchanted rationality would have resonated with many Victorian writers and thinkers, but it is an identification that Pater and Swinburne’s aestheticism resists. Of course, one could read Pater and Swinburne’s emphasis upon radical receptivity to experience and the possibilities

‘to the increasingly stressed secular spaces that have sought to displace religion’. See Jager, ‘After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism’, *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006), 301.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 300 and 303.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 404.

of worldly ecstasy as symptoms of the buffered, rationalised nature of modern subjectivity, which perversely wishes for the transcendent goods it denies itself. As George Levine repeatedly confesses in a recent essay, claiming to derive the satisfactions proffered by religion in secular terms is – to say the least – a move fraught with rhetorical difficulty.⁵² Arguably, much of the West’s literary inheritance is ranged against the possibility of rendering such claims plausible. And surely one of the reasons why aestheticism would often seem facile and embarrassing to a later generation of modernist writers was its tendency to stake its claims on the beauties of the material world and upon the richness of the gratifications available in the here and now.⁵³ Yet, as the modernists also felt – often in spite of themselves – such claims also have their allure, if only because of their audacity or poignancy. This thesis reads Pater and Swinburne’s works as efforts to explore the possibilities of secular consciousness at the perimeters of the established Victorian discourses of religious doubt. Both writers tend to frame a secular perspective not as the chastening effect of an intellectual struggle with scientific or historical evidence, but as a perception that may be authenticated through an encounter with a work of art or with the natural world, an imaginative or self-consciously ‘heretical’ interpretation of the past, or even by sexual desire. The novelty of their project may be gauged by the extent to which it both troubled and excited the positivist Morley; the ambiguities it always harboured, by the extent to which aestheticism could ultimately be used by Pater – as well as by other writers – as a means of dramatising ambivalent returns to faith.

The word ‘secular’ holds ambiguities within itself by definition. Its primary meaning derives from the medieval period, where it simply denoted members of the clergy who moved in society at large rather than remaining confined within a monastic order. (Both Pater and Swinburne are fascinated by this kind of liminality: the figure of the medieval clerk who is tempted by worldly

⁵² George Levine, ‘Introduction’, *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays For How We Live Now*, ed. Levine (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-23.

⁵³ For discussion of the ambivalent attraction modernist writers often felt toward Victorian aestheticism, see Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity, and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011).

things constitutes a shared *topos*.)⁵⁴ Etymologically, the word implies a time rather than a place: it comes from the same Latin root (*sæculum*) as the French word *siècle*. In this sense too it seems germane to Pater and Swinburne – in their works, the transience of time and the co-implication of life and death are often framed as age-old themes that nonetheless have the force of shocking new realities now that they have been separated from hopes for immortality. Thirdly, the cognate term, ‘secularisation’, implies an act of expropriation wherein things formerly held to belong to the Church become the property of the state. When literary theorists discuss religion and secularisation, this metaphor of political expropriation often looms large: literary ‘secularisation’ is understood as the annexing of forms, tropes and ideas formerly held to be religious property, and their delivery into secular territory. This type of literary secularisation is often considered partial and ambiguous; the purportedly secular, for all its rhetoric of independence, is shown to have the same features as its religious parents.⁵⁵ As I have suggested, the filiation between aestheticism and discourses of decadence is often linked to the idea that aestheticism constituted an illegitimate or debased expropriation of religious goods. This idea can also be understood as internal to aestheticism itself; Pater in particular sometimes presents aestheticism as an illicit, secular fetishisation of the religious. Yet Pater and Swinburne also often try to turn such logic on its head, and suggest that religion was itself an expropriation of originally secular and aesthetic goods.

Morley’s review of the *The Renaissance* captures another distinctive feature of aestheticism. By characterising Pater’s work as an effort to continue the Oxford Movement’s sacramentalism in a scientifically informed, anti-theological spirit, he suggests a simple passing of the torch from a religious to a secular imagination; science has ‘come’, so a sense of sacramental beauty is transferred from theology to art. Swinburne and Pater in fact often strive to present such

⁵⁴ I discuss this *topos* in relation to Pater’s ‘Poems By William Morris’ and Swinburne’s ‘The Leper’; see pages 51-60 and 215-217 respectively.

⁵⁵ Vincent Pecora called my attention to these different resonances of the ‘secular’ and ‘secularisation’ (i.e., its medieval, temporal, and expropriative connotations). See *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2-15.

shifts as easeful, and to suggest that religious ways of seeing can be translated into secular ones without tension or loss. Nonetheless, this thesis emphasises the complexity and paradoxes of their efforts to secularise aesthetic experience, and the extent to which it depended upon ambiguities within the discourses of Victorian doubt. It is telling that when Swinburne makes his early declarations of aesthetic independence, he frames these not in terms of an opposition to Christianity *per se* but in opposition to conventionalised religious doubt and religiously-toned secularism: ‘Let us no longer be pestered with the frantic and flatulent assumptions of quasi-secular clericalism willing to think the best of all sides, and ready even, with consecrating hand, to lend meritorious art and poetry a timely shove’; he defines himself against ‘Christian sceptics, hand-cuffed fighters, tongued-tied orators ...; believers whose belief was a sentiment, and freethinkers who saw nothing before Christ or beyond Judea’.⁵⁶ This thesis analyses Pater and Swinburne’s aestheticism not as a critique of a monolithic Christianity – though admittedly at times they present it as such – but rather as a phenomenon that grows out of the cracks in established ways of discussing religious doubt and the possibilities of the secular. As developed by Swinburne and Pater, aestheticism responds to a cultural moment in which a particular discourse of religious doubt – cultured, melancholic, morally serious, and either eager to confirm the pious character of doubt or to express nostalgia for a departed faith and tenderness for the heritage of Christianity – had acquired respectability and begun to settle into recognisable literary tropes and forms. Swinburne and Pater’s varieties of aestheticism have intimate but transgressive relationships with this discourse, drawing upon its authority even as they call attention to its exclusions. Crucial to my project is an attempt to delineate the poetics of aestheticism in relation to a historical juncture at which Christianity could look both hegemonic and fragile, and, by virtue of apparently minor tricks of style, religious scepticism could seem either scandalous or conventional.

⁵⁶ Swinburne, *William Blake* (London: James Camden Hotten, 1868), 92; and ‘Matthew Arnold’s New Poems’, *Fortnightly Review* 2.10 (1867), 414.

Chapter 1 discusses blasphemy in relation to Swinburne's experiments with the dramatic monologue, a form closely associated with Robert Browning and often used by the older poet as a medium for Christian apologetics. I suggest that Swinburne appropriates Browning's form in order to dramatise the instabilities of the politicised distinction between respectable doubt and blasphemy, and to interrogate Browning's efforts to posit doubt as a ground for authentic religious faith. Chapter 2 examines Swinburne's critiques of the Victorian identification of religious doubt with melancholy and disenchantment, an identification given a poetic inevitability by Alfred Tennyson and Arnold. I analyse Swinburne's handling of conventional themes and forms such as the *carpe diem* topos, the Romantic sublime, courtly love, and the epic as efforts to answer Tennyson and Arnold, and to propose a more expansive understanding of the secular. Chapter 3 is divided into three sections. The first examines Pater's essay 'Diaphaneité' (1864) in relation to Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837), and suggests that Pater's aesthetic prose seeks to transfigure the nexus between unbelief, apocalypse, and revolution in the Victorian imaginary. Section two argues that three essays from Pater's *Renaissance* – 'Aucassin and Nicolette', 'Botticelli', and 'Pico della Mirandola' – operate partly by reinforcing the submerged links between Arnold's ideal of disinterested cultural criticism and the concept of heresy, and by transvaluing those links as principles of aestheticism. Section three considers Pater's 'Conclusion' and 'Coleridge's Writings' in relation to John Stuart Mill's 'Coleridge' (1840) and *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865), and analyses Pater's bids to turn the apparently distressing implications of modern thought into sources of secular enchantment. The final chapter reads Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1881) alongside George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-1863) and suggests that Pater's novel uses Epicureanism to interrogate Victorian assumptions about the distinction between secular and Christian morality, particularly in relation to concepts of altruism and self-sacrifice. I also seek to historicise the famously enigmatic nature of Pater's novel by situating it in relation to the diffusion of Huxley's coinage, 'agnosticism', and to contests over the implications of the new

paradigm that animated the periodical press in the late 1870s and early 1880s. My coda considers Swinburne and Pater's attitudes to aestheticism in the 1890s.

Chapter One: Parleying with Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold: Blasphemy, the Dramatic Monologue, and Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads, First Series*

While still an undergraduate at Oxford, Swinburne fantasised about reviewing his own poetry and identifying its 'models' as 'blasphemy and sensuality' – an arresting formulation that seems to posit transgression itself as a celebrated literary form or precursor poet.¹ When Swinburne's fantasy of literary scandal was in a sense spectacularly fulfilled in the 'trial-by-review' of *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, Swinburne apparently minded the imputations of 'blasphemy' far less than he did those of sexual 'indecenty'.² In *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866), the pamphlet he composed in response to the controversy that followed the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne retaliated energetically against the criticisms that had been directed at erotic poems such as 'Hermaphroditus', but he only defended the volume's anti-Christian content in relation to a single poem ('Anactoria'), and he buried his sharpest riposte to the 'blasphemy' charge in a footnote:

As I shall not return to this charge of 'blasphemy', I will here cite a notable instance of what does seem permissible in that line to the English reader. (... It is the line of demarcation which admits, if offense there be, the greater offender and rejects the less – it is this that I do not understand.) After many alternate curses and denials of God, a great poet talks of Christ 'veiling his horrible Godhead', of his 'malignant soul', his 'godlike malice'. Shelley outlived all this and much more; but Shelley wrote all this and much more. Will no Society for the Suppression of Common Sense – no Committee for the Propagation of Cant – see to it a little? Or have they not already tried their hands at it and broken down? For the poem which contains the words above quoted continues to this day to bring credit and profit to its publishers – Mssrs. Moxon and Co.³

¹ Quoted by Hyder, introduction to *Swinburne: Critical Heritage*, xiii.

² I borrow this formulation from Joss Marsh, who emphasises the prosecutorial character of Victorian literary reviews. See *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94.

³ Swinburne, *Major Poems*, 352.

This gibe at Moxon & Co. – the reputable firm that initially published *Poems and Ballads* and then, fearing that prosecution would follow the damning reviews, withdrew the volume – is more charged than it appears. As Swinburne surely knew *Queen Mab* (1813), the Shelley poem to which he alludes, had in fact brought Moxon & Co. not simply ‘credit and profit’ but a blasphemy conviction. In 1841, the Chartist and freethinker Henry Hetherington sued Edward Moxon for blasphemous libel in order to dramatise the injustice of the fact that the blasphemy law was only invoked in the cases of ‘unrespectable’ writers and publishers like Hetherington himself.⁴ As Donald Thomas points out, Moxon & Co. panicked over the reviews of *Poems and Ballads* partly because Edward Moxon’s successors at the firm recalled the legendary *Queen Mab* case.⁵ In effect, Swinburne here adopts the strategy used by Hetherington: he points out that ‘blasphemy’ is embedded in esteemed works of literature, and decries the arbitrariness of the ‘line of demarcation’ between the literary and the blasphemous. Yet this protest is partly disingenuous: Swinburne of course knew that the atheistic moments in Shelley’s work marred his reputation in the eyes of many Victorian readers and his sense of affinity with Shelley was partly founded upon his conception of the poet as a Romantic infidel. What aggrieves Swinburne is not the charge of ‘blasphemy’ *per se* but the failure of his critics to share his Romantic faith in a correlation between transgression and poetic genius.

Joss Marsh has argued that the *Queen Mab* case was pivotal in what she calls the ‘literary redefinition’ of blasphemy in the nineteenth century.⁶ As critiques of traditional religion became more commonplace and socially acceptable, ‘blasphemy’ increasingly came to signify not a verbal offence against religion as such but the unsavoury twin of polite agnosticism and doubt. Marsh argues that the Victorian concept of blasphemy was class-coded and profoundly political insofar as it hinged less on the actual claims of a given critique of

⁴ Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 90-109.

⁵ Donald Thomas, *Swinburne: The Poet in His World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1978), 127-128.

⁶ Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 91.

religion than on the felt manner and sensibility of the critique; as it was enshrined in law, ‘blasphemy’ essentially constituted a crime against literary decorum or aesthetic taste.⁷ Although Marsh’s book focuses on the working-class secularists who fell victim to this distinction between sanctioned and unsanctioned styles of religious critique, it also has implications for the study of an aristocratic poet like Swinburne, whose aestheticism was partly a bid to preserve the transgressive potential of atheism at a moment when polite ‘doubt’ had accrued a considerable measure of cultural legitimacy.

Swinburne reflected more candidly on the blasphemies of *Poems and Ballads* in a letter to William Michael Rossetti:

As to the anti-theism of *Félise*, I know of course that *you* know that the verses represent a mood of mind and phase of thought not unfamiliar to me; but I nonetheless maintain that no reader ... has a right (whatever he may conjecture) to assert that this is *my* faith and that the faith expressed in such things as the ‘*Litany*’ or ‘*Carol*’ or ‘*Dorothy*’ is not ... it is not the less formally dramatic than the others; and this is the point on which it seems to me necessary to insist ... I foresee I shall soon have to defend myself from the charge of being a moralist – a deist – even (*chi lo sa?*) a Galilean. It is really very odd that people (friendly or unfriendly) will not let one be an artist, but must needs make one out a parson or a pimp. I suppose it is part of the fetid and fecund spawn of the ‘Galilean serpent.’⁸

While Swinburne here claims that the tendency to evaluate art as an index to the beliefs of its creator is one of the pernicious legacies of Christianity, he immediately betrays his own Romantic investment in the idea of art as a testament of (rebellious) authorial intentions: his delineation of his ideal of the disaffiliated aesthete, free to venture across the terrain of belief and unbelief without commitment to any public identity, culminates abruptly in an invocation of Shelley as a Romantic infidel and revolutionary (‘Galilean serpent’ alludes to Shelley’s ‘*Ode to Liberty*’ [1820]: ‘the Galilean serpent forth did creep,/And

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-109.

⁸ [Swinburne to William Michael Rossetti, October 9, 1866], *The Swinburne Letters* vol.1, edited Cecil Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 193.

made thy world an undistinguishable heap' [119-120]).⁹ This letter also suggests that Swinburne's espousal of an art-for-art's sake position – which here seems essentially a rhetorical feint, a means of asserting and disavowing radical convictions, perhaps especially anti-Christian ones, in the same gesture – was shaped by his sense of the prestige of the 'dramatic' form, a poetic genre associated with Browning and, to a lesser degree, with Tennyson, the age's two great poets of religious doubt.

Swinburne also defends his poems on the grounds that they are 'formally dramatic' in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*: here he declares that his poetry is 'dramatic, many-faced, multifarious; and no utterance of enjoyment or despair, belief or unbelief, can properly be assumed as the assertion of its author's personal feeling or faith'.¹⁰ He claims that his use of the 'dramatic' form is actually a mark of his respect for propriety: where Byron and Shelley used the confessional Romantic lyric to engage in full-dress assaults on the pieties of their culture, he adopts the 'dramatic method', a mode of indirection and authorial self-effacement.¹¹ Yet he adds a teasing double negative to this protestation: 'I do not say that, if I chose [to attack social conventions], I would not do so to the best of my power'.¹² We can only appreciate the archness of Swinburne's self-positioning here when we examine the monologues in question, for Swinburne uses the freedom of subject matter and the appearance of ideological neutrality afforded by the 'dramatic method' to reinvigorate a tradition of Romantic iconoclasm he associated with Byron and Shelley (as well as with Blake).¹³ Moreover, Swinburne uses the form to engage in an *agon* with Browning – specifically, to interrogate Browning's representations of religious doubt, and to propose an alternative vision of the relationship between religion and art.

⁹ Shelley, *The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 470.

¹⁰ Swinburne, *Major Poems*, 349.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹² *Ibid.*, 349.

¹³ For a discussion of Swinburne's indebtedness to a tradition of Romantic iconoclasm, see David G. Riede's 'Swinburne and Romantic Authority', in *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*, eds. Ricky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), 22-40.

‘Hymn to Proserpine’ and ‘Cleon’

Swinburne was by turns an avid admirer and detractor of Browning’s poetry. During his time at Oxford, he referred to Browning’s *Sordello* (1840) as ‘one of my canonical scriptures’, wrote an essay in praise of Browning to read to the Old Mortality Society, and was given to chanting Browning poems to his friends.¹⁴ In 1875, Swinburne included in his book on George Chapman a lengthy excursus on Browning in which he defended his fellow poet against the charge of ‘obscurity’ that had dogged his career.¹⁵ While Swinburne is generous in his praise of Browning, he displays marked ambivalence toward Browning’s rhetorical virtuosity, which he compares to that of a ‘greater debater or an eminent leading counsel’, and toward the forensic character of the dramatic monologue form more generally:¹⁶

The action of so bright and swift a spirit gives insight as it were to the eyes and wings to the feet of our own; the reader’s apprehension takes fire from the writer’s, and he catches from a subtler and more active mind the infection of spiritual interest; so that any candid and clear-headed student finds himself able to follow for the time in fancy the lead of such a thinker with equal satisfaction on any course of thought or argument; when he sets himself to refute Renan through the dying lips of St John or to try conclusions with Strauss in his own person, and when he flashes at once the whole force of his illumination full upon the inmost thought and mind of the most infamous criminal, a Guido Franceschini or a Louis Bonaparte, compelling in the black and obscene abyss of such a spirit to yield up at last the secret of its profoundest sophistries ...¹⁷

Tellingly, when Swinburne praises Browning for his capacity to induce readers to interpret against the grain of their ordinary feelings, he remarks first upon Browning’s suasive power in relation to Christian apologetics and only

¹⁴ See Rooksby, *Swinburne*, 50 and 56; and Gosse, *Swinburne*, 39-40.

¹⁵ Swinburne, *George Chapman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875), 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

secondly upon the psychological depth Browning grants dictators and criminals. Swinburne insinuates that Browning not only represents but also specialises in ‘profoundest sophistries’: what is most remarkable about his poetry is the way it lures readers into agreeing with ‘equal satisfaction’ to ‘any course of thought or argument’. Swinburne’s intention was probably not to pay Browning a spiked compliment, but to express an earnest fascination with the ‘secret’ of Browning’s persuasive gift and, in particular, Browning’s capacity to convey to readers the ‘infection of a spiritual interest’. That Swinburne read Browning distrustfully, struggling to quarantine aesthetic admiration from any concession to Browning’s Christian commitments, is also discernible in his 1870 essay on D. G. Rossetti’s poetry:

There are two living and leading writers of high and diverse genius whom any student of their work utterly apart as their ways of work lie – may and must, without prejudice or presumption, assume to hold fast, with a force of personal passion, the radical tenet of Christian faith. It is as difficult for a reasonable reader to doubt the actual and positive adherence to Christian doctrine of the Protestant thinker as of the Catholic priest; to doubt that faith in Christ as God – a tough, hard, vital faith which can bear at need hard stress of weather and hard-thought – dictated ‘A Death in the Desert’ or ‘Christmas Eve and Easter Day’, as to doubt that it dictated the ‘Apologia’ or ‘Dream of Gerontius’: though neither in the personal creed set forth by Mr. Browning nor in the clerical creed delivered by Dr. Newman do we find apparent or flagrant – however they may lurk, tacit and latent, in the last logical expression of either man’s theories – the viler forms and more hideous outcomes of Christianity, its more brutal aspects and deadlier consequences; a happy default due rather to nobility of instinct than to ingenuity of evasion.¹⁸

Swinburne’s display of critical disinterestedness here enables him to cast Christianity as a ‘radical’ ideology that a ‘reasonable’ reader will want to sift out of any aesthetic appreciation of Browning’s genius. At the same time, Swinburne comes close to suggesting that Browning is too good for his creed anyway: Browning’s ‘noble’ willingness to subject his faith to ‘hard thought’ and contend

¹⁸ Swinburne, ‘The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, *Fortnightly Review* 7.41 (1870), 562-563.

with the demythologisation of the scriptures performed by Renan and Strauss only confirm his incapacity to recognise the ugly truths of Christianity. Swinburne's own dramatic monologues aim to make manifest what he considered the repressed content of Browning's religious monologues: namely, the 'viler forms and more hideous outcomes of Christianity, its more brutal aspects and deadlier consequences', which he felt 'lurk[ed], tacit and latent' in Christianity's modern and liberal guises.

As Nicholas Shrimpton observes, though poems like 'The Leper' and 'Hymn to Proserpine' fulfill the genre's basic technical requirements, there has been a tendency to dismiss Swinburne's claim to be working within the dramatic genre as 'a mere subterfuge, or convenient mask, for the expression of inconveniently controversial impulses or opinions'.¹⁹ Where Shrimpton defends Swinburne against the charge that his monologues are simply mouthpieces for his own preoccupations and lack Browningsque historicism and irony, I would suggest that 'Hymn to Proserpine' and 'The Leper' in fact parody the tendentiousness often submerged in Browning's use of the form.²⁰ More precisely, Swinburne parodies the way in which Browning used the form as a vehicle for Christian apologetics by instead pressing it into the service of his own anti-Christian agenda. In this, Swinburne's dramatic monologues exemplify his delight in pushing the established literary paradigms of religious doubt to their limits and exploiting them to glorify the very threat of atheism which, in the hands of other writers, they had been used to sublimate or contain.

In poems such as 'Cleon' (1855), 'A Death in the Desert' (1864), and 'An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of the Physician of Karshish' (1855), Browning dramatised moments in early Christian history in order to address the predicament of the modern Christian unsettled by a sceptical historical awareness.²¹ Although these poems are designed to pose hermeneutic problems

¹⁹ Nicholas Shrimpton, 'Swinburne and the Dramatic Monologue', in *Whole Music*, eds. Rooksby and Shrimpton, 52-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60-71.

²¹ Robert Browning, 'Cleon', 'A Death in the Desert' and 'An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of the Physician of Karshish' in *Robert Browning: The*

for the reader in a way that approximates the perplexities faced by a modern exegete of the scriptures in the wake of the German higher criticism, their polemical thrust is decipherable. All three poems feature speakers whose failure to apprehend the divinity of Christ or to trust in a divine miracle reveals their spiritual limitations as much as the mitigating complexities of their historical contexts (though in the case of 'A Death in the Desert', the voices of scepticism are only filtered through the speech of the poem's main protagonist, St. John). In each poem, this strategy works to relativise Victorian scepticism, which is made to seem less prestigiously 'modern' and more like a manifestation of a basic resistance to mystery that has always made faith a difficult achievement. More broadly, Browning aims to recuperate religious doubt for Christianity by revealing that it was always already woven into the fabric of faith.

Of these Browning religious monologues, 'Cleon' is the crucial intertext for 'Hymn to Proserpine'. That 'Cleon' is a revision of Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), a poem that Browning admired as much as Swinburne did, has long been recognised, and I would suggest that *Empedocles* also stands behind 'Hymn to Proserpine'.²² All three poems displace a Victorian perception of spiritual malaise onto a classical and/or early Christian context, and take world weary, cultured, rhetorically commanding men for their speakers. At stake in all three poems is the question of whether the evanescent pleasures of the here and now – identified with sexuality and with art or aesthetic contemplation – are sufficient unto themselves and can compensate for the wretchedness of old age and the fact of mortality. Unsurprisingly, both Arnold and Browning answer this question in the negative, though for different reasons, while Swinburne makes the pessimism of his speaker the ground of a complicated affirmation of pagan worldliness.

The protagonist of 'Cleon' is a fictional first century A.D. Greek polymath who, over the course of the poem (which takes the form of an epistle from Cleon to his patron, King Protus), unwittingly exposes the depths of his spiritual

Major Works, ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2005), 269-278, 186-194, and 311-328.

²² See Anthony H. Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 147-151.

sterility. An ageing sensualist and aesthete who has ‘loved his life over-much’ (322), Cleon can neither believe in anything ‘more’ than his ‘animal life’ (215) nor reconcile himself to mortality. He considers his reputation as an artist meagre solace for the fact that his appetite for life exceeds his ‘bounded physical recipiency’ (246), and this makes him wistful about the possibility of an afterlife, though the intractability of his essentially secular and materialist imagination is indicated by the fact that his concept of an afterlife is really only a fantasy about the prolongation of worldly pleasure (320-35). The throwaway final lines of his epistle are a famous instance of Browningsque irony:

Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew
As Paulus proves to be, one circumcized,
Hath access to a secret shut from us?
.....
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves
Who touched on this same isle, preached him and Christ;
And (as I gathered from a bystander)
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.
(343-5; 350-3)

Cleon’s cavalier dismissal of Christ – whom he confuses with St. Paul – encourages us to reinterpret his prior statements in a more jaundiced light. Earlier in the monologue, Cleon seems an attractively ‘modern’ figure: like a Victorian artist, he looks back upon a golden age of Greek culture and struggles to make a virtue of his sense of belatedness (64-71). However, by the monologue’s end, it is apparent that Browning is using the figure of Cleon to critique the Victorian age’s narcissism about its own ‘modernity’ and a growing tendency among intellectuals to treat Christianity as a primitive superstition, or as a ‘doctrine [that] could be held by no sane man’. Cleon’s conviction that he lives in a super-civilised, ‘composite’ age – that is, a ‘late’ or decadent phase of culture defined by its sense of historical relativism – as opposed to a primitive and ‘heroic’ one necessarily seems myopic to the Victorian reader, who grasps the significance of what looks negligible to Cleon: the advent of Christianity. Browning’s gift for capturing the dissonances of colloquial speech is especially effective here: after Cleon’s

grandiloquent ruminations on mortality and the value of art, his slur against Christ – ‘mere barbarian Jew’ – is jarring, and unmasks the ugliness of his intellectual chauvinism at a stroke. In turn, this works to alert the reader to the limitations of his or her own historical perspective, and to unmask the overweening character of ‘modern’ scepticism.

Like ‘Cleon’, ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ returns to the moment of Christian historical rupture and adopts a vantage point, radically defamiliarising for the Victorian reader, from which Christianity looks like a new and alien ideology. However, where Browning casts Christianity as the sympathetic underdog, disdained by sophisticates like Cleon, Swinburne seizes upon a moment where Christianity symbolically gains hegemonic status: as his subtitle tells us, ‘After the Proclamation of the Christian Faith in Rome’. We might interpret this difference as Swinburne’s allegorical correction of Browning: while modern Christianity may look embattled to Browning, it still looks hegemonic to Swinburne. More broadly, the poem’s subtitle alerts us to Swinburne’s desire to destabilise what was a stock trope of representations of the distinction between early Christianity and Roman religion: where the latter was a state religion that consisted primarily of public ritual and ceremony, with little emotional significance for the individual, Christianity was a passionately emotional religion that flourished in spite of political persecution and promised the individual a personal relationship with God. As Frank Turner writes, ‘Victorian commentators did not regard the Roman world as having produced any religion or philosophy that might have significantly contributed to or challenged the spiritual or moral insights of the Christian faith. They considered Roman religion as extremely political, intellectually uninteresting, and lacking in moral power’.²³ ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ inverts this traditional economy: in this poem, Christianity is the sterile hand of political authority, and pagan religion the repressed locus of passionate feeling.

²³ Frank Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 319.

‘Hymn to Proserpine’ also pointedly inverts the Christian irony of ‘Cleon’, principally by revising Browning’s use of the topos of classical decadence.²⁴ We are meant to recognise Cleon’s jaded sophistication, his preoccupation with worldly success and with the life of the senses, as well as his inaccessibility to Christianity, as symptomatic of the spiritual exhaustion of the Roman empire and, by analogy, of Victorian England. ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ also exploits the Roman decadence analogy, but instead plays with the scandalous notion – familiar to Victorian readers from Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) – that Christianity tended toward Roman decadence rather than constituting its cure.²⁵ Swinburne’s speaker famously disdains Christianity as an etiolated offshoot of the paganism it displaced: ‘Thou hast conquered, O pale Gailean; the world has grown grey from thy breath’ (35). A rehabilitated Cleon, Swinburne’s speaker is not an arid sophisticate but a vatic figure whose antipathy to the new Christian dispensation reveals his pagan fullness of being. Where Cleon fails to foresee the triumph of Christianity, Swinburne’s pagan prophecies its eventual decline. The speaker’s sense of the transience of all things also works to defamiliarise the figure of Christ, who is here projected as a kind of Ozymandias figure whose claims to omnipotence will seem worse than void in the fullness of time. Swinburne heightens this sense of defamiliarisation by making his Roman sound anachronistically like a Victorian doubter lamenting the retreat of the ‘sea of faith’:

I am sick of singing: the bays burn deep and chafe: I am fain
 To rest a little from praise and grievous pleasure and pain.
 For the Gods we know not of, who give us our daily breath,
 We know they are cruel as love or life, and lovely as death.
 O Gods dethroned and deceased, cast forth, wiped out in a day!
(9-13)

²⁴ Swinburne, ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, *Complete Poetic Works I*, (London: Heinemann, 1924), 67-73.

²⁵ For a discussion of the Victorian currency of Gibbon’s interpretation of Rome’s decline, see Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 202-4.

Via a simple inversion, Swinburne parodies alarmist contemporary responses to the rise of unbelief: in this poem, the rise of Christianity is constructed as a comparably precipitous descent into decadence, nihilism and despair. In particular, Swinburne is parodying the elegiac sage posture that many intellectuals adopted in response to a perceived decline of faith: his pagan is in possession of the grandly dolorous, apocalyptic rhetoric of an Arnold, a Carlyle, or a Tennyson, yet what he mourns is the triumph rather than the erosion of Christianity. The poem is designed to make such melancholia over lost faith look narrow and sentimental, for his pagan mourns not the loss of consolation, as Christianity was often constructed within the discourse of doubt, but a belief system at once more ‘bitter’ and ‘beautiful’ (8) than Christianity.

As Margot Louis observes, ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, like many of Swinburne’s anti-Christian poems, seeks to ‘undermine the yearning for immortality’.²⁶ Louis reads this poem, as well as several other of his poems that invoke the Proserpine myth, as radically pessimistic and suggestive of Swinburne’s affinities with the Marquis de Sade and Arthur Schopenhauer: ‘his Proserpine poems repudiate not only the transcendent but also the deeper, more widespread assumption that life per se has value – an assumption that is the very basis of the yearning for immortality’.²⁷ Conversely, I would suggest that Swinburne aims to critique the perception that the value of life depends upon the promise of an afterlife, an idea that is an unmistakable subtext of Browning’s ‘Cleon’ and arguably of Arnold’s *Empedocles* as well. Rather than celebrating pessimism, Swinburne indicts Christianity for its pessimism, for its denigration of ‘all the joy before death’ (101), and, in a characteristic move, elevates above Christianity a quasi-pagan atheism that heroically embraces life’s dialectic of ‘grievous pleasure and pain’ (10). Louis finds the speaker’s ‘yearning for death’ typical of Swinburne’s pessimistic strain, yet this yearning is presented quite specifically as the speaker’s response to the triumph of Christianity. According to the poem’s imaginative economy, the pagan religions were emotionally complete

²⁶ Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises: 1860-1927, Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (London and Vermont: Ashgate, 2009), 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

because they honoured life's ambivalence, its 'mutable wings' (30) and bracing mix of joy and suffering. Christian monotheism, in contrast, is tantamount solely to worshipping Proserpine, here posited as the goddess of death and the underworld, to the exclusion of Apollo and Venus, the deities of art and love respectively. In effect, Swinburne suggests that Christianity is only a 'hymn to Proserpine' by another name. Louis's comment that the poem 'turn[s] a Christian trope against itself [and] exposes Christianity as a delusory way station on the road to nihilism and the worship of death' is exact; yet her suggestion that Swinburne simply endorses this nihilism renders the poem's critique of Christianity incoherent.²⁸ The governing irony of the poem is that Christianity has partially 'conquered' the imagination of Swinburne's pagan: he has become a morbid monotheist, retreating from life's vicissitudes and worshipping Proserpine at the expense of all the other gods in the pantheon. In other words, he has 'fed on the fullness of death' (36) and partly succumbed to the logic of the Christianity he reviles as a death-cult – an irony more piquant for the fact that his speech is presented as a deeply personal *non serviam* in the face of an official fiat. In this respect, Shrimpton is right to argue that 'Hymn to Proserpine' is less straightforwardly 'polemical' than is generally assumed; its speaker does not simply ventriloquise Swinburne's hostility to Christianity, but constitutes Swinburne's attempt to imagine his way into a liminal historical figure, one who embodies the ethos of the old pagan religions even as he shows signs of having acceded to the new orthodoxy.²⁹ In this sense, 'Hymn to Proserpine' is a classically Browningsque dramatic monologue: it takes for its speaker a heroic individualist whose rhetoric recoils upon him, creating an ironic gap between what he intends to express and what he actually discloses to the reader. Swinburne is sometimes caricatured as an unreflective rebel, blithely *épatant le bourgeois*; yet 'Hymn to Proserpine', one of his most famous poems, is about the difficulties of formulating, even inwardly, a coherent opposition to a dominant ideology. While Swinburne's Roman asserts that the Christian attempt to supplant Venus

²⁸ Ibid., 61.

²⁹ Shrimpton, 'Dramatic Monologues', 67-68.

with the Virgin Mary and restrain ‘the world’s desire’ is futile, like an effort to ‘chasten the high sea with rods’ (65), he also wonders plaintively at Christianity’s power to divest him of his pagan deities: ‘Ye are fallen, our lords, by what token? We wist that ye should not fall’ (89). Thaïs Morgan interprets the poem as a triumphant affirmation of the fact that ‘Christ will never truly oust Venus, for we will never prefer death over life’, but this preference is actually in question throughout the poem; the pessimistic undertow of the speaker’s imagery and argument is always dragging against the swell of his rhetoric, and his ultimate embrace of death, or Proserpine, underscores the allure not simply of Christianity’s romance of death, but of its newly minted official status: ‘Ye, once we had sight of another: but now [the Virgin Mary] is queen, say these’ (77).³⁰

This ironic gap is also crucial to understanding Swinburne’s sense of Christianity as a paradoxical force, mighty and oppressive in its very ‘pale’ doctrines of compassion, asceticism, and eternal life. This contradiction, which manifests also in the curious mix of triumphalism and defeatism in the speaker’s tone, often fissures Swinburne’s anti-religious polemics: we are persistently asked to imagine Christianity as at once frail and tyrannical, moribund and all-pervasive. Noting this tension, Louis remarks, ‘even a sympathetic reader must suspect that, if God is dead, we need not rage at him’.³¹ Yet we might understand this less as a failure of logic than Swinburne’s engagement with the equivocal status and meaning of scepticism in mid to late Victorian England. Even at his most vituperatively anti-Christian, Swinburne is highly self-conscious about the fact that religious doubt had been at least partially freed of its traditional associations with sin and heresy, had grown conventional as a literary theme, and to a significant extent, had become available as a common language for both committed Christians and unbelievers.³² Swinburne’s anti-Christian poems labour

³⁰ Thaïs Morgan, ‘Swinburne’s Dramatic Monologues: Sex and Ideology’, *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (1984), 193.

³¹ Louis, *Swinburne and his Gods: The Roots and Growth of an Agnostic Poetry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 106.

³² For a recent discussion of how ‘doubt’ was transformed from a sin into an ethical and even religious imperative in the Victorian period, see Christopher Lane, *The Age of*

to negotiate the fact that more moderate, decorous critiques of Christianity as well as explicitly Christian explorations of doubt were ubiquitous in the work of an older generation of Victorian writers, including Browning. As a parody of Browning's religious monologues, 'Hymn to Proserpine' at once calls attention to the kinds of formal conventions that had made religious scepticism speakable and to the more radical possibilities those conventions repressed.

Francis O'Gorman has noted that Leslie Stephen and John Tyndall frequently cast agnosticism in manly, heroic terms in an effort to establish a counterdiscourse to the 'muscular Christianity' popularised by Thomas Arnold and Charles Kingsley.³³ Similarly, Swinburne's poetry often attempts to valorise unbelief as a form of manly heroism. Key to 'Hymn to Proserpine' is a gendered distinction between a 'pale', effete Christianity and a vigorous, atheistic paganism. It may seem something of a misnomer to speak of Swinburne's pagan as an atheist, yet as Kerry McSweeney observes, his speaker does not seem to believe in the pagan deities he invokes; his conceptions of Apollo, Venus, and Proserpine seem fully reducible to metaphors for art, sexuality, and death (though this may be interpreted as the outcome of the triumph of Christianity, which has perhaps reduced his deities to a bundle of metaphors).³⁴ In either case, the poem swells to an unmistakably atheistic peroration, seemingly calculated to distress the Christian reader:

...I know
 I shall die as my fathers died, and sleep as they sleep; even so.
 For the glass of the years is brittle wherein we gaze for a span;
 A little soul for a little bears up this corpse which is man.
 So long I endure, no longer; and laugh not again, neither weep.
 For there is no God found stronger than death; and death is a sleep.
 (105-110)

Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 123-158.

³³ Francis O'Gorman, "'The Mightiest Evangel of the Alpine Club': Masculinity and Agnosticism in the Alpine Writing of John Tyndall", in *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*, eds. Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan and Sue Morgan (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 134-148.

³⁴ Kerry McSweeney, *Swinburne and Tennyson as Romantic Naturalists* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 127.

The aphoristic starkness of these lines aims to confer grandeur upon the speaker's lack of belief in an afterlife, and to cast his wish for 'thou, Proserpina, death' as a triumph of stoicism. (The speaker's death wish seems intended to invoke the Roman ideal of a noble suicide.) Elsewhere in the poem Swinburne constructs his speaker's resistance to Christianity as a form of martial valour in the face of defeat: 'Thou all men abase them before you in spirit, and all knees bend/I kneel not neither adore you, but standing, look to the end' (45-46). The latter line carries a double freight of metaphor: it at once casts the speaker as the last pagan standing in a doomed struggle against Christianity, and as the last man who will die clear-eyed and uncowed, able to contemplate his 'end' without the Christian expectation of an afterlife.

Swinburne's attempt to glamorise atheism by constructing it as a form of stoicism and heroic individualism calls to mind Arnold's *Empedocles*. This long dramatic monologue takes for its speaker the Stoic philosopher Empedocles, who was thought to have committed suicide by throwing himself into the volcano of Mt. Etna. Arnold uses Empedocles to explore the paralysis of the modern intellectual, a predicament which is seen to stem from a failure of religious conviction. Like many Victorian intellectuals and arguably Arnold himself, Empedocles can only avow a comfortless species of agnosticism (II. 347-351).³⁵ As Arnold wrote of his Empedocles, '[he] has not the religious consolations of other men ... He sees things as they are – the world as it is – God as he is: in their stern simplicity ... but cannot be transported and rapturously agitated ...'³⁶ Yet imperviousness to rapture seems to have a grandeur of its own: in the course of the poem, Empedocles's agnosticism and even his suicide attain a kind of gnomic majesty and intellectual seductiveness. For this reason, Arnold suppressed the poem soon after its initial publication, explaining in the Preface to the 1852 volume that *Empedocles* had been omitted because it depicted a world in which

³⁵ Matthew Arnold, *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*, eds. C.B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 424.

³⁶ Quoted in Jerome McGann, 'The Three Texts of *Empedocles on Etna*', in *Victorian Connections*, ed. Jerome McGann (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1989), 156.

‘everything was to be endured, nothing to be done’, and therefore failed to fulfill poetry’s obligation to ‘inspirit and rejoice the reader’.³⁷ Arnold’s self-censorship reflected perhaps not merely his commitment to an uplifting ideal of art, but the more exigent fact that an author who granted unbelief even an ambiguous degree of intellectual warrant courted vilification at the hands of reviewers. Ironically, even the bowdlerised 1852 volume was subject to reproach on this ground: for example, John Duke Coleridge warned of the ‘incalculable mischief of a sceptical and irreligious train of thought ... presented to the mind in melodious verse, and clothed with the graces of a refined and scholarlike diction’, and condemned Arnold as representative of modern writers who ‘appear to think themselves justified in standing *ab extra* to Christianity’.³⁸

Revising an 1867 review of Arnold's poems for publication in 1875, Swinburne deplored Arnold’s self-censorship in a revealing fashion: he inserted into his original review a spurious quotation from a ‘French critic’ that permitted him to mount an attack on both Browning and Tennyson. Through biting innuendo, Swinburne takes Browning and Tennyson to task for conspiring to create a literary culture in which a poet like Arnold retracts his masterpiece because he imagines that scepticism is a subject that may be treated only homeopathically, within a safe framework of Christian affirmation. The passage is both a diatribe against the intellectual prestige of honest doubt and one of Swinburne's most vibrant exegeses of his ‘art for art’s sake’ position:

English poets go astray with rational religion. Not that the English are actually either too religious or too rationalistic but rather that they always want to reconcile things irreconcilable ... Let us turn to the arts: What do you want from a painter? Paintings? Not at all! We want a little morality, a bit of purpose, the beautiful true, the true beautiful, the actual idea, the ideal actuality, a thousand other respectable things of that sort. It is that evil spirit - not very spiritual - which has come to suggest to poets the fine idea of playing the part of apostle-reconcilers between the believer and the freethinker ... poetry has no use for all that ... Every creed that rouses, that makes vibrate, reverberate, strike just one inner chord -

³⁷ Arnold, ‘Preface’, *Poetical Works*, xviii.

³⁸ [John Duke Coleridge], *Christian Remembrancer* 27 (1854), 331.

every veritable religion, sombre or radiant, tragic or gay, is a thing essentially poetic ... Venus or Moloch, Jesus or Brahma – it doesn't matter ... All emotion is serviceable to it, that of the anchorite no more or less than that of the blasphemer. For morals, it is bad and good, chaste and libertine; for religion, unbelieving and faithful, submissive and rebellious. But religious or moral impotence, the thought that lisps, the spirit that squints, the soul that fears both to submit to and to revolt, the halfway faith that weeps sceptical tears, the tasteless emanations, sorrowful and loathsome, of spiritual decay, the sickly plants, the dried up sprigs, the sprouts without sap of an uncertain and twilight epoch – what do you expect to make of all that? [In art], even negation is not sterile; with it, Lucretius has his place as well as Moses, Omar as well as Job. But it would not know where to tuck away little questions of evidence, little theological bickerings.³⁹

Significantly, Swinburne does not object to Christian poetics *per se*; rather, he objects to the poetry of a disenchanting and defensive Christianity, one that seeks to reconcile the claims of traditional faith and modern reason. Swinburne implies that he actually has greater imaginative access to the ecstatic heights of religious experience than do Browning and Tennyson; where they reason themselves into a 'not very spiritual' compromise position, he can open himself to all the intensities of religion precisely because religion's truth-claims are a matter of indifference to him. In other words, he claims superiority for his aestheticism both on the grounds of an intellectual disinterestedness *and* of a greater receptivity to feeling. Of course, Swinburne's imagination is not as ecumenical as he implies; his aesthetic ideal does not seek synthesis but rather to reinforce polarities between Job and Lucretius, the anchorite and the blasphemer, since these vivify what is at stake in a contest between religion and his secularism. Swinburne's contempt for rational religion or for any kind of *via media* is partly underpinned by his Romantic assumption that the artist must be a rebellious, antinomian figure; he might disturb social norms through his religious fervor (Christianity of a 'heretical' stripe sometimes wins his approval, notably in his

³⁹ Translated by Hyder; see *Swinburne as Critic* (London: Routledge, 1972), 59-61.

critical study of Blake), or through the vehemence of his unbelief, but he does not flatter the status quo.⁴⁰

Swinburne liked *Empedocles* for the reason that Arnold deemed it morally irresponsible: it represents agnosticism in what Arnold called ‘the grand style’, affording it the gravitas of classical verse.⁴¹ Conflating Arnold with Empedocles, Swinburne commends them both as essentially secular thinkers whose philosophies never ‘leave ... [their] hold upon earth’.⁴² Swinburne also links Arnold’s poetry with the ‘wise and sublime verses of Epictetus’, which perhaps suggests that he had *Empedocles* in mind when he wrote ‘Hymn to Proserpine’. The poem makes its closing gesture of stoic pessimism by way of Epictetus: the poem’s antepenultimate line, ‘A little soul for a little bears up this corpse which is man’, is a rendering of a remark attributed to him.⁴³ More generally, the sententious style of the poem’s closing passage seems to be Swinburne’s homage to the ‘solemn’, ‘plain,’ and ‘direct’ neoclassicism of Arnold’s poem.⁴⁴ Yet Swinburne’s essay on Arnold also suggests that ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ was partly conceived as a critique of such stoic pessimism. While Swinburne approves of Arnold’s purportedly secular sensibility when it assumes the form of heroic individualism, he demurs when it seems to entail ascetic rejection of the world. Because Swinburne thinks that the primary reward for a secular sensibility is an enhanced appreciation of the earthly, he is perplexed that Arnold’s poetry takes ‘no fullness or comfort in the eternal elements made of like matter with us, but better made, nor in any beauty nor in any life of the laborious and sleepless soul of things’.⁴⁵ He faults Arnold for neglecting sensuous detail in favour of ethereal abstraction: Arnold’s poetry induces ‘discomfort and depression’ because it is ‘a poetry of the bodiless intellect which [does not] touch ... the finger-tip or wing tip of the edge of actual things’; it overlooks ‘bodily life and terrene circumstance’ in

⁴⁰ Swinburne identifies Blake’s ‘earnestly heretical’ beliefs with his own theory of aestheticism. See Swinburne, *Blake*, 40, 157-161, and 189.

⁴¹ Arnold, ‘Preface’, *Poetical Works*, xxi.

⁴² Swinburne, ‘Arnold’, 418-419.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Swinburne, ‘Arnold’, 424.

its endeavour to ‘buoy ... upward the naked fleshless feet of the spirit’.⁴⁶ (This complaint is perhaps surprising given that Swinburne’s own poetry is often faulted for its lack of vividly observed detail.)⁴⁷ Asserting the naturalness of his own identification of aesthetics and secular materialism, Swinburne puns on the word ‘matter’: disembodied ‘spirit’ leaves poetry with ‘no *matter* to work upon’, attenuating it to mere ‘floating complaint’ (my italics).⁴⁸

If Swinburne’s pagan is a rehabilitated Cleon, he is also a markedly sensual Empedocles, one who, at least prior to the rise of Christianity, prized ‘all the joy before death’ (26). Certainly Swinburne seems at pains to emphasise the life-affirming vigour of the paganism that his speaker is losing as he falls under the influence of Christianity. This paganism involves an acute consciousness of the interrelationships between life and death, pleasure and pain (an idea ubiquitous in Swinburne’s poetry, and one that he associates with the art of poetry itself.) Like many of Swinburne’s poems, ‘Hymn to Proserpine’ seems indebted to John Keats’s ‘Ode on Melancholy’ (1819), which similarly invokes the feminine fatality of Proserpine (‘Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kist/By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine’ [4]) and suggests that maintaining a hyperawareness of mortality may be at once a form of aesthetic connoisseurship and a heroic self-discipline.⁴⁹ Keats’s ode is organised around a play of gender codes: while melancholy is personified as feminine and associated with female mythological figures (Proserpine and Psyche), contemplation of melancholy is not of itself effeminising; at its most refined (one might say, at its most ‘feminine’), it is a ‘strenuous’, manly endeavour, akin to the pursuit of a ‘troph[y]’ (27, 30). As Swinburne often does, ‘Ode on Melancholy’ emphasises the mutual embeddedness of pain and pleasure and of life and death, and suggests that fathoming these paradoxes is not only the path to aesthetic bliss but to a heroic masculinity.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 423.

⁴⁷ See Rosenberg, *Elegy*, 63-64.

⁴⁸ Swinburne, ‘Arnold’, 423.

⁴⁹ John Keats, ‘Ode on Melancholy’, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin Classics, 1968), 348-349.

Swinburne gives what Keats calls ‘the wakeful anguish of the soul’ (10) a specifically anti-Christian inflection by suggesting that his pagan’s lack of belief in an afterlife that has lent an almost unbearable intensity to his experience:

The laurel, the palms and the pæan, the breasts of the nymphs in the brake;
Breasts more soft than a dove’s, that tremble with tenderer breath;
And all the wings of the Loves, and all the joy before death
All the feet of the hours that sound as a single lyre,
Dropped and deep in the flowers, with strings that flicker like fire.
(24-28)

Swinburne’s pagan here asserts that sexual love cannot be equalled by Christian love (a nymph’s breast is said to be ‘more soft’ and ‘tenderer’ than a dove’s, the conventional symbol of the Holy Spirit). Likewise, the claims of art (here symbolised by the ‘lyre’) trump Christian claims. There is an argument embedded in these lines: sexuality and art cannot be understood in Christian terms because appreciation of their splendour depends upon a recognition of death’s untranscendable nature, the fact ‘no man outliv[es] his day’ (31). Swinburne implies early in the poem that his speaker is a poet-singer who has lost his creativity (he is ‘sick of singing’ [9]), and we are perhaps meant to infer that Christianity has destroyed his muse because his sense of art’s value depends upon the perception of life’s unredeemable finitude; poetic feet are inspired by the feet of the hours. At such points in Swinburne’s poetry, a secular paganism and aestheticism are indistinguishable: just as art should not be judged according to the alien criteria of moral or utilitarian purpose, the value of life should not be judged *sub specie aeternitatis*; just as art is its own justification, so life is sufficient unto itself.

Strikingly, Swinburne’s pagan never stops to ponder the obvious question of whether Christianity is true. His loyalty to paganism is not a matter of belief but of emotional and aesthetic preference – paganism is better than true because it enhances life. There is an important sense in which Swinburne’s poetry simply changes the subject when it comes to the Victorian faith and doubt debate: at issue is not whether Christianity is true (the question at the centre of Browning’s religious monologues), or even whether Christian morality is viable without belief

(the question at the centre of, say, Mrs Humphry Ward's crisis-of-faith bestseller *Robert Elsmere* [1888]), but whether it is life-enhancing – or, one might say, whether it constitutes good art.

'The Leper' and 'Porphyria's Lover'

As many critics have noted, Swinburne's 'The Leper' is a homage to Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover'.⁵⁰ It is also an instance of poetic one-upmanship: as Maxwell points out, it hyperbolises Browning's penchant for the grotesque by transforming the 'slight hint of necrophilia in the conclusion of Browning's poem [into...] the six-months dead body adored by Swinburne's speaker.'⁵¹ In effect, Swinburne appropriates the Gothic romance premise of Browning's monologue and escalates it into a full-blown experiment in the decadent aesthetics he had absorbed from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). Rosenberg connects 'The Leper' to an observation Swinburne made in a rhapsodic review of the volume that he wrote while in the process of revising 'The Leper': 'Even of the loathsome bodily putrescence and decay he can make some noble use; pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty, in a certain way, from actual carrion.'⁵² Swinburne's construction of necrophilic passion for a leper as the *nec plus ultra* of romantic love recalls several specific poems from *Les fleurs du mal*: 'Danse Macabre', 'A Martyr', and 'A Carcass' all have thematic affinities.⁵³ Yet 'The Leper' does more than ratchet up the shock value of 'Porphyria's Lover' by infusing it with the Baudelairean perfume of 'beauty in carrion': it uses decadent aesthetics to critique the equation between atheism, madness and evil implied by Browning's poem,

⁵⁰ Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover', *Major Poems*, 122-124.

⁵¹ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 181.

⁵² John Rosenberg, *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 165; and Swinburne, 'Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du mal*', *Spectator* 6 (1862), 999.

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire, 'Danse Macabre', 'A Martyr', and 'A Carcass' in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1993), 199, 229-233, and 61.

and to articulate a provocative vision of art as a mode of sacred transgression, or ‘holy insurrection’.⁵⁴

The speakers of Browning’s monologues – who are typically male – are famous for the intricate ways they betray themselves while caught up a process of self-vindication. ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ is traditionally read alongside ‘My Last Duchess’ as a study in the murderous extremes of male narcissism and sexual possessiveness. Yet ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ might also be paired with ‘Cleon’, for, like that poem, the speaker’s unwitting self-betrayal turns upon an apparently incidental impiety at the end of the poem: ‘And all night long we have not stirred/And yet God has not said a word!’(59-60). Here Browning offers clue to the logic behind the crime at the centre of the poem. The speaker strangles his higher-born beloved in a remote cottage, ostensibly so that he might possess her more completely and render their love immutable. However, even before the final line, there are a number of indications that the speaker does not really imagine the murder as the romantic *liebestod* that he makes it out to be. The fact that the speaker ‘debated what to do’ (35) before committing the act emphasises that, for all his rhetoric of passion, this murder has been reasoned out. The act seems undertaken in a spirit of childlike curiosity: the speaker winds his lover’s hair around her throat like ‘one long yellow string’ (39) as though she is playing with a doll or with a ball of yarn, while the fact that he afterwards pushes open her eyelids, which he notes were each ‘shut like a bud that holds a bee’ (43), makes him sound as if he were hunting for insects in a flowerbed, or, again, absorbed in oddly clinical play with a doll. That strangling his lover with her hair seems to him merely ‘a thing to do’ (38), suggesting an arbitrary choice, one idle diversion among others that might be ‘found’ (37), also gives an impression of bizarre nonchalance. The final line suggests that his perception of God’s absence from the world has neutralised within his imagination the categories of life and death, sex and violence: passionate love may just as easily inspire murder as ‘joy’, while a corpse inspires romantic sentiment just as well as a living woman. In effect, the

⁵⁴ Swinburne, *Blake*, 157.

poem dramatises the dictum often attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky: ‘If God is dead, everything is permitted’.⁵⁵

Yet Browning complicates this equation between atheism and moral insanity even as he proposes it, and in such a way as to position the poem as an oblique commentary on Victorian religious scepticism. As Terry Eagleton observes, the final exclamation can make the speaker sound either exultant or aggrieved that his crime has met with cosmic silence.⁵⁶ Either reading suggests that the speaker has transgressed in order to bait God into showing his face. In this light, the woman is little more than a pawn in a cosmic experiment, and the speaker a kind of psychopathic counterpart to the respectable Victorian doubter, yearning for concrete proof of God’s existence. This analogy cuts both ways: Browning implies that the quest for such proof is psychologically akin to strangling a lover so as to achieve total possession; both desires emerge from a remorseless literalism, a need to reduce a sacred mystery (God, a beautiful female other) to something one can squeeze between one’s hands. Both desires are also self-consuming in their violence: they destroy the faith or love they strive to consummate. For its early readers, the religious subtext of ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ was reinforced by its placement beside ‘Johannes Agricola in Meditation’ (1836) under the title ‘Madhouse Cells’: this monologue uses the medieval Antinomian heresy to dramatise the psychology of religious fanaticism and the wickedness of presuming to know God’s will. Read together, these monologues imply that atheism and religious fanaticism are two sides of the same coin – an insight in keeping with Browning’s allegiance to a liberalised Christianity, and his resistance to the polarisation of faith and scepticism.

‘The Leper’ reprises the stock romance motif of ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ – a humble man loves an elusive higher-born woman – but Swinburne renders his setting explicitly medieval, and his speaker is not a murderer but a clerk who tends his lady through the ravages of leprosy. As Rosenberg suggests, Swinburne

⁵⁵ The phrase is extrapolated from a passage in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). See *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Ignat Avsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 87.

⁵⁶ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), 103.

uses ‘clerk’ in the archaic sense, that is, a cleric in holy orders although in the medieval period, ‘clerk’ was also used more loosely as a synonym for a scholar, secretary, or man of letters (*OED*).⁵⁷ The fact that Swinburne’s ‘clerk’ – who, by the end of the poem, becomes a figure for his ideal of the artist as a heroic anti-theist and *poète maudit* – occupies an uncertain place on the medieval continuum between the ecclesiastical and the literary reflects Swinburne’s desire to destabilise a common Victorian faith in an age-old entente between religion and literature. Swinburne appends in a postscript a concocted French medieval source for the story that spells out the poem’s status as a fable about the benightedness of Christian morality. In a pastiche of archaic French, Swinburne invokes the medieval superstition that constructed leprosy as God’s punishment for carnality: the poem is supposedly inspired by the story of an adulterous noblewoman named Yolande de Sallières who contracted leprosy and was cast out by her family as a ‘thing cursed of God, stinking and abominable to all men’, while her former lovers reviled her as a ‘detestable sinner’.⁵⁸ Swinburne stresses the hegemonic authority behind her ostracism by noting that King Philip was also ‘greatly displeased’ by the presence of lepers in his country, which he interpreted as a sign of God’s wrath.⁵⁹ As Clyde K. Hyder observes, Swinburne is most likely thinking of Philip V, notorious for burning lepers at the stake and expelling Jews from his country for their supposed collaboration in a plot to contaminate wells with leprosy.⁶⁰ (Though Hyder does not note this, the reference to ‘well-water’ that is ‘not so delicate to drink’ in the opening stanza seems to confirm that Swinburne indeed had this horrifying episode in mind [2-3].) The imaginative labour of Swinburne’s poem is to dismantle the moral absolutes he ascribes to medieval Christianity in his bogus ‘source’, and to suggest that the figure of the leper has profound truths to impart about the pitilessness with which Christian societies maintain distinctions between the morally pure and impure.

⁵⁷ Rosenberg, *Elegy*, 166.

⁵⁸ Swinburne, ‘*Grandes Chroniques de France, 1505*’, translated by Cecil Lang, quoted in *Major Poems*, 479.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Clyde K. Hyder, ‘The Medieval Background of Swinburne’s *The Leper*’, *PMLA* 46.4 (1931), 1283.

By turning Browning's murderous speaker into a ministering clerk, Swinburne renders his speaker a more humane figure – yet only queasily humane, since the clerk's ministrations seem lecherous, and persist after his lady dies and her corpse begins to decay. Like 'Porphyria's Lover', 'The Leper' encourages us to understand male sexual perversion as a longing for ultimate knowledge, yet Swinburne renders unmistakable what is only insinuated by the final line of Browning's poem: the suggestion of an equivalence between the desire to fathom the relationship between sex and death via a woman's corpse and the desire to fathom the nature of God. Where in 'Porphyria's Lover' a madman's strangulation of his lover seems to allegorise the reductiveness of sceptics who demand tangible evidence for God's reality, 'The Leper' grants moral heroism to its speaker's necrophilia, which is cast as a Promethean bid to sustain an ideal of romantic love in the face of a malignant God who afflicts his creatures with disease and death. Yet the poem's crowning irony is that the clerk has been drawn into this morbid passion by an almost saintly commitment to the spirit, if not the letter, of Christianity; he is a paragon of humility and charity, prepared to risk infection so that he may tend a despised outcast. Owing to the example of Christ, whose curing of lepers (Mark 1:41) illustrates the miracle of his compassion, the figure of the leper constitutes a 'sanctified outcast' within the Christian tradition.⁶¹ The fact that the clerk's lady is also a sexual sinner means she symbolically doubles as a fallen woman or Mary Magdalen type, another archetypal recipient of Christian charity. The speaker's eagerness to tend a leper/fallen woman – which, as we learn from Swinburne's 'source', costs him his life – thus perversely resembles the feats of charity and martyrdom for which medieval Christian saints are venerated.

The clerk's love is also ironically Christian in its metaphysical aspirations. His necrophilia pursues to its logical extremity the privileging of spirit over flesh in the Christian-Platonic ideal of love: the disintegration of his beloved's body and even her death do not curdle his carnal interest in her because sex only

⁶¹ Ronald B. Bond, 'Leprosy', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David L. Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 444.

expresses a transcendental love, impervious to gross materialities. As one Victorian commentator quipped, the speaker's love is a 'triumph of mind over matter'.⁶² This irony is compounded by the fact that the speaker's description of his lady is a travesty of a Petrarchan blazon, the courtly Renaissance tradition of idealising an unattainable lady by cataloguing her physical attributes, often through hyperbolic conceits. In this case the conceit is obviously the fact that the lady's reduction to beautiful parts is a peculiarly gruesome organic process. Swinburne means us to notice that his speaker's fetishisation of the necrotic 'fragments' (98) perversely literalises the rarefied fragmentation of an ideal woman that is standard within the courtly love tradition.

'The Leper' hinges upon the malevolent deity topos that Swinburne used to controversial effect in the choruses of his neo-classical drama *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and in two other major poems in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, 'Anactoria' and 'Félice'. Like Sappho in 'Anactoria', the speaker of 'The Leper' derives ecstasy from masochistic sexual love because such love honours 'the mystery of the cruelty of things', Sappho's definition of God (154). Yet, for the speaker of 'The Leper' as for Sappho in 'Anactoria', deriving pleasure from pain is also a means of snatching fire from this sadistic God. Since the scorn of the lady and the scorn of God converge in the speaker's mind, lavishing love upon the lady against her consent (because she is either too ill to resist or dead) is simultaneously to prevail over God.⁶³

Sometimes when service made me glad
 The sharp tears leapt between my lids,
 Falling on her, such joy I had,
 To do the service God forbids.
 (77-80)

⁶² Quoted in Hyder, 'The Medieval Background', 1280.

⁶³ I lack space to analyse the disturbing equivalence between rape and heroic anti-theism implicit in 'The Leper'. For a discussion of Swinburne's representations of rape, see Louis, 'Swinburne on Rape', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 9.2 (2000): 55-68, although I am not persuaded by her claim that Swinburne highlights the suffering of the victim.

The syntax makes this passage troubling: is it a moment of servility (the speaker's tears 'fall' on the woman for joy of tending her) or of rape (the speaker himself 'falls' onto the woman, who is still alive at this point in the poem)? The word 'service' here suggests both sexual servicing and the speaker's ministering role, and this indeterminacy produces another: is the speaker suggesting that God is so cruel as to 'forbid' compassionate 'service' to a cursed leper (an implication in keeping with his complaints against the God who 'hates' him [15]) – or affirming the 'joy' of having violated a taboo, and raped a dying woman? Though for convenience I have called the speaker 'necrophiliac' thus far, it is crucial that the poem is in fact hazy on this point. Swinburne strives to hold our moral judgment in suspense; it is impossible to say whether the speaker is beyond the pale, a rapist and a necrophile, or enacting a Christian paradigm sometimes called 'foolishness for Christ' – that is, flouting social norms in the name of a higher spiritual purpose – and giving chaste comfort to a suffering sinner. Yet the poem also refuses to allow us to keep these alternatives separate; always both open, they contaminate each other as we read. Likewise, the fact that the speaker so exalts in his servitude, or in the abjection of his love, creates the impression that he has achieved via his submission to his lady a Christ-like exaltation-through-humility. His tears of 'joy' suggest either or both romantic sentiment and religious ecstasy. In sum, Swinburne suggests that, through 'doing the service God forbids', the speaker has achieved a paradoxical state of grace – though we cannot be quite sure of the nature of this 'service'.

Swinburne's construction of necrophilic/leprous love as a form of profane grace or sacred transgression in 'The Leper' is best glossed by one of his more intriguing musings in his *William Blake*:

The belief in 'holy insurrection' must be almost as old as the oldest religions or philosophies afloat or articulate. In the most various creeds this feature of faith stands out sharply with a sort of tangible human appeal. Earlier heretics than the author of *Jerusalem* have taken this to be the radical significance of Christianity; a divine revolt against divine law; an evidence that man must become as God only by resistance to God ... that if Prometheus cannot, Zeus

will not deliver us; and that man, if saved at all, must be indeed be saved 'so as by fire' – by ardour of rebellion ...⁶⁴

The extensiveness of Swinburne's parodic use of Biblical typology has been established by Louis, and we are, I think, meant to recognise that the speaker of 'The Leper' is a type of Job, who is associated with leprosy because Job 2:7 states that Satan smote him with boils (Job is venerated as the 'patron saint' of lepers).⁶⁵ Like Swinburne's speaker, Job is a figure of righteous suffering, one who assumes a contestatory attitude toward a God who appears senselessly punitive. Job's complaint against God's justice led some nineteenth-century readers – perhaps most notably Heinrich Heine – to view The Book of Job as the 'subversive' or 'skeptical' book of the Hebrew Bible, against the orthodox view of Job as an exemplar of patience and piety, God's 'suffering servant'.⁶⁶ Swinburne was certainly familiar with Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), which, as Lawrence Besserman notes, 'stress ... the propriety of Job's rebellious questioning of God's justice' and 'refashion ... Job into a Romantic rebel'.⁶⁷ One suspects Swinburne was thinking of Blake's rendering of Job when he claimed that all religions possess figures of 'tangible human appeal' who betray the paradoxical, revolutionary 'truth' that 'man must become as God only by resistance to God ... that man, if saved at all, must be indeed be saved ... by ardor of rebellion'. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Book of Job is often cited as the *locus classicus* for the problem of theodicy: given that there are innocent people in the world who experience unspeakable suffering, how is it possible that God is at once omnipotent and benevolent? This is the 'old question' to which Swinburne's monk refers at the end of the poem. He is presumably now going 'blind' because he too is smitten with leprosy:

I am grown blind with all these things:
It may be now she hath in sight

⁶⁴ Swinburne, *Blake*, 157-159.

⁶⁵ Louis, *Swinburne*, 14-20; and Bond, 'Leprosy', 444.

⁶⁶ See Katherine Julia Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 44-45.

⁶⁷ Lawrence L. Besserman, 'Job', in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition*, ed. Jeffrey, 404.

Some better knowledge; still there clings
The old question. Will not God do right?
(137-140)

There is a parallel between the speaker's capacity to love a leper and Swinburne's own willingness to portray the speaker sympathetically: just as the speaker finds exquisiteness in his lady's decay, so Swinburne is able to find beauty and nobility in a repellent subject. In effect, the monk is a figure for Swinburne's aestheticism, an analogy hinted at toward the end of the poem when the speaker likens his love to his work as a scribe: 'It may be all my love went wrong –/A scribe's work writ awry and blurred,/Scrawled after the blind evensong...' (129-131). The image of the monk's blurred handwriting after 'evensong' furnishes us with an image for the operations of Swinburne's poem, which so comprehensively blurs conventions of Christian morality. As Rosenberg remarks, 'The true audacity of 'The Leper' lies not in monstrous subject matter but in Swinburne's making, through the transfiguring power of language, the morally loathsome aesthetically beautiful'.⁶⁸

The clerk's obsessive, Christian love for a disintegrating corpse may be read as a grotesque figure for Browning's efforts to reanimate early Christian history in his religious monologues and thus preserve it from sceptical critique in the present. Similarly, Swinburne's bogus source may be understood as a sly joke on Browning's engagements with the Higher Criticism in poems such as 'Cleon'. Like 'Hymn to Proserpine', 'The Leper' aims to expose, to repeat Swinburne's phrase, 'the viler forms and more hideous outcomes of Christianity, its more brutal aspects and deadlier consequences', which he believed 'lurked' not only in Browning's religious monologues but in the interstices of the official historical record. In this way, 'Hymn to Proserpine' and 'The Leper' parody the biases of Browning's Christian historicism by flaunting their own polemical investments and 'recovering' decadent or pagan counterhistories, moments of 'holy insurrection' against Christianity's power.

⁶⁸ Rosenberg, *Elegy*, 168.

Reflecting upon Swinburne's appropriation of the phrase attributed to Julian the Apostate ('*Vicisti Galilæe*') in 'Hymn to Proserpine', L. M. Findlay suggests Swinburne identified art with heresy because 'no less than religious hypostasis, aesthetic apostasy bears witness to the need to stand somewhere and for something'.⁶⁹ The centrality of concepts of heresy and blasphemy to Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, reveals the extent to which his aestheticism was from the start a bold attempt to 'stand somewhere and for something' in relation to the Victorian crisis of faith and its sanctification of a 'halfway faith that weeps skeptical tears'. Equally, however, Swinburne's aestheticism attests to the confusions and ambiguities that intrinsic to his attempt to keep alive what he understood as a Romantic tradition of infidelity.⁷⁰ The second half of the Victorian period was an age of blasphemy trials and militant Secularism, but also an age in which the bestselling poem (Tennyson's *In Memoriam*) and, by some estimates, the bestselling 'serious' novel (Ward's *Robert Elsmere*) were epics of honest doubt.⁷¹ In this notoriously reactionary *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1931), T. S. Eliot lamented that blasphemy is impossible in the context of a secularised modernity because the true blasphemer 'profoundly believes in that which he profanes'; when this is no longer true, blasphemy is mere rudeness.⁷² Swinburne's poetry suggests he arrived at a similar insight: at a very moment heresy and blasphemy begin to seem obsolescent, Swinburne revives them as under the sign of 'aestheticism' in order to preserve religious questioning – and art – from respectability.

⁶⁹ L. M. Findlay, 'The Art of Apostasy: Swinburne and the Emperor Julian', *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990), 72.

⁷⁰ For a study of the Romantic tradition of infidelity in relation to literature, see Martin Priestman's *Romantic Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷¹ John Sutherland says that Ward's was 'probably the best-selling "quality" novel of the century'. See *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction*, ed. John Sutherland (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), 539.

⁷² T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber, 1934), 52. Marsh's *Word Crimes* drew my attention to the appositeness of Eliot's remarks to the status of blasphemy in the Victorian period; see Marsh, 277.

**Chapter Two: ‘Though Hearts Reach Back and Memories Ache’:
Melancholy, Religious Doubt, and Swinburne’s Strenuous Joy**

Thus runs our wise man’s song:
 Being dark, it must be light;
 And most things are so wrong
 That all things must be right;
 God must mean well, he works so ill by this world’s laws.
 This, when our souls are drowning,
 Falls on them like a benison;
 This satisfies our Browning
 And this delights our Tennyson
 And soothed Britannia simpers in serene applause.
 - A. C. Swinburne, ‘[The High Victorian Tone]’¹

By the time Swinburne embarked on his poetic career in earnest with the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* in 1865, the monumentalisation of Lord Alfred Tennyson as the ‘poet of the age’ was well advanced.² Since the publication of *In Memoriam* in 1850, Tennyson had been widely honoured as an intercessor between the revelations of Victorian science and Christian belief, not least by Queen Victoria, who made him poet laureate that year and later famously claimed that the poem was second only to the Bible in providing solace during her grief over the death of Prince Albert.³ By 1870, *In Memoriam* had gone through twenty-one editions in Britain, and, as Robert M. Ryan notes, ‘those who never saw or read the printed text became familiar with its verses by hearing them repeated over and over in Sunday sermons, for which the poem provided inspiration in abundance’.⁴ Like Browning, Tennyson reassured the Victorian

¹ Swinburne, ‘[The High Victorian Tone]’, *Major Poems*, McGann and Sligh, 410. Poem titled by editors.

² For a reception history of Tennyson’s works, see Laurence W. Mazzeno’s *Tennyson: The Critical Legacy* (New York: Camden House, 2004).

³ For a discussion of the poem’s consolatory value for Queen Victoria, see Kirstie Blair’s ‘Touching Hearts: Queen Victoria and the Curative Properties of *In Memoriam*’, *Tennyson Research Bulletin* 7.5 (2001): 246-54.

⁴ Robert M. Ryan, ‘The Genealogy of Honest Doubt: F. D. Maurice and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*’, in *The Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe: Essays in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Religion*, eds. David Jasper and T. R. Wright (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989), 120.

reading public that religious doubt was best understood as a heroic test to be overcome, or as a *felix culpa* that granted a richer, more enlightened faith. Browning's aphorism in 'Easter Day' (1850), 'You must mix some uncertainty/With faith, if you would have faith be (71-72)' dovetails with Tennyson's more famous aphorism in *In Memoriam*, 'There lives more faith in honest doubt/believe me, than in half the creeds'.⁵ 'The High Victorian Tone', the squib that forms my epigraph, is a piece of juvenilia that Swinburne never published, and which was probably composed around 1859.⁶ It therefore most likely dates from the period just before Swinburne abandoned his studies at Oxford, and it is telling that he was at this moment chafing against Browning and Tennyson's theodicies and the prestige that attached to their efforts to 'soothe' a doubtful 'Britannia'. If the paradigmatic Victorian narrative of lost faith is one of earnest self-questioning and heroic despair, the sheer blitheness of 'The High Victorian Tone' immediately alerts us to Swinburne's maverick quality. Around the moment Tennyson and Browning's redemptive treatments of religious doubt acquired fresh relevance to many readers with the publication within the space of four months of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *Essays and Reviews* (1860), Swinburne pronounced such consolations empty and began to perceive that 'honest doubt' constituted a poetic model against which he might define himself.

Herbert Tucker has speculated that Tennyson's immense contemporary popularity, which far surpassed that of any contemporary poet, emerged from a paradoxical conjuncture of melancholy and authoritativeness of voice and conviction in his work: 'An important clue to his popularity is probably that, writing during a crisis of authority, he was able simultaneously to gratify conflicting needs. The seal of certitude allayed publicly a cultural malaise that the

⁵ Robert Browning, 'Easter Day', in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, vol. V, ed. Roma A. King et al. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 99. Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Harlow: Pearson and Longman, 2007), 441. All subsequent references to *In Memoriam* refer to this edition.

⁶ See Sligh and McGann's note in *Major Poems*, 491.

note of melancholy was secretly feeding all the while'.⁷ Certainly, the notion that Tennyson was Britain's supreme poet because he was a melancholic sage for a doubting zeitgeist, gifted at finding a plangent *via media* between scepticism and spirituality, modern thought and traditional feeling, was a commonplace rarely questioned until the final decade of the century. Reflecting on the reverend aura that clung to Tennyson in the public imagination, Richard Le Gallienne wrote in 1926:

... his place in the English world of the day was exalted, enthroned, with even with a touch of sacredness, such as that which attached to a great cardinal. The image is worn enough, but his passage was like the fall of a great oak in a forest of lesser trees. As it crashed down, the landscape seems to grow suddenly empty, devoid of meaning, filled with the naked light of common day.⁸

Like his attitude to Browning, Swinburne's attitude to Tennyson passed from youthful idolatry through iconoclasm to a tempered scepticism. As a first year undergraduate at Oxford, Swinburne was particularly enraptured by *Maud*, exclaiming: 'To think that this time last year the world was without [it]!'⁹ When he was visiting Radley College, a nearby public school, the summer of the same year, he reportedly stormed out of a meeting of the debating club and pronounced its members philistines when the merits of the same poem were questioned.¹⁰ Yet during the *Poems and Ballads, First Series* phase of his career, Swinburne imagined his own poetry as an alternative to the palatability of the laureate's: 'I, and my betters ... are athirst for a larger and clearer draught in these Tennysonian times (the Laureate is of course delicious at his best – but one can't live ... on sorbets – it isn't digestible without bread and wine'.¹¹

The asperity which often runs through even the most generous of

⁷ Herbert Tucker, 'Tennyson and the Measure of Doom', *PMLA* 98.1 (1983), 15.

⁸ Quoted in Samantha Matthews, 'After Tennyson: The Presence of the Poet, 1892-1918', in *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, eds. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 316.

⁹ Quoted in Rooksby, *Swinburne*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

Swinburne's mature assessments of Tennyson is more complicated than a younger poet's competitiveness toward a venerable precursor. The logic behind it is partly revealed in an 1865 letter to his friend Lord Houghton. After deriding what he takes to be Tennyson's efforts to reconcile his fondness for classical subject matter with his Christian beliefs, Swinburne writes:

Not that I am disloyal to Tennyson, into whose church we were all in my time born and baptized as far back as we can remember at all; but he is not a Greek nor a heathen; and I imagine does not want to be; and I greatly fear believes it possible to be something better: an absurdity which should be left to the Brownings and other blatant creatures begotten on the slime of the modern chaos.¹²

Unsurprisingly, Swinburne links Tennyson's project with Browning's and rejects both as misbegotten efforts to be a Christian in the 'chaos' of the modern world. His suggestion that there is something outrageous and besmirching about trying to be a modern Christian is an inversion of the rhetoric of moral turpitude that could still attach to atheism in the 1860s; the reference to 'slime' seems to allude to the degradation of humanity conjured in the minds of many Christians by evolutionary science. Given that praising Tennyson as a secular prophet and priest had by this time hardened into a cliché, Swinburne's ecclesiastical metaphor seems at least partly tongue in cheek, and his likening of Tennyson's poetry to an institution that exerted an influence over him before he had the chance to think for himself is revealing. Clearly, Swinburne is piqued not merely at the 'absurdity' of Tennyson framing his poems on classical topics with Christian commitments, but at Tennyson's immense cultural cachet in an age of religious uncertainty. Analysing this letter, Kerry McSweeney points out that Swinburne is 'seldom judicious' in his letters to Lord Houghton.¹³ Yet theatricality and irony often mark Swinburne's rhetoric when he engages with religious questions, and this mode of rhetorical excess is key to his radical critique of the conventions of earnestness and reserve that governed the Victorian debate

¹² [Swinburne to Lord Houghton, March 31, 1864], *Letters*, vol.1, ed. Lang, 97-98.

¹³ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 6.

over belief. It also reflects the uncompromising nature of his project. For Swinburne was not content with simply attacking Christianity; he sought to exorcise the sense of regret and tenderness that many Victorian doubters and unbelievers felt toward it:

The tree of faith ingrafted by priests
 Puts its foul foliage out above thee,
 And round it feed man-eating beasts
 Because of whom we dare not love thee;
 Though hearts reach back and memories ache,
 We cannot praise thee for their sake.
 (63-68)¹⁴

The poem is ‘Before a Crucifix’, from *Songs Before Sunrise*, and the addressee is Christ. Ostensibly, Swinburne seeks to debunk Christianity’s claims to compassion in the name of a higher, politically efficacious compassion for the poor and downtrodden; more precisely, he is attacking the Catholic Church, and proselytising for republican liberty. Yet even here, as Margot Louis suggests, the aggression seems covertly directed toward those doubters and unbelievers for whom Christianity itself has become an object of compassion; those who refrain from direct attack and who praise the figure of Christ in an apparently secular spirit, as well as those for whom Christianity still holds emotional appeal even if actual belief is difficult to sustain.¹⁵ In a characteristic move, Swinburne suggests he is honouring Christ’s compassion for the poor more faithfully by repudiating all reverence for Christ, whose name is irredeemably tainted by the oppressions it has sanctified; yet Christianity is nevertheless posited as a temptation (‘we *dare* not love thee’ [my italics]). Swinburne’s desire to construct an unflinching and unregretful model of secularism engenders a career-long compulsion to argue with and rewrite the confession of religious doubt that the Victorian reading public had embraced as a kind of epochal scripture: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*.

¹⁴ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 746.

¹⁵ Louis, ‘Swinburne, Clough, and the Speechless Christ: “Before a Crucifix” and “Easter Day”’, *Victorian Newsletter* 72 (Fall 1987), 1-6.

The Carpe Diem Religion: Swinburne's Minor Decadent Poems and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Aside from McSweeney, who has helpfully analysed Swinburne's most explicit engagements with Tennyson, the few critics who have explored the relationship between the two poets in detail have been more curious on the whole about the impact of Swinburne's career – and especially of his sexually transgressive poetics – upon the work of the laureate than about Tennyson's presence in Swinburne's.¹⁶ A notable exception to this tendency is Francis O'Gorman's essay, 'Swinburne's Returns: The Endurance of Writing in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*', which builds upon Melissa Ziegler's suggestion that Swinburne's elegy to Baudelaire, 'Ave Atque Vale' (1878), inaugurates a modern, anti-consolatory tradition of elegy.¹⁷ O'Gorman persuasively argues that Swinburne's elegies in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series* evince a struggle to formulate a post-Christian 'language of regret and loss' that could rival that of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.¹⁸ Yet, as I have been arguing, key to Swinburne's work is a comprehensive effort to demystify Victorian doubt, which received its most culturally resonant poetic expression in *In Memoriam*; it follows that Swinburne poems that might be read as engagements with *In Memoriam* are many and varied. For example, Swinburne's desire to challenge the august Tennysonian language of grief is discernible in early poems such as 'Anima Anceps', 'Félice', 'Ilicet', 'Rococo' and 'Before Dawn', all critically neglected poems from *Poems and Ballads, First Series*. To complicate O'Gorman's model, Swinburne in these poems seems less concerned to devise alternative models of grief than to destabilise the very assumption that grief, melancholy, and contemplativeness represent profound responses to mortality.

¹⁶ For Swinburne's influence on Tennyson, see Leonard M. Findlay's 'Swinburne and Tennyson', *Victorian Poetry* 9.1/2 (1971): 217-36, Linda K. Hughes's "'Frater Ave'" Tennyson and Swinburne', in *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, eds. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 296-314; and Catherine Stevenson Bates's 'Swinburne and Tennyson's Tristram', *Victorian Poetry* 19.2 (1981): 185-189.

¹⁷ Francis O'Gorman, 'Swinburne's Returns: The Endurance of Writing in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*', *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33.3 (2004), 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

In his notes to *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, editor Kenneth Haynes suggests that the title ‘Anima Anceps’ (which means ‘two-fold soul’) has its origin in Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), in which ‘Go therefore, divided soul, may God be merciful to you’ is said to be the formula intoned by a priest as a signal to a hangman.¹⁹ This seems fitting, for the poem is a kind of playful anti-catechism, the question-and-response structure of the first two stanzas and the inculcation of a ‘moral’ lesson or maxim in the final stanza working to subvert the solemnity of grief and to suggest that light-heartedness reflects a wiser apprehension of life’s flux than ‘prayer’ and ‘tears’:

Though time rend after
 Roof-tree from rafter,
 A little laughter
 Is much more worth
 Than thus to measure
 The hour, the treasure,
 The pain, the pleasure,
 The death, the birth;
 Grief, when days alter,
 Like joy shall falter;
 Song-book and psalter,
 Mourning and mirth.
 Live like the swallow;
 Seek not to follow
 Where earth is hollow
 Under the earth.
 (33-48)²⁰

Swinburne’s nimble, almost nursery-rhyme-like iambic dimeter, which embodies the evanescence the poem celebrates, yokes piety and grief together with death, underlining that such emotions are morbid efforts to ‘follow’ the dead under the earth rather than aspirations toward heaven, and are in any case subject to the very mutability they lament or strive to assuage. Haynes suggests another possible source for the poem’s title is Arthur Clough’s *Dipsychus*, which was published posthumously in parts in 1865; the title means ‘double-minded’ or

¹⁹ Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 340.

²⁰ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 101.

‘double-souled’, and the poem dramatises a crisis of faith as a kind of *psychomachia* between Dispychus, an idealist appalled by the prospect of unbelief, which he equates with the negation of all moral value, and Spirit, a voice of *carpe diem* worldliness. Swinburne was contemptuous of Clough, regarding him (rather unjustly) as a religious honest doubter in the pattern of Browning and Tennyson but without their poetic gifts.²¹ It seems likely that this contempt was partly a reaction to the fact that Clough’s supposed failure to live up to his intellectual promise had become in the eyes of many of his contemporaries a cautionary tale about the self-destructive nature of religious scepticism.²² Swinburne’s Latin title ‘Anima Anceps’, with its echo of Clough’s Greek title, perhaps suggests that the poem is a something of an oblique, irreverent elegy to Clough; more broadly, it seems to allude to the way in which poets like Clough and Tennyson elevated wavering religious belief and the concomitant anguished self-anatomising into a master trope of emotional and intellectual complexity in poetry. In his essay on Rossetti, Swinburne also casts Clough as Tennyson’s epigone and posits them both as examples of the liberalised modern Christianity to which Rossetti’s aestheticism (and presumably Swinburne’s own) are to serve as correctives:

A certain section of Mr. Rossetti’s work as a poet and as a painter may be classed under the head of sacred art ... Its religious quality is singular and personal in kind ... The fire of feeling and imagination which feeds it is essentially Christian, and is therefore formally and spiritually Catholic. It has nothing of rebellious Protestant personality, nothing of the popular compromise of sentiment which is the hybrid jargon of a school of hybrids, we may call liberalized Christianity. The influence which plainly has passed over the writer’s mind, attracting it as by chain of sound or vision, by spell of colour or of dream, towards the Christian forms and images, is in the main an influence from the mythologic side of the creed ... Now the sacred art of Mr. Rossetti, for all its

²¹ For Swinburne’s 1891 lampoon of Clough’s religious doubt – ‘We’ve got no faith, and we don’t know what to do:/To think one can’t believe a creed because it isn’t true!’ – see ‘Social Verse’, in *Arthur Clough: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Thorpe (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 340.

²² For discussion of how Clough became the tragic symbol of the age’s religious doubt, see LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 111-152.

Christian colouring, has actually no more in common with the spirit of either Browning or Newman than it has with the semi-Christianity of “In Memoriam” or the demi-semi-Christianity of “Dipsychus”. It has no trace, on the other hand, of the fretful and fruitless prurience of soul which would fain grasp and embrace and enjoy a creed beyond its power of possession; no letch after Gods dead or unborn, such as vexes the weaker nerves of barren brains, and makes pathetic the vocal lips of sorrowing scepticism and “doubt that deserves to believe” ... The hankering and restless habit of half fearful retrospect towards the unburied corpses of old creeds which, as we need not Shelley’s evidence to know, infected the spiritual life and disturbed the intellectual force of Byron, is a mirage without attraction for this traveller; that spiritual calenture of Christianity is unknown to his soul; nor has he ever suffered from the distemper of minds fretted and worried by gnatstings and fleabites of belief and unbelief till the whole lifeblood of the intellect is enfeebled and inflamed. The intermittent Christian reaction apparently perceptible in Baudelaire was more than half of it mere repulsion from the philanthropic optimism of sciologists in whose eyes the whole aim or mission of things is to make the human spirit finally comfortable. Contempt of such facile free-thinking, still more easy than free, took in him at times the form of apparent reversion to past creeds; as though the spirit should seek a fiery refuge in the good old hell of the faithful than the watery new paradise of liberal theosophy and ultimate amiability of all things. Alone among the higher artists of his age, Mr. Rossetti has felt and given the mere physical charm of Christianity, with no admixture of doctrine or of doubt.²³

Here, in an essay that McGann and Sligh rightly suggest had a powerful influence on Pater, Swinburne’s theory of aestheticism can be observed emerging from the convolutions of an argument about the relationship between Christianity and art, and specifically from an effort to critique the ‘sorrowing scepticism’ of Clough’s *Dipsychus* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*.²⁴ The scabrous and free-wheeling rhetoric is all an effort to surmount the stumbling block that Rossetti’s attraction to Christian motifs and iconography poses to Swinburne’s sense of artistic kinship with Rossetti and, more broadly, to his conviction that art ‘[cannot in any way become a] handmaid of religion’.²⁵ By differentiating Rossetti so

²³ Swinburne, ‘Rossetti’, 562-563.

²⁴ McGann and Sligh, explanatory notes to *Swinburne: Major Poems*, 490.

²⁵ Swinburne, *Blake*, 90.

elaborately from other Christian and agnostic contemporary poets, Swinburne is able to insist that Rossetti's variety of 'sacred art' is idiosyncratic to the point where it cannot be spoken of in relation to Christianity without a finely tuned – one might say hair-splitting – sense of artistic and intellectual discrimination. Although Swinburne begins with the premise that Rossetti is 'essentially Christian', all that is essential here turns out to be the 'mere physical charm of Christianity': the beautiful surface is more profound than the interior depths of belief, which Swinburne identifies with maudlin and inauthentic doubt. Arguably, Rossetti inclined toward a reverent agnosticism that was closer to the honest doubt of Browning and Tennyson than to the crusading secularism of Swinburne (one suspects that Rossetti was defining himself against Swinburne when he wrote to James Smethan in 1865 that while he lacked strong faith, he was by no means a 'confident denier' and certainly no 'apostle of opposition').²⁶ This is precisely the complication that Swinburne's argument about Rossetti's 'aesthetic' Christianity, which consists in the 'mere physical charm of Christianity, with no admixture of doctrine' or only in the 'mythologic side of the creed', aims to overcome; it turns 'Christian' and 'sacred' into beautiful forms or mythological machinery, and strives to establish that Rossetti's loyalty lies with the sensuous and the worldly, not with any aspiration toward transcendence. The possibility of authentic belief thus foreclosed, 'aesthetic' Christianity can be celebrated as more profoundly religious than the work of poets like Tennyson and Clough, who yearn for belief beyond their 'power of possession'. The transgressive play with a surface-versus-depth distinction in relation to religion that Ellis Hanson has shown to be so crucial to the aestheticisms of Pater and Wilde might be traced to the complexities Swinburne encounters in his critical writings when he seeks radically to attenuate the role that Christianity has played within Western art and literature or to account for the attractions it continues to possess for apparently secular artists like Rossetti.²⁷ For Swinburne, Christianity is a welcome guest in the palace of art only when it leaves all its ideological force at the door – and

²⁶ Quoted in Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Orion Books, 2005), 107.

²⁷ Hanson, *Decadence*, 169-218 and 229-345.

with the catch that he thinks that Christianity is at its most insidiously ideological (and, by extension, at its most inartistic) when it assumes the form of ‘liberalized Christianity’.

‘Ilicet’, which could be considered a companion piece to ‘Anima Anceps’, similarly scorns conventional emotional and philosophical attitudes toward death as anthropocentric mistakes; death is precisely that which negates human categories of value, by which ‘all life stands chidden’ (137).²⁸ The poem’s title means ‘it’s all over’ in Latin and each stanza is a sententious assertion of death’s absolute finality:

Outside of all the worlds and ages,
 There where the fool is as the sage is,
 There where the slayer is clean of blood,
 No end, no passage, no beginning,
 There where the sinner leaves off sinning,
 There where the good man is not good.

 No soul shall tell nor lip shall number
 The names and tribes of you that slumber;
 No memory, no memorial.
 ‘Thou knowest’ – who shall say thou knowest?
 There is none highest and none lowest:
 An end, an end, an end of all.
 (7-12, 37-42)

Death is not an ultimate moral reckoning but rather a democracy of meaninglessness where none is ‘highest and none lowest’ and which obliterates individual personhood, making a mockery of efforts at memorialisation.²⁹ This reads as a pointed deflation of the quasi-apotheosis or ‘secular canonisation’ of Arthur Hallam performed in *In Memoriam*, which goes beyond paying tribute to the personal qualities of a friend and exalts Hallam as ‘nature’s best’ (LXXII.20), as a type of Christ and, as Devon Fisher points out, as an ‘exemplar of civic virtue’.³⁰ Swinburne perhaps chose the title for its proximity to the word ‘illicit’,

²⁸ Swinburne, ‘Ilicet’, *CPWII*, 74-78.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 413. Devon Fisher, ‘Spurring an Imitative Will: The Canonisation of Arthur Hallam’, *Christianity and Literature* 55.2 (2006), 232.

since the poem suggests that sanctified forms of grief and memorialisation contain or covertly promote transgressive or 'illicit' emotion, specifically the eroticisation of death, which the poem characterises as a futile quest for 'purple pleasure' (83) or 'fruit that comes not of the vine' (72). Swinburne's decadent use of pagan and/or Catholic imagery implies that rituals of mourning are in fact sensuous death-worship, performed 'in death's favour' (67); elsewhere mourning is a superstitious effort to propitiate or 'fe[e]d' the 'pale old lips of death' (51). Far from being poignant or ethereal emotions, grief and the yearning for life after death are perverse fixations on what may be seen and touched. In effect, Swinburne is casting a critique of the longing for immortality in the resolutely sensuous, earth-bound terms of his aestheticism: the longing constitutes merely an abstracted hedonism, a desire to transmute 'things of sweet shape and of sweet savour' into an imponderable variety of pleasure, 'fruit that comes not of the vine' (68-72). (Swinburne also suggests that the desire for immortality is the epitome of hedonism in his essay on Arnold's poems: '... when pleasure-seekers fail of pleasure in this world, they turn their hearts Godward, and thence in the end expect joy which the world could not give').³¹ This logic culminates in the scandalous suggestion that mourning rituals are displacements not merely of erotic but of violent or atavistic impulses; he implies they are civilised reminiscences of pagan blood sacrifice (73-78). Yet rather than simply offering a perverse antithesis to the noble, Christian modes of mourning and memorialisation that inspire *In Memoriam*, the decadent sensationalism of 'Ilicet' might be said only to make flagrant some of the stranger currents of feeling that run through Tennyson's poem. As John Rosenberg observes:

The most startling effects in *In Memoriam* all have a transgressive quality, a crossing of borders that normally separate the living from the dead, the natural from the supernatural, one sex or species from another. Death in *In Memoriam*, especially in the darker, earlier sections, is not so much the cessation of life as a displaced activity, corpses in motion or embraces underground.³²

³¹ Swinburne, 'Arnold', 64.

³² John D. Rosenberg, 'Stopping For Death', *Victorian Poetry* 30. 3/4 (1992), 295.

In Memoriam everywhere makes vivid the embodied nature of grief, and occasionally this shades into the suggestion that there is something faintly luxurious or even debauched about the experience. For instance, early in the poem it is personified as a partner in a bacchanal or *danse macabre*:

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drowned,
Let darkness keep her raven gloss;
Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,
To dance with death, to beat the ground,
(I. 9-12)³³

The speaker's obsessive longing for Hallam's physical presence is often tinged with Gothic morbidity as well as with homoeroticism. For instance, Tennyson gently conjures a necrophiliac scene of passion in an effort to convey his speaker's abandonment to grief and the twin-like intensity of the fraternal bond he has lost:

Ah yet, even yet, if this might be,
I falling on his faithful heart,
Would breathing through his lips impart
That life that almost dies in me;
(XVIII. 13-16)³⁴

Similarly, there is a faintly ghoulish physical tenderness in Tennyson's image of the graveyard tree whose roots 'grasp' at Hallam's remains:

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.
(II.1-4)³⁵

Despite Tennyson's moral aversion toward aestheticism, especially as it was embodied in Swinburne's work, he nonetheless has some sympathy with aestheticism's faith in the truths of the senses. Leighton comments:

³³ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 345.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

It is possible ... to read *In Memoriam* as deeply troubled, but also inspired by that Lucretian materialism which will become the basis of Victorian aestheticism ... Materialism, for Pater and his contemporaries, is a philosophy based on the materiality of the body. For Tennyson too, the attempt to recover the body of Hallam, 'sweet human hand and lips and eyes', involves him a long, tormented drama of touch ...³⁶

In contrast to the anguished yearning for personal immortality that pervades *In Memoriam*, 'Ilicet' invokes the Olympian deities topos that was often used by Victorian sceptics as a means of critiquing Christian visions of transcendence and preoccupation with life after death. Louis has traced how the traditional image of the Olympian deities as perfect in their immortal beauty, and callous to or amused by human suffering, was often used by Victorian sceptics to identify Christianity with a chilly, far-fetched idealism.³⁷ In this pattern, 'Ilicet' collapses the distinction between the Christian God and the 'old unalterable gods' (132) of Greek mythology, both of which are presented as impervious to human wishes and powerless to bestow life after death (characteristically, however, Swinburne saves this blacker indictments for the Christian God; the Olympian deities merely 'laugh' [131] at human life, while the Christian God is murderous: 'He hath slain them: shall he bid them live?' [102]). Swinburne's emphasis on the impotence of tears and his suggestion that the cries of a newborn infant epitomise the human condition ('We are born with travail and strong crying,/And from the birth-day to the dying/The likeness of our life is thus' [106-108]) resonate as an anti-sentimental rebuke to the famous passage of *In Memoriam* in which the speaker's nightmare vision of a godless universe produces an access of despair:

but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.
(LIV.17-20)³⁸

³⁶ Leighton, *On Form*, 69.

³⁷ Louis, *Persephone*, 24.

³⁸ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 396.

Where Tennyson here imagines himself reduced to a prelinguistic state of terror and vulnerability by the prospect of an indifferent universe, Swinburne effectively allies himself with the Olympian perspective from which human suffering might be seen in conspectus and savoured as a pattern of reversals. The poem's sets of feminine rhymes give its dramatic negations a faintly insouciant swing, even a hint of gleefulness:

One girds himself to serve another
 Whose father was the dust, whose mother
 The little dead red worm therein;
 They find no fruit of things they cherish;
 The goodness of a man shall perish,
 It shall be one thing with his sin.
 (109-114)

It was doubtless such moments in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, where the felicities of the rhyme and the quicksilver metre seem to enact the joy of idol-smashing, that prompted Morley to describe Swinburne as the 'vindictive apostle of a crushing and iron despair'.³⁹ For 'Ilicet' does not merely attack Christian rituals of grief and hopes for immortality: it attacks the idea that melancholy is a profound response to the loss of such traditional structures of feeling.

An explicitly anti-Christian attack on melancholy and grief is also at the centre of 'Félise'.⁴⁰ This poem frames itself as a homage to François Villon, taking as its epigraph his famous *ubi sunt* lament, '*Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?*' (but where are the snows of yesteryear?), from 'Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis' (circa. 1461). 'Félise' is an *ubi sunt* lament in which the speaker's cynicism toward grief at once compounds the bitterness of his loss and robs it of any profundity; throughout, Swinburne emphasises that grief always fails because it is just as ephemeral as that which it tries to mourn. 'Félise' operates through an analogy between sexual love and religious faith, both of which it exposes as illusions that cannot withstand the corruptions of time. In the first part of the poem, the speaker reflects on the fickleness of sexual love; in the second part, he

³⁹ Morley, 'Swinburne', 147.

⁴⁰ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 188-198.

extends an invocation of the ‘cruel’ Olympian deities into a long, Job-like complaint against religious hope:

By many a name of many a creed
 We have called upon them, since the sands
 Fell through time’s hour-glass first, a seed
 Of life; and out of many lands
 Have we stretched hands.

When have they heard us? who hath known
 Their faces, climbed unto their feet,
 Felt them and found them? Laugh or groan,
 Doth heaven remurmur and repeat
 Sad sounds or sweet?

.....
 Are the skies wet because we weep,
 Or fair because of any mirth?
 Cry out; they are gods; perchance they sleep;
 Cry; thou shalt know what prayers are worth,
 Thou dust and earth.

.....
 The ghosts of words and dusty dreams,
 Old memories, faiths infirm and dead.
 Ye fools; for which among you deems
 His prayer can alter green to red
 Or stones to bread?

(201-210, 216-220, 241-245)

The image of hands ‘stretched’ after faith calls to mind Tennyson’s speaker in *In Memoriam*: ‘I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,/And gather dust and chaff, and call/To what I feel is Lord of all,/And faintly trust the larger hope’ (LV.17-20).⁴¹ Swinburne need only rework Tennyson’s dialectic between faith and doubt with a slightly different emphasis: in Tennyson’s lines, doubt coincides with a Christian posture of humility before God and is assimilated into a tentative affirmation of faith; in ‘Félise’, the same image of desperate prayer is cast as more abject than poignant, and as a revelation of the true bleakness of the human lot rather than of the testing nature of faith. Swinburne’s extensive appropriation of Biblical language (for instance, his image of stones being turned

⁴¹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 398.

to bread alludes to Christ's temptation in the desert [Matthew 4:3]; the imperative 'thou shalt know what prayers are worth/thou dust and earth' registers as a blasphemous addendum to the Ten Commandments), as well as of the dignified Tennysonian language of doubt, works to suggest that unbelief lurks within the folds of the language of belief, dessicating it from within. More precisely, the logic of the allusions implies that the more austere imagery and diction of the Bible discloses the absence of a benevolent God. For example, 'O fools and blind, what seek ye there,/High up in the air?' and 'Ye fools and blind; for this is sure,/That all ye shall not live, but die', turns the 'ye fools and blind' of Matthew 23:17 and 19 into remonstrations not against worldly materialism but against Christian hopes for immortality. The speaker, who is constructed as a kind of self-regarding immoralist and *poète maudit* (he brags at one point, 'But there is nothing, nor shall shall be,/So sweet, so wicked, but my verse/Can dream of worse' [163-165]) and whose lover is called 'Félise', hazily conjures associations with French libertinism. This is also the effect sought by the Villon epigraph. Swinburne translated Villon extensively and embraced him as an poetic precursor, partly because his life of crime and exile made it possible for Swinburne to imagine him as a proto-Romantic rebel (he christened Villon the 'gallows-nightingale').⁴² As a whole, the poem circles obsessively around the *carpe diem* theme – 'Ah, take the season and have done/Love well the hour and let it go' (131-132) – and plays knowingly with the Victorian tendency to conflate atheism and sexual license, and displace both onto the putative excesses of French culture. In other words, Swinburne's *carpe diem* poems often affirm the very dreads that atheism conventionally aroused in Victorian culture, and seek to transvalue those dreads as decadent glamour.

'Rococo', which also takes a failed love affair for its subject, draws upon the same imaginative nexus.⁴³ As is the case with many poems in *Poems and Ballads, First Series*, the title calls attention to the poem's style rather than its

⁴² For a discussion of Swinburne's Romantic image of Villon as a 'criminal hero', see Jerome McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 88-91.

⁴³ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 115-117.

theme and reflects the foregrounding of formal choices which is characteristic of Swinburne's aestheticism. This poem anticipates the *fin de siècle* fashion for poems that take the rococo as a point of reference for their ornamental style or as a vague synonym for French decadence.⁴⁴ Although 'Rococo' does not appear to refer to a specific artwork, the poem also reflects the preoccupation with ekphrasis that runs through the volume, and the poem's insouciant take on the vagaries of 'light love' (20) – particularly its alternations of 'forget' and 'remember' and 'pain' and 'pleasure' in the final two lines of each stanza, which suggest the formal switching of partners in a dance – evoke the concept of *les fêtes galantes*, or the amorous play of young aristocrats, which Jean-Antoine Watteau made the signature subject of rococo style in painting. Yet Ken Ireland finds this poem 'too masochistic and bacchanalian' to capture the 'light' spirit of eighteenth-century rococo.⁴⁵ This is surely because Swinburne's imagination of eighteenth-century French culture was coloured by his enthusiasm for the Marquis de Sade, and as Haynes points out in a note to this poem, the reference to 'Juliette' seems to allude to the eponymous depraved heroine of Sade's 1797 novel.⁴⁶ Like so many of Swinburne's early poems, 'Rococo' aggrandises sadomasochistic, 'light' love as a formalisation of the inexorable truths of life's transience and its alloy of pleasure and pain. Like lasting romantic love, Christian pieties are dismissed as deluded efforts to escape from the divisions of time:

Dream that the lips once breathless,
 Might quicken if they would;
 Say that the soul is deathless;
 Dream that the gods are good;
 Say March may wed September,
 And time divorce regret;
 But not that you remember,
 And not that I forget.

(25-32)

⁴⁴ See Ken Ireland's *Cythera Regained? The Rococo Revival in European Literature and the Arts: 1830-1910* (Cranbury NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2006), 136-157.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁶ Swinburne, notes to *Poems and Ballads*, ed. Haynes, 344.

Similarly, in ‘Before Dawn’, ‘shame’, ‘sin’ and ‘virtue’ are cast off as redundancies (37-39).⁴⁷ Yet such poems are not simply a series of iconoclastic negations; they seek not only to debunk Christian conceptions of morality and transcendence, but to affirm that the pleasurable pains of mortal life are more desirable than those ideals. Swinburne was highly conscious of the extent to which poems about ‘light love’ could serve to make secular temporality seem like a desirable predicament, and he believed that he was introducing a novel note to contemporary poetry by drawing this connection: ‘In an age where all other lyrists, from Tennyson to Rossetti, go in ... for constancy and eternity of attachment and reunion in future lives, etc., etc., I limit love, honestly and candidly, to 24 hours, and quite enough too in all conscience’.⁴⁸ ‘Quite enough too’ has a double resonance upon which many of Swinburne’s *carpe diem* poems rely: on the one hand, it sounds like the sentiment of a jaded libertine, oversatiated even by a twenty-four hour tryst; on the other, it is a sentiment articulated very earnestly in countless Swinburne poems – that mortal time *is* in fact enough, that it is all that one should desire ‘in all conscience’. What is more, the repudiation of transcendental ideals and hopes for immortality in Swinburne’s *carpe diem* poems brings not simple melancholy or disillusionment but a masochistic enjoyment of transience itself, an enjoyment which Swinburne understands as a wiser kind of idealism. Thus for the speaker of ‘Before Dawn’, pleasure and its loss blur into a single experience which is ‘beyond regret’ (20). He transforms the apparently cynical insight that ‘love has no abiding/But dies before the kiss’ (71-72) into a gnomic affirmation of mortal life, which also ‘seem[s] worth living’ (19) despite the fact that it will be lost:

So hath it been, so be it;
 For who shall live and flee it?
 But look that no man see it
 Or hear it unaware;
 Lest all who love him and choose him
 See Love, and so refuse him;

⁴⁷ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 151-153.

⁴⁸ Swinburne in a letter to Joseph Knight. 8, July 1883. Quoted in Rooksby, *Swinburne*, 219.

For all who find him lose him,
But all have found him fair.
(73-80)

In this sense, Swinburne's sadomasochistic poetics are not merely symptoms of a personal quirk, nor merely a game of dares with Victorian propriety: they are often part of an endeavour to find a rhetoric adequate to affirming both the joys and pains of a wholly immanent conception of life, purged of all desire for transcendence. And for this reason, the libertine speakers of such poems often cast their devotion to worldly pleasure as a form of spiritual asceticism: steeled against the temptations of metaphysical desire, they accept that pleasure is transient and do not allow themselves to want anything higher or better. (Swinburne actually regarded de Sade as an ascetic libertine in this sense, characterising him as a Simeon Stylites in an 'inverted posture'.)⁴⁹

'Anima Anceps', 'Before Dawn', 'Félice', 'Ilicet' and 'Rococo' are the sort of *bijoux* pieces for which Swinburne and other 'aesthetic' or 'decadent' poets were disparaged as bards of 'days of wine and roses' by many modernist writers and twentieth-century critics.⁵⁰ Throughout his career, Swinburne certainly produced a vast number of such minor, formally accomplished poems that exalt lightness of spirit and use the *carpe diem* topos as a means of lending atheism the character of an eternal verity. The critical neglect of such poems is perhaps understandable: for all that they present themselves as light exercises on the eternal themes of mortality and desire, they can seem dated and curiously alienating. They are perhaps best appreciated as a stylised shrugging off of the melancholia and moral earnestness that tended to characterise the discourse of Victorian religious doubt. In his book *Heretics* (1905), G. K. Chesterton decried this strain within Victorian aestheticism (epitomised for him not by Swinburne's poems but by Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* [1859] and Pater's 'Conclusion'), as exemplary of a modern 'carpe diem

⁴⁹ Quoted in Louis, *Swinburne*, 23.

⁵⁰ The phrase 'days of wine and roses' is from Ernest Dowson's '*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*'; see *Poems of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Mark Longaker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), 38.

religion'.⁵¹ A committed Christian and eventually a Catholic convert, Chesterton found in aestheticism a far-reaching attack not only on Christian piety but on humanist models of the self: 'the quarrel of the highest Christianity with [this 'carpe diem' religion of the aesthetes] is not that the scepticism denies the existence of God; it is that it denies the existence of man', and effaces 'altogether the outlines of human personality and human will'.⁵² Maxwell has observed that Swinburne is perhaps more difficult to read than any other English-language poet of the nineteenth century, and this difficulty might be accounted for partly by way of Chesterton's insight: in his effort to evade what he considered the ruses and illusions of Christianity, especially as they were encoded in the melancholy introspection of Victorian doubt, Swinburne's poetry often denies us what we conventionally think of as 'deep' lyric interiority.⁵³ Though there is a humanistic side to Swinburne's vision that celebrates the grandeur of human potential (this is most pronounced in *Songs Before Sunrise*), particularised individual psychology is often bypassed or explicitly rejected in his poetry in favour of an ecstatic passivity towards what he enshrines as 'fate': namely, the inexorable forces of time, sexual love, and death. 'Sestina' (1872), which Swinburne claimed to have 'scribbled off in a morning', is a good example of this genre of aesthetic poetry that does away with deep, particularised interiority and erects a *carpe diem* ethos and formal virtuosity in its place.⁵⁴ As its title suggests, the poem is primarily about its own pleasingly intricate form, though the *envoi* emphasises that mortality is the cost of aesthetic 'delight':

Song, have thy day and take thy fill of light
 Before the night be fallen across thy way;
 Sing, while he may, man hath no long delight.
 (37-39)⁵⁵

⁵¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2006), 55.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³ Maxwell, *Bearing Blindness*, 196.

⁵⁴ Quoted in explanatory notes to Swinburne, *Major Poems*, ed. McGann and Sligh, 483.

⁵⁵ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 330-331.

Swinburne arrives at this *carpe diem* conclusion by reasoning that any dream of transcending the distinction between ‘night’ and ‘day’ in fact yields nothing ‘conclusive of delight’ (28), and would actually foreclose the possibility of ‘light’ and ‘song’. The demanding strictures of the sestina form also gesture at the idea that the most intense joys of life are won from embracing as a positive good its strictures, the paradoxically immutable laws of flux and impermanence. In other words, the elaborate forms in these minor aesthetic poems embody and seek to impart the lessons of the indivisibility of pleasure and pain, and of *amor fati*, or love of fate. That these poems are also ironic valedictions to Tennysonian melancholy and to Christian sorrow more generally is particularly clear in one of the loveliest of Swinburne’s roundels, ‘In Harbour’ (1883).⁵⁶ F. W. H. Myers, the Victorian poet, critic and spiritualist, singled this poem out for praise in an 1893 essay on poetry and the ‘meaning of life’, noting that the poem expresses a ‘Lucretian satisfaction at liberation from the terrors of religion’ and comparing Tennyson’s perception that modern materialism represented an ‘abiding nightmare’ with Swinburne’s capacity to be ‘exultant’ about it.⁵⁷ ‘In Harbour’ may be read as an oblique rewriting of Tennyson’s ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832), a poem Swinburne considered typical of the ‘magnificent hashes and stews’ that Tennyson created when he brought his Christian commitments to bear on classical subjects.⁵⁸ In Tennyson’s poem, the druggy paralysis that overcomes Ulysses and his men on the island of the lotos-eaters in Homer’s *Odyssey* suggests the vapidness of ancient Epicureanism: while apparently yielding to a life of pleasure, Tennyson’s mariners seem to experience only ‘mild-eyed melancholy’ (27) and conclude that there is ‘no joy but calm’ (68).⁵⁹ The apathy of Tennyson’s mariners mirrors the apathy of the Epicurean gods they worship, who are entirely ‘careless of mankind’ (156). In Swinburne’s re-writing, the predicament is reversed: the problem is not that we are marooned on a demoralising island but that,

⁵⁶ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 529-530.

⁵⁷ F. W. H. Myers, ‘Modern Poets and the Meaning of Life’, *Nineteenth Century* 33.191 (1893), 97-99.

⁵⁸ [Swinburne to Lord Houghton, March 31, 1864], *Letters* vol. 1, ed. Lang, 97.

⁵⁹ Tennyson, ‘The Lotos-Eaters’, *Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, 71-79.

metaphorically speaking, we have never left the harbour. ‘We have drunken of Lethe at length’ (8) registers as a self-borrowing from ‘Hymn to Proserpine’, where drinking of ‘things Lethean’ signifies falling under the deathly influence of Christianity; here, conflated with ‘lotos-eating’, drinking from Lethe appears to symbolise a blissful forgetting of the ‘dream’ and ‘dread’ of religion (10), as well, perhaps, of the Tennysonian fixation upon ‘mourning’ (5). The intricacy of roundel form lends an insinuating playfulness to the valediction; the poem attempts to enact the joyful spirit that it suggests awaits just ‘outside’ (15) the present age, which remains in ‘thrall’ (7) to religious gloom, while also gently ironising the valedictory and apocalyptic modes of rhetoric that dominated representations of the decline of Christianity.

To the extent that Swinburne’s minor *carpe diem* poems are miniature *ars poetica*, allying aestheticism with an anti-transcendent worldliness, they actually carry a large polemical burden, even if they seem only to declare art’s freedom from all such burdens. This is best exemplified by another of Swinburne’s roundels, ‘A Singing Lesson’ (1883), which tells us that song must

shine through the sound as it pierces
Men’s hearts with possession of music unsought.
For the bounties of song are no jealous god’s mercies,
Far-fetched and dear-bought.

(7-9)⁶⁰

While Swinburne seems only to celebrate the beautiful gratuitousness of ‘song’, he is, as the poem’s title suggests, also teaching us a lesson, and prescribing an anti-transcendental model of art’s value. The poem both formally embodies and argues for a type of self-authenticating easefulness: those who imagine art is a gift of God or a tribute to a ‘far-fetched’ other world are identified with meretricious poetics (the transcendent is like an overpriced bibelot ‘ladies’ might buy [2]), whereas art which wants only its own secular ends has the simplicity of nature (it is like the ‘turn of a wave’ [4]). Yet Swinburne is also ironically undermining our expectations of such brief, self-consciously exquisite

⁶⁰ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 579.

poems: the roundel presents itself as a kind of child's plaything or a feminine trinket (the title of this roundel also suggests the school room), but here its capacity to create an impression of a perfect formal consummation is identified not with artifice but rather with nature. In turn, this identification enables Swinburne to cast his rejection of transcendence in terms of consummation rather than of loss.

A framework for appreciating Swinburne's *carpe diem* poems might be found in Pater's essay on Joachim du Bellay in *The Renaissance*. This essay obliquely sets forth a poetics of aestheticism through its portrait of the group of sixteenth-century French poets known as the Pléiade school. Pater's paradoxical ambition in this essay is to reveal the profundities of a style of poetry that appears merely to revel in its own inconsequence. He argues that consummate formal grace has serious value in itself because it captures the ephemerality of life, the value of the contingent and apparently trivial. For Pater, the virtue of this form of poetry lies precisely in its repression of grandeur and seriousness, and the essay itself seeks to embody the 'silvery fineness of grace' it vindicates in the Pléiade school. That Pater is also seeking to anatomise a modern poetics of aestheticism – and perhaps even thinking of Swinburne's poetry – is discernible when he discusses the manner in which the Pléiade poets represented death:

Like the people in Boccaccio's 'Decameron', [the Pléiade poets] form a party who in an age of troubles, losses, anxieties, amuse themselves with art, poetry, intrigue; but they amuse themselves with wonderful elegance, and sometimes their gaiety becomes satiric, for as they play, real passions insinuate themselves, at least the reality of death; their dejection at the thought of leaving *le beau séjour du commun jour* is expressed by them with almost wearisome reiteration. But with this sentiment they too are able to trifle; the imagery of death serves for a delicate ornament, and they weave into the airy nothingness of their verses their trite reflections on the vanity of life ...⁶¹

Pater goes on to observe that the only form of consolation permitted within this mode of poetry is the 'sentiment of the grandeur of nothingness, *la*

⁶¹ Ibid., 80-81.

grandeur du rien and the ‘final regret of all human creatures for the familiar earth and limited sky’.⁶² He also calls attention to the precious, coterie atmosphere of Pléiade poetry, its eagerness to display its ‘refined voluptuousness’ and its familiarity with things ‘foreign’ or exotic.⁶³ As a whole, the essay is a masterly exercise in the rhetorical ploy of concession. Pater acknowledges that such poetry might be found ‘distasteful’, ‘trite’, ‘jaded’ – but he then redefines these vices not merely as aesthetic virtues, but as qualities that enable a special eloquence about life’s ‘tenuity’.⁶⁴ In effect, Pater projects the drama of the Victorian crisis of faith onto sixteenth-century French poets in order to imagine how this modern predicament might be imagined differently – indeed, not as a crisis at all, but as a ‘dream[y]’, relishable condition that affords opportunities for aesthetic refinement.⁶⁵ Swinburne’s minor *carpe diem* poems, which usually advertise themselves as either French or classical, or both, in inspiration, conjure a similar fantasy world, with the attendant ‘satiric’ edge that Pater detects in this mode of poetry. Swinburne’s self-consciously flippant handling of the subjects of sex and death in these poems also tenders a similar argument about the possibility of discovering a kind of higher élan in a desacralised view of the world. The disconcerting gaiety of such poems seeks to effect a thoroughly secular reconciliation with death and with time; any loss can be recast as lightness of being, any suffering as a labour of love. Thus, for all their flamboyant cynicism, such poems manifest a strong impulse to find redemptive value in negativity, and strive to embody the paradox that life might mean more for seeming to mean less.

‘The Darkness of These Beaches’: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, Swinburne’s ‘By the North Sea’ and the Atheistic Sublime

‘By the North Sea’ (1880) is one of Swinburne’s most deeply considered responses to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and to the culture of Victorian doubt more

⁶² Ibid., 83.

⁶³ Ibid., 79 and 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 79-81.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

broadly.⁶⁶ This poem is now often cited as a counterexample to the old critical orthodoxy that slighted all of Swinburne's 'Putney' poems – that is, the vast body of poetry he produced after 1878, when, following an alcoholic breakdown, he retreated to a semi-reclusive life in Putney under the care of his friend, Theodore Watts-Dunton, a now largely forgotten but then-respected man of letters. It was once often speculated that Watts-Dunton monitored not only Swinburne's drinking and socialising but his writing, and that under the Putney regime, Swinburne's iconoclastic impulses flamed out and he produced ever more decorous and turgid poems. Yet, as Riede has noted, if Watts-Dunton sought to impose respectability on Swinburne's poetry as narrowly as legend has it, he must have been 'exceedingly imperceptive to think ['By the North Sea'] the best poem Swinburne had ever written', since the 'not terribly safe subject of the poem is Swinburne's vehement anti-Christianity'.⁶⁷ Since its critical rehabilitation in the 1970s, 'By the North Sea' has primarily been read as an engagement with the nexus between Christianity and the Romantic tradition, and specifically as an anti-theistic critique of Wordsworthian nature.⁶⁸ Yet by 1880, a Wordsworthian vision of a benevolent nature imbued with divine purpose had been made to seem problematic even to many Christian minds by the revelations of Victorian science and, perhaps more importantly in terms of understanding Swinburne's work, had been undermined by Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. When Swinburne attempts to write an anti-theistic nature poem such as 'By the North Sea', he is preoccupied less with confident Christian belief or with Wordsworthian naturalism than with the cultural resonance of Tennyson's 'honest doubt' and with Tennyson's Gothic and apocalyptic visions of a godless nature. More broadly, 'By the North Sea' is a complex negotiation of the problem that, as a poetic topic, atheism had been imaginatively colonised by an older and culturally influential generation of doubters and agnostics like Tennyson, J. A. Froude, Clough, and Arnold, all of

⁶⁶ Swinburne, 'By the North Sea', *CPWII*, 99-524.

⁶⁷ David Riede, *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 162.

⁶⁸ See Andrew Fippinger, 'Intimations and Imitations of Immortality: Swinburne's 'By the North Sea' and 'Poeta Loquitur'', *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009):675-690; McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 154-164; and Riede, *Swinburne*, 162-181.

whom identified it with nihilism, melancholia, and moral degeneration. The ambition of 'By the North Sea' is to cast atheism in affirmative terms, as a refinement rather than an emptying out of meaning and as an empowerment rather than a negation of the human. To this end, Swinburne attempts to formulate an atheistic sublime: a vision that incorporates the vertiginous terror that doubters and agnostics often associated with atheism, but which ultimately transfigures that terror into rapture.

'By the North Sea' was inspired by the ruins on the Dunwich coast in Suffolk. Swinburne clearly found the site an apt symbol of his conviction that Christianity was moribund. Dunwich had been a flourishing port and cathedral city in the Middle Ages, but over centuries, much of the city was destroyed by coastal erosion, and by the time of Swinburne's visit in 1875, its cathedral as well as its six churches and their graveyards were in the process of toppling into the sea. Swinburne was not the only nineteenth-century observer to find in Dunwich a Gothic literalisation of the potentially disintegrating effect of scientific knowledge upon providential understandings of the world. The ruins are also accorded a brooding passage in Charles Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830-33) that serves as a suggestive gloss on Swinburne's poem:

On the verge of a cliff, which the sea has undermined, are represented the unshaken tower and western end of an abbey. The eastern aisle is gone, and the pillars of the cloister are soon to follow. The waves have almost isolated the promontory, and invaded the cemetery, where they have made sport with the mortal relics, and thrown up a skull upon the beach. In the foreground is seen a broken tombstone, erected, as its legend tells, 'to *perpetuate* the memory' of one whose name is obliterated, as is that of the county for which he was 'Custos Rotulorum'. A cormorant is perched on the monument, defiling it, as if to remind some moraliser like Hamlet of 'the base uses' to which things sacred may be turned. Had this excellent artist desired to satirise certain popular theories of geology, he might have inscribed the stone to the memory of some philosopher who taught 'the permanency of

existing continents’—‘the era of repose’—‘the impotence of modern causes’.⁶⁹

Although there is no evidence that Swinburne read Lyell, the centrality of Lyellian geology to the literature of the Victorian crisis of faith and as an intertext within *In Memoriam* is well known, and the association of geology with the spectre of atheism certainly would have been familiar to Swinburne.⁷⁰ As is often rehearsed, Tennyson’s grief over Hallam was exacerbated by his reading of scientific texts, perhaps most notably Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* and Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of Creation* (1844), which unsettled his faith (or perhaps only deepened his doubts) in natural theology.⁷¹ This branch of theology, which was given a popular and very influential testament at the beginning of the nineteenth century with William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802), attempted to enfold empiricism within Christianity by postulating that evidence of a divine ordering logic could be found in natural phenomena. Prior to the advent of Darwinian science, Lyell’s ‘uniformitarian’ theory of the earth posed one of the most alarming challenges to the Biblical account of creation and to natural theology by introducing a vision of a world constituted by non-teleological flux. Lyell presented evidence for the extinction of species and claimed that even the most monumental natural formations were created over aeons by earthly, observable forces such as wind, water erosion, and volcanic activity. While Lyell sought to evade religious controversy, his dissemination of a concept of ‘deep time’ played an important role in popularising within the Victorian imagination a vision of the natural world intimidating in its indifference to human values and in

⁶⁹ Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth’s Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation*, vol.1, 2nd edition (London: John Murray, 1832), 313-314.

⁷⁰ For an overview of geology as a source of religious despair in Victorian literature, see Dennis R. Dean’s “‘Through Science to Despair’: Geology and the Victorians”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 360 (1981): 116-136.

⁷¹ For discussions of Tennyson and geology, see J.M. I. Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment: the Effect of Geological Discoveries on English Society and Literature Between 1820 and 1859* (Leiden, New York and Köln: Brill, 1997), 168-176; and ‘Varieties of Geological Experience: Religion, Body, and Spirit in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*’, *Victorian Poetry* 42.2 (2004): 113-133. Tomko’s article also drew my attention to Lyell’s reflections on the coast of Dunwich.

which the only principle of stability inhered, ironically, in the forces of change.⁷² Tennyson's *In Memoriam* frames some of its most famous moments of religious despair with Lyellian geology. For instance, as Virginia Zimmerman points out, lyric XXXV 'clearly evokes a Lyellian view of landscape shaped by water; over the "long result of time" continents erode to nothing more than dust'.⁷³

The moanings of the homeless sea,
The sound of streams that swift or slow
Draw down Æonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be;

And Love would answer with a sigh,
'The sound of that forgetful shore
Will change my sweetness more and more,
Half-dead to know that I shall die'.
(9-16)⁷⁴

The image of a coast eroded by the sea assails not only the speaker's hopes of immortality but his belief in Love, which seems to refer to a desire to believe in divine love as the motive force within nature as well his desire to believe in love as the motive force within humanity. Though apparently lamenting the loss of an anthropocentric understanding of nature, Tennyson's language remains strikingly anthropomorphic: the sea is in mourning for its homelessness just as its erosion of the coastline makes the speaker mourn his homelessness within nature; the shoreline is 'forgetful' of itself, or insensible to human needs, just as a confrontation with such an insensible nature may cause humanity to forget its highest ideals. In one of the poem's most cited passages, the fossil record and 'deep' geological time provoke the speaker to imagine less an indifferent nature than a redoubtable mother nature who has – like a Medea or Lady MacBeth – unsexed herself by repressing her own compassionate feelings:

⁷² For the impact of Lyell's concept of 'deep time' on the Victorian imagination, see Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 35-60.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁴ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 378.

Are God and Nature then at strife,
 That Nature lends such evil dreams?
 So careful of the type she seems,
 So careless of the single life;

.....
 ‘So careful of the type?’ but no.
 From scarpèd cliff and quarried stone
 She cries, ‘A thousand types are gone;
 I care for nothing, all shall go’.

.....
 Man, her last work, who seemed so fair
 Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
 Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,
 Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
 And love Creation’s final law –
 Though Nature, red in tooth and claw
 With ravine, shrieked against his creed –

(LV. 5-8, LVI.1-4, 9-16) ⁷⁵

As James Eli Adams remarks of these lyrics, ‘[Nature] mysteriously withdraws the care the poet has come to expect, leaving him baffled, abandoned, and fearful: clearly this Nature incarnates that strangely tenacious and central theme of nineteenth-century literature and art, the demonic woman. In Tennyson’s personification ... the male observer is held in thrall when a feminine Nature, formerly beautiful and benign, discloses an unexpected and terrifying enigma of violent purpose’.⁷⁶ Adams suggests that this moment of almost Gothic misogyny, which retains the archetypal understanding of nature as a mother but recasts her as a negligent or murderous one, reflects the speaker’s psychic resistance to the distressing scientific knowledge whose implications he is unwilling fully to contemplate: ‘Tennyson’s trope ... can be viewed as a desperate effort to humanise the results of science by envisioning nature even in its bleakest aspects

⁷⁵ Ibid., 397-399.

⁷⁶ James Eli Adams, ‘Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin’, in *Tennyson: Longman Critical Readers*, ed. Rebecca Stott (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 96.

as a conscious, designing being, however perverse'.⁷⁷ The tension between the speaker's sense of intellectual awe at geological time and his emotional resistance to imagining its implications for human life can also be felt in lyric CXXIII:

There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

But in my spirit will I dwell,
And dream my dream, and hold it true;
For though my lips may breathe adieu,
I cannot think the thing farewell.
(1-12)⁷⁸

Geological science here furnishes Tennyson with a dazzling metaphor for the dissolution of Christian belief it threatens to induce: where once stood 'the tree' (which doubles as a metonym for familiar, solid land and as a reference to the tree of life, a Jewish symbol that often represents Christ within the Christian tradition), now there is only abyssal scepticism, or terrifying vistas of ceaseless, purposeless fluidity. Yet Tennyson's identification of religious doubt with an incoherent vista of ever-forming and fleeing shadows, oceans, and clouds is not simply an enactment of the slippery slope between scientific knowledge and unbelief. As Daniel Cook has pointed out, unbelief within the Christian theological tradition is 'not often represented as a position, but as *no position* at all, a utopia in the most etymologically pure sense of that word' (emphasis in original) and the troping of unbelief as phantasmal or self-consuming pervades Victorian crisis of faith literature.⁷⁹ Cook writes:

⁷⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁸ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 468-469.

⁷⁹ Daniel Cook, 'Froude's Post-Christian Apostate and the Uneven Development of Unbelief', *Religion & Literature* 38.2 (2006), 56.

Images of the unreal sceptic in his vacant world ... crop up everywhere in Victorian narratives of lost faith ... the world of the sceptic is figured as an ocean, ... a flat surface where nothing stands in relief because nothing has any ontological or epistemological priority to anything else ... This is only one set of images that links a phantom selfhood with speculation and the annihilating aporia to which speculation apparently leads. At other times the sceptic is in (or becomes) a wilderness, and in a third set of metaphors, the sceptic's mind is figured as the shadow cast by a cloud ... For Arnold as for Froude, the sceptic's self is a kind of blank slate which cannot internalise or structure experience – especially intellectual experience – in a meaningful way.⁸⁰

Swinburne's 'By the North Sea' is an attempt to revise the 'through science to despair' topos that animates some of the most poignant lyrics of *In Memoriam*, as well as the association between unbelief and all-dissolving nihilism that haunted the Victorian imaginary. Swinburne was certainly preoccupied with Tennyson's poetic career around the time he composed the poem: the following year, he published a long, largely admiring essay in the *Fortnightly Review* comparing Tennyson to Alfred du Musset, while in November of the same year, after having read Tennyson's poem 'Despair: A Dramatic Monologue' in the *The Nineteenth Century*, he wrote an acerbic parody of Tennyson's religious politics entitled 'Disgust: A Dramatic Monologue'.⁸¹ His essay on Tennyson and de Musset includes an ambivalent attack on *In Memoriam*, which Swinburne characterises as an extraordinary poem marred by its hypocritical sermonising and 'pretentiously unpretentious philosophy':⁸²

Mr. Tennyson is so ostentatious of his modesty, so unsparing in his reserve, so incessant and obtrusive in his disclaimer of all ambition to rank as a thinker or a teacher, while returning again and yet again to the charge as an ethical apostle or a sentimental theosophist ... it is hardly reasonable to touch repeatedly and with obvious earnestness on the gravest and the deepest questions of life

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁸¹ Tennyson, 'Despair', *Nineteenth Century* 10.57 (1881): 629-640. Swinburne, 'Tennyson and Musset', *Fortnightly Review* 170.29 (1881):129-153; and 'Disgust: A Dramatic Monologue', *Major Poems*, 424-426.

⁸² Swinburne, 'Tennyson', 145.

and death, of human affection and moral bereavement – to pour forth page upon page of passionate speculation, of love and fear and hope and doubt and belief, and then to turn around ... with the surely astonishing protest that it does not pretend to grapple with the questions on which it harps and the mysteries of which it treats ... But the possession of a book so wholly noble and so profoundly beautiful in itself is more precious than the most coherent essay towards the solution of any less insoluble problem.⁸³

It was also Tennyson's tendency to assume the role of 'sentimental theosophist' that led Swinburne to deride his alarmist representations of atheism in poems such as 'Despair'. Tennyson makes the premise of 'Despair' plain in a headnote to the poem: 'A man and his wife, having lost faith in a God, and hope of a life to come, and being utterly miserable in this, resolve to end themselves by drowning. The woman is drowned, but the man is rescued by a minister of the sect he had abandoned'.⁸⁴ Although purporting to be a dramatic poem, 'Despair' makes little effort to endow its speaker with a convincing persona, and the poem is essentially a jeremiad against 'horrible infidel writings' and what Tennyson called 'this terrible age of unfaith':⁸⁵

Have I crazed myself over their horrible infidel writings? O yes,
 For these are the new dark ages, you see, of the popular press,
 When the bat comes out of his cave, and the owls are whooping at noon,
 And Doubt is the lord of this dunghill and crows to the sun and the moon,
 Till the Sun and the Moon of our science are both of them turn'd into
 blood,
 And Hope will have broken her heart, running after a shadow of good:
 For their knowing and know-nothing books are scattered from hand to
 hand –
We have knelt in your know-all chapel too looking over the sand.
 (88-95)⁸⁶

As McSweeney suggests, the reference to infidel writings is perhaps a veiled swipe at Swinburne, though it also surely refers to the popular secularist

⁸³ Ibid., 145-146.

⁸⁴ Tennyson, 'Despair', 629.

⁸⁵ Tennyson's son Hallam claimed in his 1899 memoir that 'this terrible age of unfaith' was a characteristic phrase of his father's. Quoted in Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment*, 169.

⁸⁶ Tennyson, 'Despair', 637-638.

movements that were gathering force in the 1870s.⁸⁷ Elsewhere in the poem, the speaker's conviction that world is 'a fatherless hell' (57) is linked to his bitter perception of the transience of love and his desire to drown at sea, which certainly registers as an attack on trademark Swinburne themes.⁸⁸ McSweeney observes that 'Despair' also rehearses in a shriller key one of the axioms of *In Memoriam*: loss of belief in divine love entails the degradation of human love. The speaker's capacity to believe in human love also hinges upon immortality: for in a godless world, in which death 'were seen/at first as Death', love would be 'mere fellowship of sluggish moods', or assume 'the coarsest Satyr-shape' (XXXV.18-19, 21-22).⁸⁹

In 'Disgust', Swinburne satirises the astronomical imagery used to convey the abyssal nature of atheism in 'Despair', suggesting that Tennyson's fears of an incoherent cosmos are spectres conjured by his addled logic and ponderous style:

And the infinitesimal sources of Infinite Unideality
 Curve into the central abyss of a sort of a queer Personality
 Whose refraction is felt in the nebulae strewn in the pathway of Mars
 Like the parings of nails Æonian – clippings and snippings of stars –
 Shavings of suns that revolve and evolve and involve – and at times
 Give a sweet astronomical twang to remarkably hobbling rhymes.
(33-38)⁹⁰

This is also a satire on *In Memoriam*, where astronomical speculation is as crucial as meditations on geology to the speaker's intellectualised doubts. The continuity between Swinburne's parodic energies and more serious efforts to engage with the Victorian culture of doubt is perceptible if we place 'Despair' alongside 'By the North Sea'.⁹¹ The first section of the poem is a critique of the Gothic or decadent excesses in which the human imagination indulges when confronted with an indifferent nature. As every critic notes, the first stanza of the poem offers a vision of nature almost hallucinatory in its desolation. What has

⁸⁷ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 18. The secularist movement reached the peak of its cultural prominence in the early 1880s. See Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 204-268.

⁸⁸ Tennyson, 'Despair', 634.

⁸⁹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 379.

⁹⁰ Swinburne, 'Disgust', 425.

⁹¹ Swinburne, 'By the North Sea', *CPVII*, 507-524.

been overlooked – perhaps because of a still-persistent tendency to suspect that Swinburne’s use of extravagant effects is generally motiveless – is the very deliberate hyperbole in the first section of the poem, which aims to dramatise the irrational cast of a modern consciousness that, because divested of faith in a divinely created and ordered cosmos, perceives the natural world only in terms of nightmarish absences and negations:

A land that is lonelier than ruin;
 A sea that is stranger than death:
 Far fields that a rose never blew in,
 Wan waste where the winds lack breath;
 Waste endless and boundless and flowerless
 But of marsh-blossoms fruitless as free;
 Where earth lies exhausted, as powerless
 To strive with the sea.

(1-8)

The profusion of sibilants, including five repetitions of the suffix ‘-less’, in the final four lines, hints that there is something excessive or even histrionic in apprehending this landscape through such a *via negativa*. This rhetoric of negation pervades *In Memoriam*; for instance, as David W. Shaw notes, the first seven sections of the poem use ‘various grammatical forms of the word ‘no’ (including the prefixes ‘in’ and ‘un’ and the suffix ‘less’ eighteen times’.⁹² In the following stanza, Swinburne gestures at the proximity between such a gloomy view of nature and superstitious belief: the grass is said to be as ‘thick woven as the weft of a witch is/Round the heart of a thrall that hath sinned’ (13-14). The poem provides a kind of etiology of Christian belief: the spectacle of a place like Dunwich, a stark rebuke to human effort, gives rise to a superstitious dread of nature, and in turn to the polarity of a frightening Old Testament God and a merciful Christ, figures which are attacked as consolatory fictions in part vi of the poem. Yet the poem takes seriously even as it parodies the human tendency to experience nature’s indifference as Gothic malignity or decadent perversion. For instance, we might detect a parody of Tennyson’s more portentous personifications of nature in *In Memoriam* when Swinburne personifies the

⁹² David W. Shaw, ‘*In Memoriam* and the Rhetoric of Confession’, *ELH* 38.1 (1971), 92.

process of erosion as a ‘converse of desolate speech’ between two ‘lords’, death and the sea (26-40); yet Swinburne also aims to reveal the deeper roots of such anthropomorphic fantasies. He suggests that at the core of our superstitious dread of nature is a dread of sexuality, which is implicated in nature’s relentless process of destruction and renewal:

And her waters are haggard and yellow
 And crass with the scurf on the beach:
 And his garments are grey as the hoary
 Wan sky where the day lies dim;
 And his power is to her, and his glory,
 As hers unto him.

.....
 And year upon year dawns living,
 And age upon age drops dead:
 And his hand is not weary of giving,
 And the thirst of his heart is not fed:
 And the hunger that moans in her passion,
 And the rage in her hunger that roars,
 As a wolf’s that the winter lays lash on,
 Still calls and implores.

(27-32, 41-48)

This Baudelairean image of nature as a decrepit, sadomasochistic sexuality dramatises the extent to which the flux of natural processes can appear almost willfully to defile our moral and aesthetic distinctions. The anaphoric list underlines not merely the vast time-scale and unremitting force of such natural processes, but calls attention to the distortions such an idea wreaks upon the imagination, which cannot tolerate nature’s ambivalence, its convergence of creation and destruction (or, in Swinburne’s metaphor, sex and death) and so experiences it melodramatically, as horror piled on horror, and imputes to it a baleful agency. Once again appearing to parody Tennyson’s visions of a rapacious mother nature, Swinburne imagines a sea as a kind of ogress who has ‘slain by the thousand’ and whose ‘reefs the bloodguiltiest of murder’ by shipwreck still pale in comparison to the destruction wrought by ‘her’ sandbanks (51-53). Shipwreck is a key motif in *In Memoriam*, symbolic of the speaker’s loss of spiritual

moorings (he drifts ‘within a helmless bark’ [IV.3]) but also of God’s apparent incapacity or unwillingness to protect human life:⁹³

O mother, praying God will save
 Thy sailor – while thy head is bowed,
 His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud
 Drops in his vast and wandering grave.
 (VI. 13-16)⁹⁴

Elsewhere in *In Memoriam*, death at sea symbolises the desacralisation of death implied by a godless account of nature. Through a startling compression of ideas, the loss of faith in immortality not only renders the loss of Hallam literally as well as spiritually unredeemable – his body will be anonymously engulfed by the elements – but suggests his descent to a primeval order of creation:

..... O to us,
 The fools of habit, sweeter seems
 To rest beneath the clover sod,
 That takes the sunshine and the rains,
 Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
 The chalice of the grapes of God;

 Than if with thee the roaring wells
 Should gulf him fathom-deep in brine;
 And hands so often clasped in mine
 Should toss with tangle and with shells.
 (X.11-20)⁹⁵

The sea seems to lie outside God’s creation: where a consecrated burial in the soil would confirm the ‘chalice of the grapes of God’, death at sea is an exposure to the desecrating elements. This association of atheism with drowning in an abyssal sea, coupled with the hint that such drowning is also a return to primeval chaos, is revisited at the moment of the speaker’s epiphany of faith:

If e’er when faith had fallen asleep,
 I heard a voice ‘believe no more’
 And heard an ever-breaking shore

⁹³ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 348.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 355-356.

That tumbled in the Godless deep;
(CXXIV. 9-12)⁹⁶

The ruins at Dunwich provided Swinburne with a grotesque literalisation of these imaginative links between the loss of Christian belief, death-by-drowning, and the desecration of corpses. Like Lyell, Swinburne was struck by the way the ‘waves’ had ‘made sport with the mortal relics’ at Dunwich; in a letter to Lord Houghton, he claimed that all of his representation of the ‘dead cathedral city’ in the poem was taken ‘from life – salt marshes, ruins, and bones protruding seawards through the soil of the crumbling sandbanks’.⁹⁷ Clearly, however, Swinburne’s evocation of Dunwich is not simple naturalistic description but an ironic threnody to Christianity that fully exploits all the Grand Guignol possibilities of the scene. Throughout the poem, the sea embodies the very transgressive qualities that many Victorian readers, including Tennyson, associated with Swinburne himself: the sea is decadent, morbid, and sexually voracious; it ‘scoff[s]’ at Christian sentiment; it ‘shakes’ time-honoured conventions and flouts the rules of decorum (it ‘gives not thanks’ [453-460]). In this sense, ‘By the North Sea’ might be understood as obliquely self-reflexive, a meditation on Swinburne’s own disruptive role within Victorian culture; more precisely, it might be understood as a meditation on why his own poetics were often received as acts of desecration. As Louis notes, in the *Songs of the Springtides* and *Studies in Song* phase of his career (both volumes appeared in 1880; ‘By the North Sea’ was published in the latter), Swinburne frequently uses the sea as an image for the ‘amorality of the creative power’.⁹⁸ The distinction that ‘By the North Sea’ asks us to make between the reality of an amoral nature and our more Gothic fantasies of a depraved nature is the same distinction that, since ‘Notes on Poems and Reviews’, Swinburne had been asking his readers to make between aestheticism and immoralism, or between the representation of unpalatable truths in art and an immoral author. Nature in ‘By the North Sea’ may

⁹⁶ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 470.

⁹⁷ [Swinburne to Lord Houghton, December 18, 1880], *Swinburne Letters*, vol. 4, ed. Lang, 179.

⁹⁸ Louis, *Swinburne*, 120.

be taken in part as an image for the disaffiliated aesthete, who does not seek to desecrate ordinary moral values so much as to stand apart from them. Swinburne seeks to reveal the superstitious dimension of the imaginative slippage between the prospect of a godless or amoral nature and fearful sexual depravity that is often enacted in *In Memoriam* and which was a standard trope within the Victorian debate over Darwinian science. For Swinburne as for many Victorian readers and subsequent critics, Tennyson and Darwin were imaginatively associated, and the despairing sections of *In Memoriam* seemed an uncannily prophetic vision of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. In a parody of the Francis Bacon-Shakespeare authorship controversy, Swinburne adduced points of similarity between Tennyson's poem and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and joked that Darwin was in fact the author not only of *In Memoriam*, but of Tennyson's entire *oeuvre*.⁹⁹ Yet, as Dawson has shown, Darwinian science was also frequently identified with Swinburne's poetry and with aestheticism more broadly.¹⁰⁰ Dawson is largely silent on the question of how far this was an accurate representation of Swinburne's intentions, no doubt because Swinburne seldom engages explicitly with contemporary science in his poetry, critical writings or letters. Nonetheless, Dawson shows that explicit espousal of Darwinism or materialism was unnecessary for readers to draw such connections: critics simply inferred Swinburne's complicity with modern science from his anti-Christian polemics and the frequent use of the word 'fleshly' in his early poems.¹⁰¹ Building on Dawson's work, Jason Rudy suggests that contemporary critics were right to draw such an inference.¹⁰² Rudy cites a letter in which Swinburne reports his admiration for John Tyndall's 1874 Belfast address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (a speech notorious for its defense of materialism) and ventures a rare reflection upon the relationship between art and science:

⁹⁹ Swinburne, 'Dethroning Tennyson', *Nineteenth Century* 23.131 (1888), 127-129.

¹⁰⁰ Dawson, *Darwin*, 26-81.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰² Jason Rudy, *Electric Metres: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Columbia: Ohio University Press, 2006), 145.

Science so enlarged and harmonized gives me a sense as much of rest as of light ... Even my technical ignorance does not impair, I think, my power to see accurately and seize firmly the first thread of the great clue, because my habit of mind is not (I hope) unscientific, though my work lies in the field of art instead of science, and when seen and seized even that first perception gives me an indescribable sense as of music and repose. It is Theism which to me seems to introduce an element – happily a factitious element – of doubt, discord and disorder.¹⁰³

It is worth emphasising that Swinburne conceives of the points of convergence between his poetry and science as arising from his Romantic intuitions about the ‘great clue’ rather than hard knowledge or conscious design; we might also recall that his ‘Despair’ mocks not simply Tennyson’s theological speculations but his efforts to import scientific technicalities into poetry. While it is certainly true that Swinburne ‘does not shy from what others decried as “materialism”’ and I will discuss Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse* using the term, he resists being situated in the context of Victorian science in an important sense.¹⁰⁴ The touchstones for Swinburne’s critiques of Christianity are an eclectic cast ranging to Lucretius to Villon to de Sade to Hugo to Blake to Shelley, but the common denominator is that Swinburne principally understands his atheistic or heretical heroes as artists, and he rarely explicitly draws upon modern science to justify his rejection of Christianity. It thus seems strange to indict Swinburne – as John Holmes has done – for his failure to be rigorously Darwinian in his representations of human progress in poems such as ‘Hertha’; Swinburne never sought an intellectual warrant for his art in modern science, Darwinian or otherwise.¹⁰⁵ In *Under the Microscope*, Swinburne evinces a telling ambivalence toward the cultural authority of science: while he rejoices in its capacity to ‘clear the air of mythologic malaria’ and ‘religious pestilence’, he also mocks its

¹⁰³ [Swinburne to Theodore Watts-Dunton, August 29, 1874], *Letters* vol.2, ed. Lang, 334-335.

¹⁰⁴ Rudy, *Electric Metres*, 146.

¹⁰⁵ John Holmes, *Darwin’s Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 52.

pretensions to sovereignty as a form of knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Swinburne's anxiety about the diminishing cultural prestige of his own, largely literary stock of knowledge can be felt beneath the essay's exuberant satire, and actually makes him sound quite like the many Victorian religious thinkers who insisted that something essential necessarily eluded the grasp of science:

We live in an age when not to be scientific is to be nothing ... It is vain to reply, while admitting that truth cannot be reached by men who take no due account of facts, that each fact is not all the truth, each limb is not all the body, each thought is not all the mind; and that even men (if such there be) ignorant of everything but what other men have written may possibly not be ignorant of everything worth knowledge, destitute of every capacity worth exercise. One study alone, and one form of study is worthy of the time and the respect of men who would escape the contempt of their kind.¹⁰⁷

If Swinburne used 'fleshly' as a provocative synonym for materialism in his early poetry, his later work tends to frame the same position in more elevated and quasi-spiritual terms. A critics often note, the phrase 'spirit of sense', as well as variations upon it such as 'soul of sense', are ubiquitous in Swinburne's poetry and reflect his apprehension of a seamless identity between matter and spirit, body and soul – an idea that perhaps receives its most lucid statement in 'Hymn of Man', which celebrates 'indivisible spirit and blood, indiscernible body from soul' (50).¹⁰⁸ As Jerome McGann points out, Swinburne clearly uses his 'spirit of sense' *topos* to counter the traditional Christian elevation of spirit over flesh.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, the fact that he makes this gesture not by deploying scientific concepts in his poetry but by turning religious language against itself is an important feature of his secularism, since it enables him to posit secularism not as

¹⁰⁶ Swinburne, 'Under the Microscope', in *Swinburne Replies*, ed. Clyde K. Hyder (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 35.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁸ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 756. For discussions of the 'spirit in sense' *topos*, see Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, 'Knowledge and Sense Experience in Swinburne's Late Poetry', in *Singing Word*, ed. Levin, 21; Maxwell, *Swinburne*, 120; and McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 168-169.

¹⁰⁹ McGann, *Swinburne*, 196.

an effect of modern intellectual discoveries but as a primordial intuition which religion never managed to occlude.

Where Tennyson's speaker in *In Memoriam* is dismayed by his vision of a nature 'so careless of the single life', Swinburne makes the Lucretian point that there is little to regret in nature's indifference since in death we attain to the same state of indifference:

A multitude noteless of numbers,
As wild weeds cast on a heap:
And sounder than sleep are their slumbers,
And softer than song is their sleep;
And sweeter than all things and stranger
The sense, if perchance it may be,
That the wind is divested of danger
And scatheless the sea.

(65-72)

Swinburne's vision of the dead as 'a multitude of noteless numbers/as wild weed cast on a heap' chimes as a rejoinder to the anxious hopes of Tennyson's speaker:

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God has made the pile complete;
(LIV.5-8)¹¹⁰

Although Swinburne emphatically rejects such hopes for a benevolent plan underwriting nature's processes, he strives to recast the dreads of Tennyson's speaker in consolatory terms. At the end of section i, Swinburne claims that dissolution within nature's flux is a consummation devoutly to be wished: the 'doom of death' is 'more tender' than a God of 'judgment, the sword, and the rod', and the 'seal' of death's 'slumber' 'sweeter' than can be conceived, for, paradoxically, we are then preserved in the eternity of nature's changefulness (110-120). In section iii, Swinburne suggests that though the scene seems to epitomise the cruelty of nature, 'slowly, gladly full of peace and wonder/grows

¹¹⁰ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 396.

his heart who journeys here alone' (151-152), and the rest of the poem is an effort to give a felt quality to this paradox. His first move is simple: he emphasises that his lugubrious evocation of the erosion at Dunwich only represents one pole of the human response to nature; we are just as often impressed by a sense of nature's harmony and beauty (89-96). However, Swinburne's effort at consolation goes beyond an attempt to recast oblivion as a desirable fate or to celebrate the duality of our relationship to nature. The crux of his solution is elaborated in part iv of the poem. Discussing this section, McSweeney argues that Swinburne demands that we adopt a more 'objective' view of nature and renounce our desire for transcendence: 'death [is] the final end, absolute and without memorial, and that consequently man must learn to accept the circumstances of his life – symbolised by the bleak landscape – as sufficient to sustain and fulfill him'.¹¹¹ Yet the philosophical stance advocated in the poem is more riddling and more idealistic than this formulation allows. 'By the North Sea' is unusual though not unique among Swinburne's poems insofar as it accords dignity to the desire for transcendence. The poem suggests that it is in fact impossible emotionally to 'accept' the realities of the human lot and the indifference of nature, and ennobles this incapacity as the definition of the human. The urge to transcend the 'iron' (265) circumstances of life is itself the highest form of transcendence; 'song' (which critics of this poem have tended to identify with poetry only, but may be interpreted to mean human creativity or endeavour more broadly, including religion), always at core a protest against mortality, is itself the redemption of mortality. Another way to put this is to say that religious longings fulfill themselves by way of their futility, or succeed by way of their failure. Rather than advocating an 'objective' attitude toward nature or stoicism in the face of life's harshness, Swinburne identifies the human spirit with the restlessness of the wind, and proposes that we find a paradoxical satisfaction in this very dissatisfaction, since it is the only 'lordship' over nature or fate (both identified with the sea) available and is in any case the only kind worth wanting:

But nor satisfied ever nor weary

¹¹¹ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 159 and 164.

Is ever the wind.

The delight that he takes but in living
 Is more than of all things that live:
 For the world that has all things for giving
 Has nothing so goodly to give:
 But more than delight his desire is,
 For the goal where his pinions would be
 Is immortal as air or as fire is
 Immense as the sea.

.....
 For these have the toil and the guerdon
 That the wind has eternally: these
 Have part in the boon and the burden
 Of the sleepless unsatisfied breeze,
 That finds not, but seeking rejoices
 That possession can work him no wrong:
 And the voice at the heart of their voice is
 The sense of his song.

For the wind's is their doom and their blessing;
 To desire, and have always above
 A possession beyond their possessing,
 A love beyond reach of their love.
 Green earth has her sons and her daughters,
 And these have their guerdons; but we
 Are the wind's and the sun's and the water's,
 Elect of the sea.
 (281-290, 339-354)

Human aspiration, then, is better than the horizon it hallucinates; the real immortality or eternity is the 'pinions' of the imagination that conceives of it. A paradox of Swinburne's anti-theism is that he was as apt to admire as to deplore what, quoting Schelling, Louis calls the 'God-positing potencies of man', and the stanzas quoted above reveal some of the logic behind this paradox.¹¹² The human desire for transcendence or for a 'possession beyond [its] possessing' inspires sublime awe because of the ingenuity of its misrecognition of itself, which keeps it in the cycle of painful desire that is its secret aim.

'By the North Sea' additionally may be read as an effort to counter the pessimism of Arnold's 'Dover Beach', which also takes geological erosion as its

¹¹² Louis, *Swinburne*, 123.

figure for the inexorability of the retreat of Christianity; ‘the grating roar/Of pebbles which the waves draw back’ (9-10) portends the ebbing of ‘the Sea of Faith’ (21), which in turn threatens to afflict humanity with an austere materialistic vision of nature, or to expose ‘the naked shingles of the world’ (28).¹¹³ The second stanza of part iv of ‘By the North Sea’ resonates as an echo of Arnold’s despairing prophecy of a world which ‘hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain’ (33-34) and where ‘ignorant armies clash by night’ (37):

What houses and woodlands that nestle
Safe inland to lee of the hill
As it slopes from the headlands that wrestle
And succumb to the strong sea’s will?
Truce is not, nor respite, nor pity,
For the battle is waged not of hands
Where the grave of a city
The ghost of it stands.
(243-250)

Swinburne also seems to have Arnold in mind in his invocation of Hellenism in part iii of the poem. Yisrael Levin and Thaïs Morgan have emphasised Swinburne’s philhellenism, specifically his recuperation of the myth of Apollo, in his quest for spiritual alternatives to Christianity, yet ‘By the North Sea’ interestingly suggests that Hellenism is also an inadequate response to the spectacle of an indifferent nature.¹¹⁴ Swinburne uses Odysseus’s encounter with his mother Anticleia in the underworld in book xi of Homer’s *Odyssey* to emblematised the idea that the ancient Greek world was as preoccupied by the yearning for life after death as medieval Christianity (symbolised by the city of Dunwich). The scene at Dunwich is like Hades ‘dispeopled’ of ghosts and visions:

¹¹³ Arnold, *Poetical Works*, 210-212.

¹¹⁴ See Yisrael Levin’s ‘The Terror of Divine Revelation and Apollo’s Incorporation into Song: Swinburne’s Apollonian Myth’, *Victorian Review* 34.2 (2008):103-129 and Thaïs Morgan’s ‘The Sun of Faith, The Shadow of Doubt: Language and Knowledge in Swinburne’s Myth of Apollo’, *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 125-158.

All too sweet such men's Hellenic speech is,
 All too fain they lived of light to see,
 Once to see the darkness of these beaches,
 Once to sing this Hades found of me
 Ghostless, all its gulfs and creeks and reaches,
 Sky, and shore, and cloud, and waste, and the sea.
 (229-234)

In other words, Hellenism is of little use to the modern poet troubled by the cruelty of nature; ancient Greece was at once too invested in an ideal of 'sweetness' and 'light' and too superstitious, credulous of 'ghosts' and 'visions'. Arnold popularised the idea that ancient Greece embodied 'sweetness and light' in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).¹¹⁵ There, Arnold posits Hellenism as a free-floating, ahistorical paradigm that prioritises freedom, rationality, and aesthetic beauty; in contrast to what he calls 'Hebraism', the contending cultural paradigm of strict moral conscience, Hellenism aims 'to see things as they are' and embodies 'aerial ease, clearness and radiancy'.¹¹⁶ Swinburne's suggestion that Hellenic culture is too 'sweet' and 'light' to provide answers to the predicament of this poem may be taken to mean that an Arnoldian faith in high culture, ideal beauty and reason rings hollow in the face of the 'darkness of these beaches', or as a solution to a modern, sceptical crisis in the perception of nature. Where the Arnold of 'Dover Beach' takes comfort in the notion that Sophocles also knew the 'turbid ebb and flow of human misery' (17-18), Homer possesses no such talismanic power in 'By the North Sea'.

Swinburne warmly praises 'Dover Beach' in his essay on Arnold's poems: 'it has a grand choral cadence as of steady surges, regular in resonance, not fitful or gusty but antiphonal and reverberate'.¹¹⁷ Yet he passes over the poem quickly and without discussing its theme, doubtless because 'Dover Beach' is obviously a poem that contradicts one of the premises of his passionate apology for Arnold's poetry: namely, that Arnold transcended the age's stultifying preoccupation with

¹¹⁵ Arnold, *Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, V, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 165-167.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Swinburne, 'Arnold', 432.

the melancholia of doubt and lost faith. With an implicit sneer at *In Memoriam*, Swinburne extols Arnold's poetry thus: 'In his minor poems, Mr. Arnold has now and then given signs of that sad task of sweeping up dead leaves fallen from the dying tree of belief; but he has not wasted much time or strength on such sterile and stupid work. In [*Empedocles*], at all events, he has wasted none; here is no melodious whine of retrospective and regretful scepticism; here are no cobwebs of plea and counterplea, no jungles of argument and brakes of analysis'.¹¹⁸ Yet 'Dover Beach' is undeniably a poem of 'regretful scepticism', and elsewhere in his essay, Swinburne acknowledges that Arnold occasionally reverts to grieving over lost faith.¹¹⁹ The remorselessness of Swinburne's desire to attack not simply Christianity but the compensatory hope that melancholy might be a meaningful response to its loss seems to emerge from his perception that melancholic or elegiac sentiments are a furtive means of tarrying within the religious faith to which they appear to offer a requiem. Reflecting on Victorian poetry in general, John Schad makes this point eloquently:

The Victorian poets, and Tennyson in particular, knew this well; elegy, their characteristic mood and mode, is not just testimony to the passing of belief in transcendence but also a last-gasp perpetuation of that same transcendence. Hence, for instance, Emily Bronte's 'divinest anguish', Matthew Arnold's preoccupation with the 'nobleness of grief', and Tennyson's reference to 'some divine despair'. Arnold, in fact, laments that the nobleness of grief is gone – and so contrives to grieve even for the departure of grief, thus illustrating elegy's capacity to survive its own deconstruction. Arnold's line, then, serves as a gloss to [Tennyson's investment in] the 'far-off interest of tears'.¹²⁰

Although I have followed other critics of 'By the North Sea' and referred straightforwardly to 'a perceiving poet' or simply 'Swinburne' as the consciousness apprehending the scene at Dunwich, the 'I' voice is radically attenuated: a first-person singular voice appears explicitly in only ten lines of a

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 417.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 433.

¹²⁰ John Schad, 'The Divine Comedy of Language: Tennyson's *In Memoriam*', *Victorian Poetry* 31.2 (1993), 173.

524 line poem. A first-person plural voice appears at times ('Our father is lord of the day' [472]) but is also rare, and as a whole, the poem attempts to enact the ecstatic immersion of the self in the flux of nature that it celebrates: we read hundreds of lines of description of nature's processes, the vast majority of which are untethered from any particularised consciousness. As I have noted, this stark contraction of what we conventionally understand by 'deep' lyric interiority is common in Swinburne's poetry, but in the context of a poem about religious scepticism and the indifference of nature, it registers as a counterpoint to the plaintive confessional intimacy of the lyric voice of *In Memoriam*. As David Riede argues, the Romantic topos of melancholy self-division pervades Victorian poetry, but among Victorian poets, it was Tennyson who elaborated upon it most extensively and resonantly: it was his 'characteristic mood and poetic mode'.¹²¹ Though Swinburne's indebtedness to a Romantic poetic tradition (for him consisting principally of a radical trinity of Shelley, Blake, and Hugo) is often remarked and he plausibly might be called a late Romantic, Swinburne's originality as a poet could be said to inhere partly in the way a vast number of his poems reject Romantic melancholy, which became so closely associated with religious doubt that Swinburne swerved from it and sought alternative ways of imagining the human condition. Even a poem like 'The Triumph of Time' (1866), which takes a (possibly autobiographical) situation of unrequited or failed romantic love as its subject and might superficially seem a rather conventional instance of the melancholic or elegiac mood in Victorian poetry, ultimately affirms that loss is liberation, the chance for a joyous dissolution of the self.¹²² If the poem's speaker is contemplating suicide, as critics sometimes suggest, then he imagines it as a peculiarly invigorating experience, richly providing the fulfillment that he could not find in love.¹²³

I will go back to the great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea,

¹²¹ Riede, *Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 41.

¹²² Swinburne, *CPWI*, 34-47.

¹²³ See for example Riede, *Mythmaking*, 64.

I will go down to her, I and none other,
 Close with her, kiss her and mix her with me;
 Cling to her, strive with her, hold her fast;
 O fair white mother, in days long past
 Born without sister, born without brother,
 Set free my soul as thy soul is free.

O fair green-girdled mother of mine,
 Sea that art clothed with the sun and the rain,
 Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine,
 Thy large embraces are keen like pain.

(257-268)

In other words, Swinburne persistently invokes the sublime as a remedy to Victorian melancholy over doubt and lost faith (or, it could be said, turns one trope heavily associated with Romantic poetry against another). ‘By the North Sea’ recommends just such a sublime cure. It ends with a celebration of the demise of Christianity, which is now fully conflated with the Gothic imagery of the first section of the poem – ‘the Gods of the night/lie rotten/And their honour be taken away’ (501-502). In other words, the poem’s opening vision of nature-as-nightmare is now explicitly identified as a symptom of Christianity in its death throes. In its stead, Swinburne apotheosises the life-giving aspects of the natural world, symbolised by the sun (513-524). The evocation of wine, flowers, madness and music in the poem’s penultimate stanza is a homage to the Dionysian ecstasy that is one of the gifts of giving oneself over to sheer immanence and integration within the flux of the natural world. Yet even as he honours the creative and sensual aspects of nature, Swinburne keeps its more forbidding and destructive powers in view; Time, ‘haggard and changeful and hoary’, remains ‘master and God of the land’ (485-486), while the wind is again associated with human ‘dreams’ (we know from earlier in the poem that these ‘dreams’ are the perennial longing for transcendence [523]). The complex network of imagery here attempts to reinscribe the Gothic Christian vision of the sea and earth as sadomasochistic sexuality at the beginning of the poem as an atheistic sublime: life consists of a perpetual cycle of creation and deconstruction, which Time at once ‘gives’ and ‘takes’; the only transcendent element amid this

natural economy is the human ‘song’ that bears witness to the ambivalence of our immersion within such flux. This celebration of ambivalence contrasts tellingly with the redemptive solution proposed in *In Memoriam*. Tennyson’s speaker jettisons the natural theology that provoked him to ‘ghastliest doubt[s]’ (CXXIV.2) in favour of a fideistic recovery of Christian belief:¹²⁴

I found Him not in world or sun,
Or eagle’s wing, or insect’s eye;
Nor through the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun:
.....
A warmth within my breast would melt
The freezing reason’s colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered ‘I have felt’.
(CXXIV.2, 5-8, 13-16)¹²⁵

As Michael Tomko has argued, faith is here recuperated at the expense of the earthly and corporeal: ‘a spiritualised inner life founded on the impassable barrier of soul and body, pearl and shell, has replaced any external basis of religion’.¹²⁶ Tennyson’s fear that a faith grounded in reverence for nature tends inexorably toward a ‘secular abyss’ (LXXVI.6) leads him to posit ‘an absolute bifurcation of body and soul’ that can quarantine the value of the spiritual against the encroachments of modern science as well as against more his visceral epiphanies of nature’s cruelty.¹²⁷ In other words, the sensuous materialism that Leighton finds suggestive of Tennyson’s affinities with aestheticism is decisively renounced, and the final sections of the poem celebrate, as Tomko vividly puts it, a ‘de-anatomised’ or ‘eviscerated’ faith.¹²⁸ As I have been emphasising, Swinburne’s aestheticism aims at an unreserved affirmation of the sensuous and earthly, and ‘By the North Sea’ is an attempt to accommodate the darker implications of an atheistic materialism – so vividly imagined by Tennyson –

¹²⁴ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 469.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹²⁶ Tomko, ‘Varieties of Geological Experience’, 127.

¹²⁷ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 415, and Tomko, ‘Geological Experience’, 127.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 129-130.

within a redemptive vision, and to avow that even the worst aspects of a desacralised nature can be greeted with ‘music and repose’. Though at the end of the poem Swinburne emphasises the humility of the poet’s role within the natural world, there is a certain grandiosity implicit: he calls attention to the idea that his poem overcomes an impasse within the conventional understandings of the relationship between humanity, religion and nature; his atheistic ‘thanksgiving’ toward nature has been ‘mute’ within humanity for too ‘long’ because of the melancholic, Tennysonian and Arnoldian perception that the loss of God would entail the loss of a perception of nature’s glory. (As Swinburne surely knew, his attempt to conceive of an atheistic sublime in poetry was not without precedent: though I have been highlighting the Victorian rather than the Romantic intertexts within ‘By the North Sea’, the use of geological erosion as the symbol for an atheistic sublime inevitably invites comparison with Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’ [1816].)

Swinburne’s habitual reaching after paradox necessarily produces ambiguities within the thread of polemical secularism I have been tracing in his poetry. Thais Morgan analyses some of these ambiguities in her study of major Swinburne poems (including ‘By the North Sea’) that attempt to supplant the Christian God with a renewal of the myth of Apollo. Morgan finds Swinburne’s mythopoesis highly problematic and argues that his dependence on poetic conceits heavy with Christian connotation such as ‘God’, ‘Light’, ‘Lord’, and ‘Heaven’ is symptomatic of a compulsive reversion to Christian habits of mind. Of ‘By the North Sea’, she writes: ‘The vacillation between agnosticism which informs parts i-iii and vi of the poem and the transcendent revelations claimed in parts iv and viii supports the point that Swinburne never completely settled on either side of the debate over faith and doubt, but continued instead to take refuge in the myth of Apollo as a supposedly aesthetic solution to an essentially religious problem’.¹²⁹ She goes on to claim that the poem entangles itself in the ‘fundamental contradiction of deism without a deity’.¹³⁰ Yet ‘By the North Sea’

¹²⁹ Morgan, ‘Sun of Faith’, 150-152.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

never explicitly invokes Apollo (just as it keeps its invocation of Dionysius an implicit allusion) and Swinburne resists turning his apostrophe to the sun and his celebration of the power of art into a hymn to Apollo at the end of the poem; as noted, part iii of the poem actually rejects Hellenism as a possible remedy to the problem of a natural world that can seem unbearably cruel and death-ridden. Rather, 'By the North Sea' exalts only the sun and time as objects of reverence, or the processes of life and death – a move that seems less vulnerable to the charge of latent theism or Christianity than Morgan's critique suggests. Morgan also identifies a problem not peculiar to Swinburne's imagination but endemic to atheistic poetry: as Martin Priestman puts it, 'how can a form dedicated to presenting a sublimely elevated view of nature and man's place within it do so without borrowing from the religious imagery which in most cultures invests that position of elevation?'¹³¹ Swinburne often displays a keen awareness of the vexed nature of attempting to formulate new, liberatory creeds out of ideas or metaphors associated Christianity, or, as he puts it in 'Before a Crucifix', 'Let not thy tree of freedom be/Regrafted from that rotting tree' (156).¹³² I would suggest that, rather an unreflective harkening after Christian paradigms, 'By the North Sea' is a self-conscious effort to dissolve the polarity which underpins Morgan's critique and which also structured the Victorian debate over faith and doubt: that is, the identification of longings for transcendence and consolation, as well of feelings of awe and reverence, with Christian piety on the one hand, and the identification of atheism with 'freezing reason' or annihilating emptiness on the other. In the same year 'By the North Sea' was published, Swinburne expressed his frustration with this polarity in a review of Hugo's *Religions et Religion* (1880):

A creed which is based on deicide and sustained on theophagy is never more insupportably laughable ... than when its advocates denounce or deride their antagonists as – of all opprobrious names on earth – materialists. The men of our own day are far indeed from being the first to remark on the incomparable drollery of such a term of reproach from lips which profess belief in the mortality of an immortal, in the interruption of an eternity; but no thinker or

¹³¹ Priestman, *Romantic Atheism*, 44.

¹³² Swinburne, *CPWI*, 746.

reasoner of the past ever brought heavier or sharper weapons from the armoury of reason for the panoply of truth to bear upon the monstrous and murderous absurdities of his day than here has Victor Hugo in our own. ... As all the pleading and reasoning powers of [Newman] in that most memorable argument were lavished on the demonstration of the fact or circulation of the fallacy that there is no sure refuge from the pelting storm of nihilistic dogmatism but in the bosom of a deicidal and theophagous Christianity, so here all the reasoning and pleading powers of a greater than he girt up to deny and dispute it ... the direct aim of this book is ... to answer those who contend that positive nihilism or nihilistic positivism is inevitable if Christianity as expressed in its creeds and embodied in its sacraments be incredible ...¹³³

Swinburne's habit of defining Christianity in terms conventionally used to stigmatise atheism – nihilism, materialism – reflects his wider strategy of appropriating and transvaluing standard tropes within the Victorian literature of doubt. Behind this iconoclastic habit of appropriation lies a refusal to be 'impaled' on 'two long-horned and sharp-edged alternatives', Christianity and nihilism. Morgan's claim that Swinburne's myth of Apollo represents an aesthetic evasion of an 'essentially religious problem' also overlooks the extent to which Swinburne sought to destabilise the 'essential' distinctions between the aesthetic and the religious (often explicitly at the expense of the latter), and to suggest that modes of feeling officially arrogated to religion belonged equally or more truly to the province of art.

'A Note of Rapture in the Tune of Life': Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*, Tennyson's 'The Last Tournament' and Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*

It is well known that Swinburne wrote *Tristram of Lyonesse* partly as a riposte to Tennyson's rendering of the Tristram and Iseult legend in 'The Last Tournament' (1871) from *Idylls of the King*, but Swinburne's critique of Tennyson had a special edge in this instance because the 'The Last Tournament' was itself quite

¹³³ Swinburne, 'Victor Hugo: *Religions et Religion*', *Fortnightly Review* 27.162 (1880), 762-763.

plainly an indictment of Swinburne's work.¹³⁴ By 1871, Tennyson had apparently grown sensitive to the fact that he had a poetic rival in Swinburne, and in 'The Last Tournament', he dramatised his abhorrence for Swinburne's 'fleshly' poetics and the materialist philosophy which underpinned them. To the extent that Swinburne's poetry had given credence to the widespread suspicion that 'atheism' or 'materialism' were metonyms for *all* subversion – moral, political, sexual, and artistic – Tennyson's critique of Swinburne in 'The Last Tournament' could not be said to falsify the implications of his poetry; if it demonised his work, it did so in ways that Swinburne had invited. Yet if Tennyson's critique had its justice, it arguably repressed the most threatening aspect of Swinburne's vision insofar as 'The Last Tournament' depicted secular materialism as sterile and disenchanting. Unsurprisingly, it is on this very ground that Swinburne seeks to rehabilitate his own position in *Tristram*: his epic is a long paean to the higher 'rapture' (VIII. 429) and 'strenuous joy' (VIII. 562) to be discovered both in erotic love and in a materialist view of the world.¹³⁵ For Swinburne, this is as much an aesthetic contest as it is an argument about the nature of things: he poured vitriol on Tennyson's *Idylls* because he felt that Tennyson's Christian moralism had led him to produce a mean and jaundiced epic, one which deprived the ancient legends of their sublimity.

'The Last Tournament' is arguably the bleakest poem in Tennyson's richly pessimistic *Idylls*. Although Tennyson denied that the *Idylls* operated as a strict allegory, he conceded that it had a 'an allegorical or perhaps parabolic drift', and 'The Last Tournament' is also one of the idylls in which his desire to make the legend of Arthur serve as a tragic parable of the Victorian crisis of faith is most legible.¹³⁶ Within Tennyson's overarching design, the story of Tristram and Iseult figures as part of an epidemic of adultery that is both symptom and cause of the

¹³⁴ See Bates Stevenson, 'Swinburne and Tennyson', 185-189.

¹³⁵ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 125 and 129.

¹³⁶ Quoted in David Staines, *Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and Its Medieval Sources* (Wilfrid Laurier Press: Waterloo, Canada, 1982), 153.

moral degeneration of Camelot and of its ultimate unraveling.¹³⁷ Throughout the poem, sexual infidelity both produces and symbolises a universal faithlessness: Guinevere's betrayal of King Arthur and love affair with Lancelot has a contagious effect in Camelot, precipitating not only other adulteries, but a fatal cynicism toward all abstract ideals and social bonds. While Tennyson's allegory is certainly plangent with generalised forebodings about the foundations of the Victorian social order – patriarchy, monarchy, empire – the linguistic and imaginative link between sexual and religious 'infidelity' is the master trope of the poem, enabling the proliferation of other allegorical meanings. In effect, Tennyson returns to the concept of 'infidelity' in order to recuperate an earlier cultural moment when unbelief could be construed as a predominantly *moral* rather than an intellectual matter. As Colin Jager observes in a different context, 'fides (faith) carries with it the sense of trust in something or someone. For most of Christian history, therefore, an "infidel" was someone in a moral rather than an epistemological predicament; he hasn't so much lost a "belief" as he has violated a relationship'.¹³⁸ The imaginative force of this link is what gives substance to the key premise of Tennyson's poem: knowledge of a sexual infidelity can destroy the possibility of faith for an entire society. The supposed co-implication of sexual and religious infidelity prompts Arthur to characterise Guinevere's sexuality as if it were a pernicious new ideology, spreading with particular virulence among the young:

Her station, taken everywhere for pure,
 She like a new disease, unknown to men,
 Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,
 Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps
 The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse
 With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.
 (515-519)¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Tucker makes this point slightly differently, noting that the 'the infidelity of Arthur's queen and chief knight serves as both a metaphoric symbol for the collapse of Camelot and its metonymic cause'. See Tucker, 'The Epic Plight of Troth in *Idylls of the King*', *ELH* 58.3 (1991), 707.

¹³⁸ Colin Jager, 'Shelley After Atheism', *Studies in Romanticism* 49.4 (2010), 616.

¹³⁹ Tennyson, 'Guinevere' (1859), *Idylls of the King*, ed. J. M. Gray (London: Penguin, 1996), 282.

Scepticism is infectious because, as Tennyson emphasises, faith is a communal phenomenon. Throughout the poem, belief seems to depend upon one's capacity to believe in the belief of others, and characters doubt or believe by example. Thus Lancelot says to Guinevere, 'I may not well believe that you believe' (1190); conversely, Galahad commits to the quest for the Holy Grail because he 'believe[s] in [the] belief' of a visionary nun (165).¹⁴⁰ Yet if religious infidelity is demonised throughout the *Idylls*, faith is not idealised in any simple sense. In 'The Holy Grail' (1869) idyll, for instance, Tennyson casts suspicion on the legitimacy of mystical faith and on the possibility of miracles; the readiness of Percivale and the other knights to trust in the evidence of things unseen leads them to 'follow wandering fires/Lost in the quagmire!' (887-888).¹⁴¹ Similarly, 'Pelleas and Ettarre' (1869) is a dark fairy tale about the perils of credulity: Pelleas's faith in Ettarre's goodness makes him prey to a violent nihilism when he is disillusioned. As a whole, the *Idylls* dramatises a world in which belief and unbelief seem equally ruinous and often indistinguishable. Tennyson has the enchantress Vivien proclaim the dogmatic credo, 'Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all' (387) when she is seeking to beguile Merlin, and while Tennyson implicitly condemns such absolutist logic as sinister, the *Idylls* as a whole dramatises its irresistible force: Vivien observes that a 'speck in garner'd fruit ... slowly moulders all' (393-394), and the fact that the rumour of an adultery serves to corrupt Camelot as a whole fully authenticates her insight.¹⁴²

Tennyson's conflation of sexual and religious infidelity throughout the *Idylls* produces one of the poem's most disconcerting effects: through the figure of Arthur, the reader is invited to imagine the Christian God as a cuckold. The analogy between the passive, pure, much betrayed Arthur and Christ always has this underlying strangeness because of the insistence with which Tennyson

¹⁴⁰ Tennyson, 'Lancelot and Elaine' (1859), *Idylls*, 199; and 'The Holy Grail' (1869), *Idylls*, 210.

¹⁴¹ Tennyson, 'The Holy Grail', 229. For an analysis of the sceptical stance that Tennyson adopts toward the possibility of visions, see William Bonney, 'Tennyson's Sublunary Grail', *Philological Quarterly* 72.7 (1993): 237-259.

¹⁴² Tennyson, 'Merlin and Vivien' (1859), 152.

constructs Guinevere's sexual infidelity as a kind of metaphysical castration: it demystifies Arthur's apparently otherworldly power and legitimacy in the eyes of all. And when Tennyson implies parallels between the decline of faith in Arthur among the knights of the Round Table and a dwindling faith in Christianity in the Victorian present in the epic's final idyll, 'The Passing of Arthur' (1869), the overall effect is even more strange, since the analogy prompts the reader to feel the pathos of a God anguished not only by a collective collapse of belief in his powers, but by the fact that he has come to doubt himself, and is confronted with the prospect of his own demise:

'O Bedivere, for on my heart hath fall'n
Confusion, till I know not what I am
Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King.
Behold, I seem but King among the dead.

.....
And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,
When all the purport of my throne hath fail'd,
That quick or dead thou holdest me for King.
King am I, whatsoever be their cry;
And one last act of knighthood shalt thou see
Yet, ere I pass.'

(143-146, 159-164)¹⁴³

Yet soon after affirming that he will 'worship' Arthur 'as King' even after he has died, Bedivere's faith wavers: 'What record, or what relic of my lord/Should be to aftertime, but empty breath/And rumours of a doubt?' (266-268).¹⁴⁴ And Arthur himself dies with his 'mind ... clouded with a doubt' (426).¹⁴⁵ As LaPorte has shown, Tennyson's allegorical identifications of Arthur with Christ are charged with the unsettling implications of the Higher Criticism of the Bible; the dubiousness of 'the weird legend' (664) of Arthur's legitimacy parallels very Victorian anxieties about the authenticity of the Scriptures and the divinity of the historical Christ.¹⁴⁶ Yet the uncanny intensity of the *Idylls* surely hinges upon the way Tennyson's allegory projects these dilemmas onto a

¹⁴³ Tennyson, 'The Passing of Arthur', *Idylls*, 291-292.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁴⁶ Tennyson, 'The Last Tournament', *Idylls*, 266. See LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 67-110.

Christlike figure who himself suffers the agonies of religious doubt and bears witness to his own oblivion. The notion of Christ as the original Christian doubter has some Biblical justification in Christ's utterance on the Cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). Tennyson underscores this when the dying Arthur echoes Christ's agony of doubt: 'My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death' (27).¹⁴⁷ While Arthur immediately then affirms his belief in his immortality, the epic's final idyll is a despairing prophecy which draws its poetic power from a surreal conflation of ideas: Tennyson implies that the Victorian crisis of faith effectively serves to re-crucify Christ, and without possibility of Resurrection. (The underlying logic here is that of a pious Christian literalising the metaphor of the 'death' of God and conflating it with the crucifixion of Christ: Christ/God experiences his own 'death' by secularisation as a reenactment of humanity's betrayal at the Crucifixion.)

Catherine Bates Stevenson rightly detects a denunciation of aestheticism in general and of Swinburne in particular in the epic's closing dedication 'To the Queen' (1873).¹⁴⁸ Here Tennyson clarifies that his epic is a Christian allegory of the contest between materialism and idealism or 'Sense at War with Soul' (37), and he positions it as a corrective to 'wordy trucklings to the transient hour,/And fierce or careless looseners of the faith' (51-52).¹⁴⁹ Fierce *or* careless seems especially evocative of Swinburne, whose secularism could be by turns aggressive and blasé, and sometimes both at once. In case we miss the allusion, Tennyson specifies that he is thinking of atheistic sensualists who make 'Art with poisonous honey stol'n from France' (56).¹⁵⁰ As Stevenson suggests, such lines only seem to amplify the critique of Swinburne's poetry embedded in 'The Last Tournament'. This idyll dramatises an advanced stage in Camelot's degeneration. At its opening, we learn that Pelleas has established a demonic parody of Camelot in the North, a Satanic kingdom in which lawlessness is law. Pelleas is himself testament to the depraving effects of adultery: once a romantic idealist, the

¹⁴⁷ Tennyson, 'The Passing of Arthur', *Idylls*, 288.

¹⁴⁸ Bates Stevenson, 'Swinburne and Tennyson', 186.

¹⁴⁹ Tennyson, 'To the Queen', *Idylls*, 302.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

infidelity of a woman he loved has transformed him into an arch infidel, the ‘Red Knight’. Tennyson’s construction of the ‘last tournament’ in Camelot as the ceremony of ‘dead innocence’ (136) resonates as a nightmare vision of the kind of decadent literary culture Swinburne threatens to create, one in which poets strive to outdo one another in aestheticising sacrilege.¹⁵¹ Camelot’s knights compete over a prize that seems like a decadent *objet d’art*: the jewels of ‘dead innocence’, a ruby carcanet which was discovered around the neck of a foundling baby girl who died despite – or because of – Guinevere’s attempt at nurturance (Tristram later dreams that the ruby consists of frozen blood [19-30, 411-415]).¹⁵² We are perhaps meant to infer that Tristram is the most depraved of the knights from the fact that he is the victor in this competition. Certainly Tennyson implies that he is a kind of decadent anti-Orpheus: Dagonet, the fool, reproaches him for his sensual harp-music, quipping that he ‘harpest downward’, as if in an effort to serenade his wife down to hell [332, 328]).¹⁵³ Yet on the whole Tennyson’s Tristram seems more fatuous than evil; he is depraved insofar as he is too shallow to hold anything sacred, and his harp-playing is not devil’s music so much as folly – he is fiddling while Rome burns. Tristram’s *carpe diem* ethic not only makes him both a casual unbeliever and republican (flaunting his ‘wit’, he questions whether Arthur is ‘King by courtesy, or King by right’ [340-341]), but renders his love for Isolt essentially frivolous; his ‘broken music’ only affirms ‘free love – free field – we love but while we may’ (259, 275).¹⁵⁴ And Tennyson encourages us to feel that in Isolt, Tristram has the lover he deserves: to the degree that she makes her ‘hate’ for Mark, her husband, the ‘measure’ of her love for Tristram (535-536), her love for him is only a species of hatred.¹⁵⁵

Tennyson constructs Tristram as a debased empiricist, slave to his sense-impressions and to what he derives from ‘the dirty nurse, Experience’ (317).¹⁵⁶ The fact that Tristram is ‘grown wild beast’ (632) hyperbolises the idea that his

¹⁵¹ Tennyson, ‘The Last Tournament’, *Idylls*, 251.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 248 and 259.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 257 and 255.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

empiricism is a self-fulfilling prophecy: he has in fact been reduced to the coarse physical realities to which he devotes himself.¹⁵⁷ Like a grotesque Wordsworth, Tristram likes all the nasty details of unregenerate nature because they confirm his own identity: his ‘outer eye’ is ‘keen’ for ‘all that walk’d, or crept, or perch’d, or flew’, since they ‘re-collect the shape/Of one that in them sees himself, return’d’ (366-370).¹⁵⁸ Amid the blighted natural world evoked in ‘The Last Tournament’, such naturalism seems at best a philosophy out of season, if not simply absurd; who can rejoice in the ‘death-dumb autumn-dripping gloom’ (750)?¹⁵⁹ And when Tristram is ‘clove ... thro’ the brain’ by Mark, Tennyson’s brutal choice of phrase enacts an ironic justice: an axe to the brain will disclose to Tristram once and for all the brutality of the ‘woodman of the woods’ ethos he so blithely espoused (748, 294).¹⁶⁰

The vehemence of Swinburne’s attacks on Tennyson’s *Idylls* suggests that he was alive to the condemnation of his own work submerged in the poem. In *Under the Microscope*, Swinburne protested that Tennyson had rendered Arthurian legend both ludicrous and banal by imposing a crude moralism upon it:

[Tennyson’s] very exaltation of his hero as something more than man he has left him in the end something less. The keystone of the whole building is removed, and in place of a tragic house of song where even sin had all the dignity and beauty that sin can retain, and without which it can afford no fit material for tragedy, we find an incongruous edifice of tradition and invention where even virtue is made to seem either imbecile or vile.¹⁶¹

Swinburne’s aestheticist argument here is more subtle than a sweeping call for the expulsion of moral concerns from art. Swinburne suggests that Tennyson’s tendency to draw stark moral distinctions has the paradoxical effect of effacing

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 265.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 258.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 268.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 268 and 266. Of course, Tennyson’s subversions of pastoral convention here are not simply aimed at Swinburne but mount a wider critique of philosophical naturalism. See Randy J. Fertel, ‘Antipastoral and the Attack on Naturalism in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*’, *Victorian Poetry* 19.4 (1981): 337-350.

¹⁶¹ Swinburne, *Swinburne Replies*, 58.

such distinctions, since it effectively deprives them of their tragic complexity. Swinburne's apparently aesthetic critique of Tennyson is mounted in heavily moralistic language: he declares that Tennyson has 'lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story' through its 'sordid' and 'vulgar' representations of sexuality, and particularly deplores Tennyson's Vivien, whom he pronounces 'the most base and repulsive person ever set forth in serious literature'.¹⁶² To an extent, Swinburne is simply turning the tables on the laureate by claiming that the sexual immorality he finds so troubling is a figment of his imagination; Arthurian legend, treated aright, would yield only a lofty and romantic model of sexuality. The patrician cast of Swinburne's aestheticism is noticeable here: he effectively accuses Tennyson of peddling hypocritical titillation to a 'vulgar' reading public, where a more 'noble' poet would demonstrate a profounder morality by being less narrowly moralistic and allowing himself to imagine the 'dignity and beauty' of 'sin'. Yet this is not simply an example of Swinburne's playful, mock-patrician inversion of values, since it is fully in keeping with his conviction that Tennyson's 'halfway faith' and commitment to middleclass propriety led him to produce an inhibited and disenchanted poetry. That Swinburne was at least partly in earnest in his attack on the *Idylls* is also suggested by his own version of the Tristram and Iseult legend, which strives to demonstrate that 'infidelity' – both sexual and religious – is in fact worthy of the most elevated poetic treatment.

Swinburne's effort to critique Tennyson's poetics of religious doubt in *Tristram of Lyonesse* is simultaneously an engagement with Arnold's work. Swinburne knew Arnold's *Tristram and Isolt* (1852) well. In his 1867 essay on Arnold's poetry, he indicated that it was a poem he loved as a schoolboy.¹⁶³ Yet in 1882, he claimed that he had been inspired to write his own version of the legend not only because Tennyson has 'degraded and debased it', but because Arnold 'has transformed and recast' it.¹⁶⁴ For most of his career, Swinburne was disinclined to attack Arnold directly; the two maintained a friendly acquaintance

¹⁶² Ibid., 59.

¹⁶³ Swinburne, 'Arnold', 415.

¹⁶⁴ [Swinburne to R.H. Horne, February 13, 1882], *Letters* vol. 4, ed. Lang, 260.

until Arnold's death in 1888.¹⁶⁵ As his 1867 essay makes clear, Swinburne wanted to admire Arnold as an essentially secular thinker who adhered to a heroic 'creed of self-sufficiency', opposed to 'any revelation of mystic or prophet or saint'.¹⁶⁶ As I have argued, Swinburne develops his own aestheticist position partly out of an effort to distinguish Arnold's allegedly secular poetry from the 'melodious regrets and tortuous returns' of doubting Christian poets like Tennyson.¹⁶⁷ Yet Swinburne cannot help but register that Arnold's poetry manifests some reluctance to bid farewell to Christianity: 'This alone I find profitless and painful in his work; his occasional habit of harking back and loitering in mind among sepulchers. Nothing is to be made by an artist out of scepticism, half-hearted or double-hearted doubts or creeds; nothing out of mere dejection and misty mental weather'.¹⁶⁸ Swinburne's aestheticism seeks to counter the equation of unbelief with melancholy and disenchantment that Arnold considered as self-evident as Tennyson did. Indeed, the fact that Swinburne was apparently irresistibly compelled to take up subjects that both Arnold and Tennyson had already made their own and inscribed with crisis-of-faith narratives attests to the extent to which his aestheticism is an effort to produce a robust alternative to their models of religious doubt. While Swinburne often presents his aestheticism as a straightforwardly rebellious, oppositional discourse in relation to Christianity, it is more truly a convoluted argument with the often ambiguous, median positions occupied by figures like Arnold and Tennyson in response to a perceived religious crisis.

Like Tennyson, Arnold offered a remarkably austere rendering of the Tristram and Iseult legend in which romantic passion offers meagre gratification and is in any case overshadowed by the suffering it causes. As the Victorian critic Henry Hewlett remarked, Arnold's version of the legend is 'curiously tame and cold'; 'for genuine sympathy with a ... distinctively Christian art, [Arnold] seems

¹⁶⁵ See Sidney Coulling, 'Swinburne and Arnold', *Philological Quarterly* 49.2 (1970): 211-238.

¹⁶⁶ Swinburne, 'Arnold', 417.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 433.

at this period to have been constitutionally indisposed, the spiritual conviction ... being as yet wanting'.¹⁶⁹ Anthony Harrison makes the same judgment in a modern idiom: it is, he says, a 'poem about spiritual unfulfillment', and it 'implicitly adopts a stance of secular nihilism'. As Harrison also notes, Arnold wrote *Tristram* around the time he wrote 'Dover Beach', and his rendering of the legend is pervaded by the same sense of lost religious meaning as the more famous poem.¹⁷⁰ For Arnold as for Tennyson, the infidelity of the couple symbolises the desolation of a world in which Christian belief has failed; where there is no religious faith, there can be no fulfillment in romantic love, not even of a fleeting kind. Yet where Tennyson makes the link between sexual and religious infidelity unmistakable and condemns both in moral terms, Arnold leaves the equivalence submerged, and its implications more ambiguous: in his telling, the infidelity seems to expose the lovers to an existential void, one which the poem does not construct as a moral punishment so much as an authentic confrontation with the inimical nature of things. Arnold's narrator informs us that romantic passion is a useless struggle not only against a hostile cosmos, but against an essential numbness in ourselves:

... 'tis the gradual furnace of the world,
 In whose hot air our spirits are upcurl'd
 Until they crumble, or else grow like steel -
 Which kills us in the bloom, the youth, the spring -
 Which leaves the fierce necessity to feel,
 But takes away the power - this can avail,
 By drying up our joy in everything
 To make our former pleasures all seem stale.
 This, or some tyrannous single thought, some fit
 Of passion, which subdues our souls to it
 Till for its sake alone we live and move
 (120-129)¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Henry Hewlett, "'The Strayed Reveller", and Other Poems', *Contemporary Review* 24 (June 1874), 539.

¹⁷⁰ Harrison, *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology* (Charlottesville: Virginia, 1998), 30.

¹⁷¹ Arnold, *Poetical Works*, 153.

As Harrison points out, Arnold's *Tristram* is extraordinarily resistant to the legend's status as a great tragic *love* story: 'Love, variously idealised in medievalist discourse, is here denounced and repudiated altogether, presumably in favour of an emotional detachment from experience, a philosophical approach to life that Arnold promotes everywhere in his major poems and prose works'.¹⁷² Indeed, Arnold goes so far as to construct erotic passion as an *unnatural* affliction, disturbing the stoic equilibrium which is the more proper condition of human beings; it is 'a diseas'd unrest,/And an unnatural overheat at best' (134-135).¹⁷³ And while erotic love is illusory and ephemeral, the suffering it causes is real and abiding: 'All the spring-time of his love/ Is already gone and past,/And instead thereof is seen/Its winter, which endureth still'(173-176).¹⁷⁴ As can be felt in these lines, the poem is preoccupied with retrospection, particularly with the capacity of regret to ruin experience *ex post facto*: Arnold dwells upon the figure of Tristram in his 'waning time' (70) rather than upon the original passion between the lovers, and thereby creates the impression that their love was always blighted by its ultimate disillusionment.¹⁷⁵ Tristram's illness, which Arnold also dwells upon, seems to attest not only to the etiolating effects of passion, but to a cosmos which is waning for lack of a purpose. The present of the poem takes place in a landscape leached of heat, energy and colour: Arnold insistently calls attention to the pallor of the lovers, and accumulates images of blanched lips, wasted fingers, haggard air, grey seas, sunken reefs, and feeble winds. The passion of the lovers actually seems to have accelerated a process of cosmic entropy; for instance, Iseult's desire for Tristram 'consume[s] her beauty like a flame,/And dim[s] it like the desert-blast' (134-135).¹⁷⁶ Yet there is scant pathos in love's transience here; the narrator avers, 'And yet, I swear, it angers me to see/How this fool passion gulls men potently' (133-134).¹⁷⁷ Arnold further restricts the pathos of the lovers' predicament by channeling readerly sympathy

¹⁷² Harrison, *Discourse and Ideology*, 31.

¹⁷³ Arnold, *Poetical Works*, 153.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

toward the ‘other’ Iseult – the Brittanic Iseult of the White Hands, Tristram’s betrayed wife. If, as Hewlett felt, Arnold’s poem seems devoid of ‘spiritual conviction’, it is not devoid of Christian sentiment. The key innovation that Arnold introduces to the legend is to make the Brittanic Iseult a central protagonist, and to suggest that her fidelity, both marital and religious (she is the ‘sweetest Christian soul alive’ [54]), has greater emotional depth than the illicit passion.¹⁷⁸ In effect, Arnold bestows the lustre of the myth’s traditional *liebestod* motif upon the figure of the longsuffering wife, whose pious ministrations to Tristram on his deathbed are exalted as the highest consummation of love.

Swinburne perceived that the prominence of religious doubt and Christian scepticism in Victorian poetry effectively left crucial parts of the religious tradition free for him to appropriate in secular terms. Indeed, Swinburne’s poetry everywhere avows that it can achieve by secular means precisely those varieties of religious experience – enthusiasm, rapture, inspiration, ‘large ecstasy’, ‘full souled’ reverence (VIII. 425-427) – that Arnold, Browning, Clough and Tennyson at once regarded with suspicion and lamented that the modern Christian found difficult to attain.¹⁷⁹ (While it might seem obvious that Swinburne regarded such elevated experiences as part of the inheritance of a Romantic literary tradition and therefore as not exclusively religious, he did not in fact take this perception for granted; as I have been emphasising, the art-for-art’s-sake positions he adopts in his critical prose typically emerge as an part of an effort to assert the essentially secular nature of a literary tradition that was conventionally conflated with religion.) *Tristram* exemplifies the paradoxical effects of Swinburne’s desire to lay claim to what were often considered the affective prerogatives of religious faith, now apparently diminished or lost: Arnold and Tennyson’s pessimistic renderings of the same legend inspire Swinburne to write rapturously of the emotional fulfillment to be found in, as McSweeney puts it, ‘a wholly naturalistic vision of human existence’.¹⁸⁰ Rosenberg registers some part of this paradoxical effect when he notes with surprise that the Tristram myth leads Swinburne to

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹⁷⁹ Swinburne, *Tristram*, CPWII, 125.

¹⁸⁰ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 165.

produce ‘his healthiest poetry’.¹⁸¹ By this, Rosenberg means that Swinburne refrains from the more lurid sadomasochism that characterised his earlier depictions of erotic love. Swinburne’s vision of love actually remains sadomasochistic in *Tristram* insofar as he continues to emphasise the intertwinement of pleasure and pain, though Rosenberg is right to indicate that Swinburne here renders this theme more palatable by filtering out his fascination with cruelty. Swinburne’s restraint on this score is part of a larger polemical mission: his *Tristram* aims to demonstrate that a ‘wholly naturalistic vision of human existence’, as well as frank eroticism, are compatible with a traditionally sentimental and exalted conception of romantic love. In other words, the fact that both Tennyson and Arnold’s intimations of religion’s decline led them to imagine the debasement of romantic love ironically allows Swinburne to position himself as the staunch upholder of the courtly love tradition. Swinburne certainly savoured this irony; he believed that, in writing against Victorian religious and sexual proprieties, he was in fact being more faithful to the spirit of the Arthurian tradition than Tennyson or Arnold had been: ‘I want my version to be based on notorious facts, and to be acceptable for its orthodoxy and fidelity to the dear old story (and, one might add, its antagonism to current orthodoxies)’.¹⁸² If Tennyson and Arnold might both be said to have turned the *Tristram* legend into parables of spiritual despair at the expense of its more sentimental and idealistic possibilities as a love story, Swinburne seems to lose sight of the story’s traditional status as a tragedy in his effort to render it as a grand affirmation of the plenitude of erotic love and of a wholly naturalistic apprehension of existence. Joy, rapture, and gladness – all key words in his poem – predominate over any sense of anguish or doom, and Swinburne takes the *liebestod* motif as means of proposing an imaginative equivalence between accepting a radically deterministic naturalism and yielding to a compulsive, fatal love affair.

In 1893, Myers suggested that Swinburne’s *Tristram* was an effort to rewrite Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* for the late nineteenth century: analysing

¹⁸¹ Rosenberg, *Elegy*, 170.

¹⁸² [Swinburne to Edward Burne Jones, November 4, 1869], *Letters*, vol.2, ed. Lang, 51.

the Lucretian echoes in Swinburne's work, he remarks that *Tristram* constitutes 'the strict materialist synthesis clad in its most splendid colouring, and its most inexorable scorn of men'. (As 'scorn' here implies, Myers was sceptical of Swinburne's efforts to suggest that one can rejoice in a non-theistic nature.)¹⁸³ As McSweeney notes, the long invocation to 'Love' in the poem's prologue clearly recalls Lucretius's long invocation to Aphrodite in the first book of *De Rerum Natura*.¹⁸⁴ More generally, Swinburne's epic parallels Lucretius's in its persistent identification of materialism with erotic love, as well as in its efforts to assure us that death is nothing to fear. I also suspect that Swinburne had Lucretius in mind when composing *Tristram* because he tended to imagine his rivalry with Tennyson as part of a transhistorical literary *agon*: he identified Tennyson with Virgil because they both composed their epics under the patronage of a sovereign, while implicitly identifying himself with a transgressive and anti-religious tradition of epoists which consisted of Lucretius and Shelley.¹⁸⁵ (Swinburne's contempt for Tennyson's *Idylls* was partly a republican contempt for Tennyson's office as laureate: he dubbed the poem the *Morte d'Albert*.)¹⁸⁶

Swinburne accepts the symbolic nexus between sexual and religious infidelity proposed in different ways by Arnold and Tennyson in their constructions of the Tristram legend, but as one might expect, he departs from his predecessors by glorifying the twofold infidelity and granting the lovers the epic stature which he felt they had been wrongly denied in Arnold and Tennyson's versions. Swinburne does not simply suggest, as Arnold did, that the illicit passion exposes the lovers to ultimate cosmic truths, but that it illuminates for them the essential desirability of those truths.¹⁸⁷ In this, Swinburne's *Tristram*

¹⁸³ Myers, 'Modern Poets', 97-98.

¹⁸⁴ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 165.

¹⁸⁵ Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), 24. Swinburne also links Shelley and Lucretius in his poem 'For the Feast of Giordano Bruno' (1878), in which Bruno and the two poets are celebrated as a freethinking trinity. See Swinburne, *CPWI*, 344-345.

¹⁸⁶ Swinburne, *Swinburne Replies*, 56.

¹⁸⁷ Laura Cooner Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin note that the suggestion that the infidelity integrates the lovers with nature has no basis in the Arthurian tradition; it is 'ultimately Swinburne's private mythology'. See their *Camelot in the Nineteenth*

attempts on a much grander scale what ‘By the North Sea’ attempted: to posit an atheistic sublime, or to suggest that a post-Darwinian apprehension of nature only demands more daring and complicated affirmations of nature’s grandeur. Like that poem, *Tristram* suggests that a sufficiently passionate surrender to ‘fate’ – Swinburne’s word for the radically deterministic materialism which undergirds the poem – is heroism of a kind; a heightened receptivity to the inexorable affords a blissful sense of freedom. The twist of logic here – one which is also key to Pater’s work, especially the ‘Conclusion’ to the *Renaissance* – is at least partly self-conscious: the mythic fatedness of the two lovers is resonant for Swinburne partly because it parallels the predicament of a materialist poet, faced with the task of making poetically and emotionally true what he takes to be inexorably true. Swinburne’s attraction to a radically deterministic materialism always created an incipient tension in his desire to posit secularism as the basis of human freedom and autonomy. On the one hand, Swinburne self-consciously goes one better than Protagoras’s ‘man is the measure of things’ and declares, ‘Glory to Man in the highest! For Man is the master of things’.¹⁸⁸ On the other, he asserts that ‘we must submit ... [and] live as the sons, not as the lords of nature’. This latter phrase is taken from Swinburne’s essay on Arnold, and is framed as a critique of Arnold’s excessively pessimistic stoicism, which prompts Swinburne to delineate his understanding of the scope for human self-determination:

Man’s welfare – his highest sphere and state of spiritual well-doing and well-being – this indeed is his true aim; but not this is the aim of nature; the world has other work than this to do; and we, not it, must submit; submit, not by ceasing to attempt and achieve the best we can, but by ceasing to expect subservience to our ends from all forces and influences of existing things; it is no reason or excuse for living basely instead of nobly ...¹⁸⁹

In *Tristram*, however, Swinburne jettisons the concern with free will that was essential to his political secularism in *Songs Before Sunrise* and embroiders

Century: Arthurian Characters in the Poems of Tennyson, Arnold, Morris and Swinburne (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), 124.

¹⁸⁸ Swinburne, ‘Hymn of Man’, *CPWI*, 746.

¹⁸⁹ Swinburne, ‘Arnold’, 417.

upon the *amor fati* theme which is often given a self-consciously blithe treatment in his minor *carpe diem* poems. *Tristram*, in contrast, grants the theme full epic seriousness, and makes it the centre of a larger philosophical vision. Critics have sometimes doubted that *Tristram* is in fact an epic because its impetus is more lyrical than dramatic, though Harrison has demonstrated that the poem fulfills the traditional requirements of epic form.¹⁹⁰ Swinburne avoids mythological machinery and simply calls upon ‘Love’ in the traditional epic invocation to the Muse in the poem’s prelude, though the full implications of this choice are only clarified in the poem’s final canto, ‘The Sailing of the Swan’. The opening twenty-two couplets of this canto repeat the rhymes of the opening twenty-two couplets of the ‘Prelude’, though now Swinburne hymns ‘Fate’, with the obvious implication that ‘Love’ and ‘Fate’ stand in chiasmic relation to each other: to be passionately in love is to be awakened to cosmic realities, and to be awakened to such realities is to be passionately in love. In other words, Swinburne suggests that the fated love teaches Tristram and Iseult the desirability of a deterministic naturalism. Just as Iseult comes to feel that her love for Tristram is profound *because* it is not freely chosen (V.89-90), natural law elicits Tristram’s love because it makes him aware of his own sublime impotence.¹⁹¹

O strong sun! O sea!
 I bid not you, divine things! Comfort me,
 I stand not up to match you in your sight –
 Who hath said ye have mercy toward us, ye who have might?
 And though ye had mercy, I think I should not pray
 That ye should change your counsel or your way
 To make our life less bitter: if such power
 Be given the stars on one deciduous hour,
 And such might be in the planets to destroy
 Grief and rebuild, and break and build up joy,
 What man would stretch forth hand on them to make
 Fate mutable, God foolish, for his sake?
 For if in life or death be aught of trust,
 And if some unseen just God or unjust

¹⁹⁰ Harrison, *Swinburne’s Medievalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 102-107.

¹⁹¹ Iseult thinks her love superior to that experienced by those who have merely ‘chosen’ to love; see Swinburne, *CPWII*, 78-79.

Put soul into the body of natural things
 And in time's pauseless feet and worldwide wings
 Some spirit of impulse and some sense of will
 That steers them through the seas of good and ill
 To some incognizable and actual end
 Be it just or unjust, foe to man or friend
 How should we make the stable spirit to swerve,
 How teach the strong soul of the world to serve,
 The imperious will in time and sense in space
 That gives man life turn back to give man place –
 The conscious law lose conscience of its way,
 The rule and reason fail from night and day,
 The streams flow backward toward whence the springs began,
 That less of thirst might sear the lips of man?
 Let that which is be, and sure strength stand sure,
 And evil or good and death or life endure
 Not alterable and rootless, but indeed
 A very stem born of a very seed.

(III.120-151)¹⁹²

The radicalism of Swinburne's determinism here is precisely measured when he has Tristram ask: 'How should we make the stable spirit to swerve ...?' Lucretius famously tells us that Epicurus allows for contingency and thus free will within his materialistic system through his concept of the 'swerve' or *clinamen*: 'While atoms move by their own weight straight down/Through the empty void, at quite uncertain times/And uncertain places they swerve slightly from their course' (1.217-219).¹⁹³ Not only does Swinburne rule out such a possibility within the materialistic universe of *Tristram*, he strives to make even the *desire* for such a possibility appear mean-minded or nonsensical; who could ask for anything more than to be subject to natural processes? Here as throughout the poem, Swinburne insists that the concept of an anthropocentric cosmos is untenable even as a desire: the way things are is more truly desirable than the world of human wish fulfillment we putatively desire. Thus Tristram's is a paradoxical prayer: in effect, he beseeches the cosmos to maintain its indifference, and to fulfill his

¹⁹² Swinburne, *CPWII*, 57-58.

¹⁹³ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Ronald Melville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 42. 'Swerve' is also used by H. A. J. Munro, who published the major Victorian translation in 1864; see Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, 4th edition (Cambridge: Deighton Bell & Co., 1886), 33.

desires by denying them. As the passage quoted above suggests, philosophical arguments are often elaborated in single sentences which are strung across more than a dozen lines of verse in *Tristram*. By this, Swinburne seeks to give an irrefutable force to his logic: one can no more meaningfully wish to unravel the chains of cause and effect in nature, Swinburne implies, than one can meaningfully isolate any one line or couplet in his branching hypotaxis as an autonomous unit of meaning. As McGann points out, Swinburne's 'delight in suspending the grammatical completion of a statement' is observable throughout *Tristram*, and often works to overwhelm the reader, who is discouraged from following closely the chain of logic by which his or her assent to a final idea or impression is apparently secured.¹⁹⁴ In this case, the chain of reasoning resolves itself into the tautological injunction 'let that which is be' – an aphorism, reminiscent of Pope's 'Whatever is, is Right' (294), which compacts the passage's effort to dissolve 'is' and 'ought', and to conflate naturalistic determinism (i.e., events arise from their antecedents) with a more mystical fatalism, which unconditionally embraces whatever is as something inevitable and beautiful.¹⁹⁵

Swimming is one of Swinburne's favourite tropes for the freedom to be discovered through succumbing to one's 'fate' as a constituent of natural processes, and in *Tristram*, he deploys it twice in order to underscore this freedom-within-determinism paradox. Julia Saville has recently written of Swinburne's 'immersive' imagination and his use of swimming as a paradoxical trope which encodes both the struggle for political and religious freedom and a blissful submission to 'fate', and while she notes that this trope marks a complication in Swinburne's thinking, she downplays the extent to which the trope enables Swinburne to perform a sleight-of-hand: liberation from the bondage of Christianity and authoritarian political systems is to be sought because we are then able to 'choose' the better bondage of 'fate' or natural processes, though of course Swinburne conceives of this latter bondage as ineluctable

¹⁹⁴ McGann, *Swinburne*, 150.

¹⁹⁵ Alexander Pope, 'An Essay on Man', *Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), 515.

anyway, conditioning all regardless of what we believe.¹⁹⁶ Swimming is a useful trope for this paradox since it can be imagined as at once active and passive, and it enables Swinburne to suggest that immersion in natural process, while ineluctable, can nevertheless be made heroic if one plunges into its implications without ambivalence. This double logic is powerfully at work in the gender codes evoked in the depiction of Tristram's second swim: the swim is at once a submissive, erotic yielding to a maternal principle ('he sprang,/As toward mother's where his head might rest/Her child rejoicing, toward the strong sea's breast' [VIII, 478-480]), and an assertion of martial masculinity, contending dauntlessly against the elements ('strong-spirited for the chance and cheer of fight,/ [He] donned his arms again, and felt the might/In all his limbs rejoice for strength ...' [VIII, 529-531]).¹⁹⁷ Here ecstatic submission to the laws of nature seems to involve an active struggle against those laws. Elsewhere Swinburne apparently flinches from the fatalistic vision the poem generally endorses, and suggests that natural law is 'lord and God' of all things *except* 'the soul of man' – though even here he asserts the priority of that law, which has been 'lord and God since body and soul began' (IX.11-12).¹⁹⁸ And on the whole, Swinburne seems so eager to present Tristram and Iseult's conversion away from Christianity and toward a kind of pagan naturalism as a series of rapturous epiphanies that he is willing to check his usual desire to characterise rebellion against Christianity in terms of heroic agency. The word 'rapture' appears eleven times in the poem, and is often used as means of conveying the irresistible, intuitive force of a naturalistic vision of humanity as opposed to Christian one, with the additional implication that Tristram and Iseult experience through an unconditional receptivity to nature the overmastering joy that Christianity promises in transcendental terms.

As the two swimming set-pieces suggest, Swinburne's *Tristram* seeks to affirm the profundity of pleasure – not simply sexual pleasure, but the diverse

¹⁹⁶ Julia Saville, 'Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne, the Immersive Poet as Public Moralizer', *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009), 694-700.

¹⁹⁷ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 127-129.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

pleasures of embodiment.¹⁹⁹ In *Tristram*, physical pleasure is never trivial, nor is it merely self-indulgent or private; it attests to the porousness of the boundaries of the self, and is figured as the basis for a properly reverent dissolution the self within both romantic love and the natural world. By awakening one another to erotic pleasure, Tristram and Iseult become receptive to cosmic wisdom; they recognise that their highest purpose is to be ‘a note of rapture in the tune of life’ (VIII. 506).²⁰⁰ (As Saville has argued, *Tristram* attests powerfully to the influence of Whitman upon Swinburne.)²⁰¹ The natural world often has a paradisiacal radiance in *Tristram*, and Swinburne casts his lovers as a pair of primordial innocents whose wonder at each other and at the splendours of nature inevitably calls to mind Adam and Eve. Swinburne had already attempted to write a secularist version of the Biblical creation story in ‘Genesis’ (1871), but as is the case with most of the poems in *Songs Before Sunrise*, that poem has no protagonists and exalts only an abstract humanity, whereas *Tristram* attempts to give the same cosmic vision the contours of a love story. Swinburne’s unstinting idealisation of Tristram and Iseult – particularly his emphasis upon the ‘sinless’ (IX. 548) nature of their infidelity – strives to propose a countermyth not simply to the Fall, but to the melancholic crisis-of-faith narratives Tennyson and Arnold embedded in the Tristram legend.²⁰² Tennyson and Arnold quite literally stripped the legend of its enchantment: Arnold does not really dwell upon the magic philtre that causes Tristram and Iseult to fall in love (104, 136-150), while Tennyson omits this traditional element altogether in order to underscore the moral culpability of the lovers.²⁰³ Ironically, Swinburne’s effort to demonstrate that a purely naturalistic understanding of life is sufficiently rich in enchantment depends upon the supernatural element – the magic potion – which Arnold and Tennyson suppress in their efforts to show the barrenness of a world without faith.

¹⁹⁹ For discussion of Swinburne’s model of eroticism in *Tristram*, see Louis, ‘The Vanishing Knight and the Drift of Butterflies: Erotic Figuration in Swinburne’s *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Canto 2’, *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009), 647-654.

²⁰⁰ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 128.

²⁰¹ Saville, ‘Swinburne Contra Whitman: From Cosmopolitan Republican to Parochial English Jingo’, *ELH* 78.2 (2011), 491-499.

²⁰² Swinburne, *CPWII*, 151.

²⁰³ Arnold, *Poetical Works*, 133-135.

The magic potion is crucial to Swinburne because it enables him to imagine the sexual passion between the lovers as at once entirely uninhibited and entirely innocent. It simultaneously allows him to construct their religious infidelity as an inevitable outgrowth of their passion, and, by extension, to construct their conversion to a kind of secular naturalism as an emotional and embodied insight, analogous to a rapturous religious conversion, rather than as a form of disillusionment wrought by intellectual analysis. As McSweeney argues, Swinburne presents Tristram and Iseult's love affair as a force which impels them beyond Christian frameworks and toward an inchoate recognition that they are subject only to natural laws.²⁰⁴ This process begins even before the lovers drink the love potion: conversation with Tristram prompts Iseult to wonder why God seems so cruel by human standards (I.403-413), and this prepares the ground for Iseult's anti-theistic monologue in the 'Iseult at Tintagel' canto.²⁰⁵ Swinburne initially casts Iseult as a rather sweet infidel, more perplexed than rebellious; she begins by expressing guilt at the fact that her love for God pales by comparison to her love for Tristram. Nevertheless, her rhetoric soon rises to defiance, and she becomes a more familiar Swinburnean type, a heroic anti-theist (or, to use the more correct term, a misotheist): Iseult proclaims that her 'transgression' is 'perfect', and dares God to 'slay' her (V. 83-89).²⁰⁶ Nonetheless, Iseult remains a remarkably sunny figure even at this moment, since her rebellion inheres in her conviction that she has been not only more happy on earth with Tristram than she could ever be in heaven, but that her happiness was so intense, and so contingent upon her mortality, as to surpass anything an immortal God could fathom. In proclaiming herself more 'happy' and 'glad' than 'God above' (V.148), Swinburne's Iseult makes a more radical claim than any of the jealous contention against God Swinburne ascribes to Sappho in 'Anactoria', superficially the more scandalous poem.²⁰⁷ Iseult sees no point in abasing herself before God because he cannot or will not give her what she wants, which is not immortality but more

²⁰⁴ McSweeney, *Romantic Naturalists*, 165-174.

²⁰⁵ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 25.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

mortal life; she wishes only to be ‘clothed with [her] mortal body’ so that she may feel ‘love’s arms’, and to be given the chance to re-experience ‘one amorous hour of mingling breath’ (V. 230-242).²⁰⁸

Iseult’s lusty affirmation of ‘Life palpable, compact of blood and breath,/Visible, present, naked, very death’ because she cannot ‘touch the time to be’ nor ‘strain insensual eyes toward increate light’ amplifies an argument Swinburne embeds in the poem’s prelude (V. 214-223).²⁰⁹ There Swinburne critiques the Christian idealisation of transcendent, eternal love as superior to temporal love and suggests that such an ideal produces an enervated, melancholy poetics: to transcend nature, embodiment and change would be to inhabit a ‘pale poor world too deep for sun or star’, populated by ‘forms without form, a piteous people and blind,/Men and no men’ with ‘featureless heads discrowned of hate and love’ (Prelude, 157-183).²¹⁰ Swinburne’s imagery strives to convince us that eternal, spiritual love is an oxymoronic ideal; to pine for the eternal or spiritual is to conjure vague fantasies of death-in-life. The ostensible target of the critique here is Dante, whose poetry attempts the perverse feat of illuminating ‘all time for all men with the shadow of it’ (Prelude, 188).²¹¹ Yet Swinburne’s image of ‘men and no men’ recalls his jeering assessment of Tennyson’s emasculated image of Arthur in the *Idylls*: ‘[Tennyson’s] very exaltation of his hero as something more than man he has left him in the end something less’. Swinburne’s images of an anemic otherworld also recall his critique of Arnold’s ‘fleshless’ poetics, and reflect his desire to idealise by contrast a thoroughly temporal, eroticised and earthly model of love. In Swinburne’s rendering of the legend, the desire for transcendence is not merely devitalising but corrupting. Countering Arnold’s portrayal of the love triangle, in which the pious Iseult of the White Hands represents a higher, more virtuous ideal of love than the adulterous couple, Swinburne casts the same character as at an once abject and villainous figure: her appeals to a vengeful Old Testament God are depicted as the symptoms of a

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 83.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹¹ Ibid., 11.

thwarted erotic desire which seeks release in violent fantasy.²¹² In other words, Swinburne's version of the story schematically aligns sexual and religious infidelity on the one hand, and unrequited love and Christian faith on the other: where sexual fulfillment makes happy pagans of Tristram and Iseult – they both begin to find 'God' in the sun and the sea, and to reject the Christian God as at once too punitive and too abstract – sexual frustration makes a morbid fanatic of Iseult of the White Hands.

For the sake of simplicity I have thus far followed Myers's characterisation of *Tristram* as a poem informed by a Lucretian materialism, as well as McSweeney's assessment of the poem as a celebration of a 'wholly naturalistic' conception of life.²¹³ Yet Rikky Rooksby is right to question whether 'materialism' is in fact an adequate term for Swinburne's vision in *Tristram*; as he writes, the poem 'goes beyond materialism without violating Swinburne's implacable anti-theism and his general agnosticism'.²¹⁴ The poem's materialism often seems slanted toward a form of panpsychism, the view that some degree of sentience or capacity for experience pervades all things, both animate and inanimate. While the poem maintains some distance from Tristram and Iseult's pantheistic impulse to designate nature 'God', it certainly endorses their perception that even the rocks are instinct with a sensual proto-awareness:

For all the radiant rocks from depth to height
 Burn with vast bloom of glories blossom-bright
 As though the sun's own hand had thrilled them through with light
 And stained them through with splendor; yet from thence
 Such awe strikes rapture through the spirit of sense
 From all the inaccessible sea-wall's girth,
 That exultation, bright at heart as mirth,
 Bows deeper down before the beauty of earth
 Than fear may bow down ever ...
 The splendour of the moist rock's fervent light,

²¹² See the 'The Wife's Vigil' canto. *Ibid.*, 104-111.

²¹³ Herbert Tucker also discusses the way Swinburne's epic similes strive to convey his 'virtually scientific monism'; see Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 527.

²¹⁴ Rikky Rooksby, 'The Algernonicon, or Thirteen Ways of Looking at *Tristram of Lyonesse*', in *Whole Music*, eds. Rooksby and Shrimpton, 79.

Fresh as from dew of birth when time was born
 Out of the world-conceiving womb of morn.
 (VIII. 239-265)²¹⁵

As Maxwell has argued, such personifications reach beyond the conventions of the pathetic fallacy and suggest that ‘feeling resides both in nature and its beholders and they are thus co-involved and reinforce each other’.²¹⁶ And more boldly still, Swinburne asserts that this ‘feeling’ ought to be defined as joy: the burden of the lines quoted above is not simply that nature, justly appraised, is more beautiful than fearful, but the rather astonishing claim that ‘Joy’ is ‘the gospel graven of life’s most heavenly law’ (VIII. 230-231).²¹⁷ In other words, Swinburne’s efforts to celebrate life in its immanence, the more-than-enough beauty of the world, lead him to suggest that all matter participates in a kind of cosmic *joie de vivre*. The poem’s panpsychist vision sweetens its stern rejections of anthropocentrism, as well as its insistence that we submit to ‘fate’ or natural law: while the universe may have no regard for our desires, it nevertheless pulsates with something akin to those desires. This suggestion pulls against Swinburne’s critiques of Christian anthropomorphism in poems like ‘By the North Sea’ and recuperates a Romantic perception of a benevolent intelligence at work in nature, a view which Swinburne elsewhere often seeks to dismantle.²¹⁸ In other words, Swinburne’s wish to affirm the plenitude of earthly, mortal life leads him in two potentially contradictory directions – on the one hand, he critiques the religious desire for an anthropocentric nature; on the other, he affirms that the earth is so fully our home that it is replete with a human-like sentience. In the case

²¹⁵ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 120.

²¹⁶ Maxwell, *Swinburne*, 118-119.

²¹⁷ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 119.

²¹⁸ As Susan Lorsch has argued, Swinburne’s late nature poems often explicitly avow that nature only has spiritual meaning insofar as the human imagination invests it with one. Lorsch rejects the idea that Swinburne can be called a ‘pantheist’. See Lorsch, *Where Nature Ends: Literary Responses to the Designification of Landscape* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), 51. McSweeney also thinks that ‘Swinburne is not a pantheist in any meaningful sense of the word’; see *Romantic Naturalists*, 216. Yet, with some justification, Harrison and Rooksby suggest that *Tristram* is a pantheistic poem. See Rooksby, ‘Algernonicon’, 82-83; and Harrison, *Swinburne’s Medievalism*, 101.

of *Tristram*, which articulates both perspectives, the incipient tension seems at least partly an effect of Swinburne's desire to make Tennyson and Arnold's images of a spiritually defunct nature in their 'Tristram' poems seem myopic. In his version of the story, Swinburne does not entirely ignore the problem of suffering, nor expunge a sense of the tragic, but he clearly presses his sadomasochistic imagination into the service of a grand cosmic 'yes': although Tristram and Iseult are traditionally imagined as sorrowful figures, his lovers experience only 'honeyhearted pain' ('Prelude', 204), or 'rapturous pulse[s] of pain' (III. 315) – that is, pain which gives texture to their pleasure and makes their endorsements of life a form of heroism.²¹⁹

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner has argued that Swinburne's late nature poems abide by empiricist precepts more rigorously than has been recognised, and by extension, that he is more of an Enlightenment thinker than critics who simply define him as a late Romantic have acknowledged.²²⁰ Weiner rightly emphasises that such poems celebrate the 'scope of sense experience rather than its limits' and often explicitly repudiate transcendental aspirations, though I would suggest that Swinburne's anti-transcendentalist position emerges less from a firm sense of the 'inaccessibility of extrasensory knowledge' than from a belief that such aspirations constitute a betrayal of life in this world, to borrow Taylor's phrase.²²¹ The panpsychist tendencies of *Tristram* suggest that Swinburne was more concerned with advancing beyond the identification of the secular with disenchantment and loss than he was with observing the strictures of empiricism. Indeed, Swinburne's aestheticist position can be understood as an attempt to obviate the possibility that a commitment to secularism would mean that he would have to curtail his Romantic sense of the visionary powers of the imagination and to occupy himself only with the world as it can be known by science. By extension, his assertions that art must be liberated from religious imperatives in order to fulfill its potential should also be understood in part as efforts to refute the idea that, in renouncing religion, he was renouncing poetry's magic ingredient

²¹⁹ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 12 and 63.

²²⁰ Kuduk Weiner, 'Sense Experience', 11-14.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 18 and 11; and Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

– an idea that must have been difficult to repress entirely in a culture which took the filiation between religion and poetry as axiomatic, even if the definitions of ‘poetry’ and ‘religion’ in Victorian understandings of this equation were fluid.²²² (Indeed, devout critics often suggested that the example of Swinburne actually proved the inextricable relationship between poetry and religion because his poems were reliant upon the religious feelings that they apparently denigrated.)²²³

Although the poems in *Songs Before Sunrise* often propose that secularism demands a purification and reconstruction of our ways of understanding, Swinburne does not seem to have thought that it entailed any radical reconsideration of aesthetics. He was on the whole insouciant about the extent to which a secularised art could be created out of the received literary tradition: apparently religiously-inflected paradigms such as the sublime or courtly love did not need to be abandoned or painstakingly secularised, but simply liberated into their true secular significance. In other words, Swinburne’s aestheticism was a means of asserting that secular art does not need to relinquish anything apparently religious that it happens to find beautiful: his poems freely expropriate ostensibly religious forms, tropes and concepts as elements in a fully useable literary tradition and thereby evade having to acknowledge any schism or loss. For instance, the word ‘spirit’ appears fifty-five times in *Tristram*, and while Swinburne is generally eager to specify that ‘spirit’ is indistinct from ‘sense’ or ‘body’ so that the effect is to suggest only a poeticised empiricism or materialism, he clearly finds the word indispensable to his effort to ennoble the lovers’ infidelity.²²⁴ If Swinburne’s retention of such words and concepts attests to an underlying ambivalence in his efforts to marry art and secularism, or to a lingering sense of the temptations of the religious, it is an ambivalence that his

²²² For an analysis of the Victorian tendency to conflate poetry and religion, see LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 7-22.

²²³ See for example John Charles Earle’s ‘The Vices of Agnostic Poetry’, *Dublin Review* 8.1 (1882): 104-127; and ‘Scepticism and Modern Poetry’, [anonymous], *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* 115 (1874): 223-231.

²²⁴ Variations upon Swinburne’s ‘spirit of sense’ *topos* proliferate in *Tristram* as the lovers cease to perceive any distinction between carnal and spiritual love. Iseult wonders: ‘sense is that or spirit, soul or flesh,/That only love lulls or awakes afresh?’ See Swinburne, V.182-183, *CPWII*, 81.

poetry also strenuously denies. *Tristram*, with its unqualified celebrations of the joys of this world, is the epitome of Swinburne's counter-elegiac secularism: it strives to imagine the secular as an intoxicating love affair, and thereby to dissolve the identification of poetry with religious doubt, intellectual ambivalence, and disenchantment that had come to seem so natural for Victorian culture.²²⁵

²²⁵ I borrow the concept of a 'counterelegiac' secularism from Rebecca Stott; see 'The Wetfooted Understory: Darwinian Immersions', in *Secularism*, ed. Levine, 213-214.

Chapter Three: ‘A Secular, a Rebellious Spirit Often Betrays Itself’: Pater’s Early Aestheticism

‘Without the Sound of Axe or Hammer’: Pater’s ‘Diaphaneité’, Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, and Secular Aesthetics

Pater’s desire to explore what a purely secular aesthetics might entail is submerged in ‘Diaphaneité’ (1864), his earliest extant essay.¹ Pater delivered this essay, which was never published in his lifetime, to the Old Mortality society at Oxford, an exclusive student discussion club known for its liberal sensibility. As Monsman explains in his monograph on the club, its membership was on the whole ‘fiercely dedicated to social amelioration, liberty of thought, and the ultimate validity of human reason in things secular and sacred’.² Nonetheless, even oblique expressions of atheism could fissure the collective commitment to the free play of ideas. In February 1864, a few weeks after he had been elected a Fellow of Brasenose, Pater presented an essay on Fichte’s ideal of self-culture that caused some of the more devout members of his audience to regard him as ‘thoroughly infidel’.³ While no copy of the essay has been discovered, it is clear from the diary of S. R. Brooke, a fellow club member, that the source of the controversy was Pater’s attempt to finesse the doctrine of immortality into a secular aesthetic ideal. What particularly incensed Brooke was Pater’s attempt to make unbelief sound ennobling and beautiful:

Pater’s Essay this evening was one of the most thoroughly infidel productions it has ever been our pain to listen to. The writer in fact made no secret of his ideas. He advocated ‘self-culture’ upon eminently selfish principles, and for what to us appeared, a most unsatisfactory end. To sit in one’s study all [day?] and contemplate the beautiful is not useful even if it is an agreeable occupation; but if it were both useful and agreeable, it would hardly be worthwhile to spend so much trouble upon what may at any time be wrested

¹ Pater, ‘Diaphaneité’, *Renaissance*, 136-140.

² Monsman, *Oxford University’s Old Mortality Society: A Study in Victorian Romanticism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 26.

³ For details of this controversy, see Monsman, *Pater*, 29-35.

from you. If a future existence is to be disbelieved the motto ‘Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die’, is infinitely preferable.⁴

Brooke’s conviction that the possible meanings of disbelief in immortality are exhausted by a ‘motto’ from St. Paul – the passage in Corinthians to which he alludes reads in full, ‘If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die’ [1 Corinthians 15:32] – anticipates a strong current of negativity in the reception of *The Renaissance*. Like Brooke, many critics would interpret Pater’s aestheticism as prettified atheism, or, in Margaret Oliphant’s phrase, ‘elegant materialism’.⁵ In her astringent review of *The Renaissance*, Oliphant reached after the same motto and dismissed the book as ‘rococo from beginning to the end, – in its new version of that coarse old refrain of the Epicureans’ gay despair, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”’.⁶ Oliphant was at once indignant at Pater’s atheistic interpretations of art and culture, which she condemned as tendentious and fanciful, and anxious to point out the banality of such interpretations – *The Renaissance* just embroiders pretentiously around a worn theme. Brooke also suggests that Pater’s iconoclasm is a symptom of his mediocrity: ‘If a man cannot make an original remark, if he cannot cut out a new figure he will hack and carve the old ones. Pater seldom makes what may be considered a really original remark, but he is fond of criticising original remarks, and drawing fine distinctions between identical conceptions’.⁷ The ‘fine distinction’ that Brooke particularly deplores is Pater’s phrase ‘subjective immortality’, which Brooke understands as a euphemism for ‘annihilation’ without an afterlife. As Monsman notes, Brooke almost certainly caught Pater’s meaning and was probably right to understand ‘subjective immortality’ (a Comtean phrase) as something of a mystification; nonetheless, Brooke’s hostility to Pater’s attempt to find a beautiful nuance within a materialistic view of death

⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁵ [Margaret Oliphant], ‘New Books’, *Blackwood’s Magazine* 114 (1873), 608.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in Monsman, *Pater*, 30.

prefigures common Victorian responses to Pater's aestheticism.⁸ Similarly, both Brooke and Oliphant complain that Pater's 'infidelism' is somehow at once flagrant and surreptitious, both exposed and masked by the fineness of his style. For Brooke, Pater's 'fine distinctions' 'hack' and 'carve' at pieties, while Oliphant is keen to demystify the 'curious trick' by which Pater lures readers into finding anti-Christian meanings in Botticelli's paintings, even as she declares that she is 'not afraid' that Pater's 'elegant materialism will strike many minds as a desirable view of life'.⁹ For Brooke and Oliphant, Pater's aestheticism is a mask discourse that aims to reduce human life to its starkest elements; Pater's fixations on beauty, happiness, and refinement paradoxically disclose the 'coarse', despairing nature of his vision. Ironically, Brooke and Oliphant both engage in strikingly Paterian hermeneutics in their response to him: just as Pater does with diverse artists, thinkers, and historical periods, they insist that a 'rebellious, a secular spirit' is both the unmistakable and cryptic burden of his work, manifest in its aesthetic surfaces but also in its secret core.¹⁰

It is often forgotten that *The Renaissance* not only caused a minor scandal, but that it was written in the wake of one. Monsman has pieced together the narrative of how Brooke ensured that news of Pater's 'infidelism' and the putative atheistic tendency of the club percolated through Oxford circles and beyond. For instance, William Bright, who would become Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History and canon of Christ Church four years later, noted in his journal in 1864: 'Pater, now of B. N. C., at his essay society in Brooke's hearing *averred his unbelief in a future state* and that Conington got up to rebuke him', while H. P. Liddon wrote a letter to the Bishop of Salisbury informing him of the 'notoriety' of a 'junior fellow' of Brasenose college who used the *Old Mortality* as a forum for 'propagating sheer unbelief'.¹¹ Here, as in the case of *The Renaissance*, the extent to which Pater intended to provoke controversy is mysterious. Given the liberal atmosphere of the club and the taste of many of its members for more

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Oliphant, 88 and 91.

¹⁰ Pater, *Renaissance*, 10.

¹¹ Monsman, *Pater*, 31-33.

radical forms of speculation – Swinburne was among its founders – it is plausible that he only expected to generate an admiring *frisson*. Nonetheless, the open secret status of atheism in the 1860s – its proximity to or dispersal within many intellectual discourses on the one hand, and its tendency to arouse *ad hominem* abuse and moral panic even within intellectual circles on the other – would have been freshly vivid to Pater when, six months after he presented his Fichte essay, he composed ‘Diaphaneité’.

‘Diaphaneité’ is a fantasy about an ideal figure who is above the fray of all ideological conflict, yet nonetheless the conduit of a revolutionary ethos. Paradoxically, the figure is radical *because* he represents the almost bland or ‘colourless’ distillation of the dominant ideas circulating in his culture. Where the ‘speculative thinker’ has to suffer his ideas being ‘confused, jarred, disintegrated in the world’ – just as Pater’s musings on ‘subjective immortality’ and Fichtean self-culture recently had been – the ‘diaphaneité’ figure simply incarnates contentious ideas, and, like an artist, integrates them into a *concordia discors*.¹² While Pater concedes (perhaps thinking of his own reputation as an infidel) that ‘there is a violence, an impossibility about men who have ideas’ and that ‘revolution is often impious’, the risks of ‘speculative’ ideas are ‘softened, harmonised’ within this ideal personality.¹³ ‘Diaphaneité’ seems to express both Pater’s uncertainty about how far he wished to construct himself as a controversialist at this early stage of his career, and his sense of the fissiparous intellectual climate of 1860s Oxford, where critiques of Christianity were by turns incendiary and common coin. Four years earlier, a group of Oxford Broad Churchmen (six of whom were ordained clergymen) had published *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of theological essays arguing for a liberalised Christianity willing to confront the challenges posed by the Higher Criticism and modern science. A furore ensued: the essayists were branded as infidels (memorably, they were dubbed the ‘Seven Against Christ’) by high churchmen and evangelicals, two of the contributors were brought before the Court of Arches on charges of

¹² ‘Diaphaneité’, *Renaissance*, 136-137.

¹³ *Ibid.* 138-139.

heresy, and the book was condemned by the Synod of the Church of England in 1864. One of the most supposedly provocative essays in the collection, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, which claimed that the Bible should be interpreted ‘like any other book’, was written by Jowett, Pater’s undergraduate tutor.¹⁴ This controversy initially overshadowed the near-contemporaneous controversy that followed the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, and must have impressed on Pater that challenges to orthodox Christianity were at once woven into the fabric of the Oxford establishment and liable to generate scandal.¹⁵

Critics often suggest that Pater grew more circumspect in his expression of irreligious sentiments in the wake of the publication of *The Renaissance*, and while this is incontestable, it overlooks the extent to which he turned the equivocal status of atheism – the fact that it seemed to be everywhere yet nowhere, prestigious yet dangerous – into a principle of his style from the beginning of his career. Oliphant and Brooke were right to suggest that Pater’s distinctive style continuously exploits the transgressive charge of atheism at the level of subtext, and that this is key to his quest to find ‘novel’ perspectives on the history of Western art and culture. At the same time, however, Pater’s work seeks to project a utopian space beyond contemporary religious controversies, where ideas about religion can be explored without the necessity of binding choice or public self-positioning. Like Swinburne, Pater persistently identifies aestheticism with the rebellious and the transgressive even as he characterises it as a realm of neutrality and disinterestedness. Thus their aestheticism is ‘secular’ in two contradictory senses: it posits an autonomous sphere, free of religious partisanship and controversy; and it re-inscribes the very conflicts from which it apparently frees itself by using this space to polemicise for the secular in a more radical sense – that is, as a desire for the worldly ‘for its own sake’. Moreover, both Pater and Swinburne persistently identify the aesthetic with the very conflicts they have apparently banished from the realm of art – with both disputes internal to

¹⁴ Benjamin Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, in *Essays and Reviews* (Farnborough, Hampshire: Gregg International, 1970), 377.

¹⁵ For an account of the controversy, see Basil Willey, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 137-185.

Christianity, and with their shared sense of an exciting tension between the religious and the secular.

‘Diaphaneité’ gives modern readers, as it likely did its original audience, the impression of being covertly transgressive; its rhetoric seems to skirt taboo even as its thesis remains obscure. Recent critics have responded to the essay’s elusive quality by suggesting that it is a coded celebration of homosexual desire and even a proleptic attempt to formulate a modern queer aesthetics.¹⁶ Yet Pater’s need to encrypt his investment in homosexual desire is often inseparable from his parallel need to encrypt his investment in the possibilities of secular consciousness. In Pater’s early work, homosexuality and infidelity are often twinned as occluded modes of subjectivity that nonetheless may be explored and legitimised through the manipulation of an array of culturally prestigious discourses. An obvious example of such a legitimating discourse is Hellenism, which, in Victorian Oxford, could serve as a code for either or both homosexuality and infidelity. Richard Dellamora and Linda Dowling suggest that ‘Diaphaneité’ exemplifies how Oxonian Hellenism could operate as a homosexual counterdiscourse.¹⁷ Yet the transgressive undercurrent that critics have sensed in the essay stems not only from its hints of homoeroticism, but the fact that the essay is a paean to a Christlike figure that never directly invokes Christ. Instead, it systematically turns many of the standard tropes of Christology into secular poeticisms. While critics have suggested a plethora of sources for this essay – in particular, they have emphasised the essay’s debts to German Romanticism, and variously suggested that Fichte, Goethe, Hegel, Schiller, or Winckelmann underwrite it – the extent to which Pater’s diaphaneité type has Christ-like qualities has perhaps been too self-evident to be remarked.¹⁸ To point out only the

¹⁶ See Michael F. Davis’s ‘Walter Pater’s “Latent Intelligence” and the Conception of Queer “Theory”’, in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002), 261-285.

¹⁷ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 59-67, and Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 81-84.

¹⁸ See James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 157-160; Kit Andrews, ‘Walter Pater and Walter Benjamin: The Diaphanous Collector and the Angel of History’, in *Transparencies*, Brake, et al., 250-260; Billie Inman, *Walter Pater’s Reading: A Bibliography of his*

most obvious of these qualities, the diaphaneitè type is associated with mystical light as well with purifying flame (he is ‘that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point’); he is preternaturally innocent and mild, though also ‘hero[ic]’ and the bearer of a mysterious and ‘revolution[ary]’ message; he is a ‘victim’ or martyr figure, whom humanity might choose to ‘send into the grave’ as a propitiation; he is beautiful yet chaste, and androgynous insofar as he unites masculine and feminine qualities within himself; and he has salvific powers – if his type became a ‘majority’, it would be ‘the regeneration of the world’.¹⁹ As a whole, ‘Diaphaneitè’ seeks to reorient Christian models of revelation and salvation toward an ideal of secular aestheticism. However, at the same time, the essay is intricately self-reflexive; it meditates on the risks and complications of its own effort to secularise Christian tropes.

Although the diaphaneitè figure seems Christ-like, Pater defines his figure against Christianity early in the essay. This occurs indirectly when Pater asserts that his figure attains ‘perfect life by a happy gift of nature, without any struggle at all’.²⁰ The word ‘struggle’ refers back to an earlier sentence where Pater quotes Thomas à Kempis in relation to ‘the long struggle of the Imitatio Christi’.²¹ Casting aside a Christian ideal of the self that valorises sacrifice and suffering after the example of Christ, Pater instead praises a figure who possesses ‘repose and simplicity, coming as it were in order of grace ... by some happy gift, or accident of birth’.²² Pater’s diaphaneitè figure is morally admirable, then, not by virtue of conscious effort but because he is the recipient of good ‘moral luck’. Pater conceives of his figure in terms of the idea, often explored in ancient Greek philosophy and literature though incompatible with most Christian conceptions of morality and free will, that our moral natures are determined by contingencies

Library Borrowings and Literary References, 1858-1873 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), 74-76; Monsman, *Pater*, 34-35, and Anne Varty, ‘The Crystal Man: A Study of ‘Diaphaneitè’’, in *Pater in the 1990s*, eds. Brake and Small, 205-215.

¹⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 138-140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

²² *Ibid.*, 137.

beyond our control.²³ Pater often identifies the beautiful with the ‘accidental play of sunlight and shadow’ in human life, with what is ‘laid open by accident’ in history or within the individual consciousness, and this effort to aestheticise what many Victorians considered one of the most disturbing implications of a loss of belief in divine providence is a crucial part of his early poetics.²⁴ Consider, for example, this approving comment on Wordsworth’s poetry:

Human life, indeed is, for him, at first, only an additional, accidental grace on this expressive landscape ... The close connexion of man with natural objects ... has sometimes seemed to degrade those who are subject to its influence, as if it did but reinforce that physical connexion of our nature with the actual lime and clay of the soil, which is always drawing us nearer to our end. But for Wordsworth, these influences tended to the dignity of human nature ... he subdues man to the level of nature, and gives him thereby a certain breadth and coolness and solemnity.²⁵

In ‘Diaphaneitè’, Pater attempts to perform the very capacity to maintain a contemplative serenity in the face of troubling ideas that he praises in his ideal figure. Repose, simplicity, calmness, geniality, naturalness, blitheness: these are all key virtues for Pater, and they carry a polemical charge in his work. This cluster of associated words designate the lightness of being he identifies with Hellenism, and he frequently uses this idealising idiom as a means of underscoring what he finds repressive and melancholic in Christianity, and of fantasising about the possibility of an easeful reconciliation with the bodily and the worldly.

The puzzling diacritical mark on ‘diaphaneitè’ – the word only appears in the essay’s title – suggests that Pater had in mind something other than the English ‘diaphaneity’ (‘the quality of being freely pervious to light; transparency’ [OED]). Monsman and Ann Varty both think the word is an eccentric

²³ On ‘moral luck’ and classical Greek philosophy and literature, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 123 and 138.

²⁵ Pater, *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 47.

transliteration of an ancient Greek verb.²⁶ Monsman renders this verb as ‘you will cause [something] to appear’ or ‘You will allow [something] to shine through you’, and suggests that the diacritical mark was Pater’s reminder to himself to sound the ‘e’ as one sounds an ‘è’ in French.²⁷ Pater often uses etymology as way of thinking through concepts, and his either or both Hellenised and Frenchified version of ‘diaphaneity’, with its common suggestion of receptivity to light, indicates that he was attempting to think about the roots of ideas of revelation, illumination, and epiphany as they appear in religion and art. Pater’s claim that his ‘diaphaneité’ figure enacts a kind of unveiling, which recurs in the essay when he distinguishes his figure from the ‘dim blackguardism’ of the sort of hero celebrated by Thomas Carlyle and suggests, paradoxically, that the ‘veil’ of his diaphaneité figure is an ‘entire transparency of nature’, carries a potent symbolic resonance.²⁸ As Kevin Mills explains, ‘unveiling is the founding trope of the Apocalypse’, since the Greek word from which it derives, *apokalypsis*, means uncovering or unveiling.²⁹ Pater’s essay is simultaneously preoccupied with the continuum between art and revelation, and, more elliptically, with the violent and cataclysmic associations of the idea of revelation within Christian eschatology. Significantly, Pater’s engagement with Christian eschatology in this essay is mediated by Victorian sage discourse, and, in particular, by his reading of Carlyle, a writer famous for having abandoned orthodox Christianity but who nonetheless glorified faith (and reviled unbelief) with evangelical urgency.

As is well known, ‘Victorian sage discourse’ is a critical label for an oracular tradition of nineteenth-century prose, particularly social criticism, that is generally thought to have been inaugurated by Carlyle and which is also associated with Arnold, Eliot, and Ruskin. In George P. Landow’s definition, sage writing is:

²⁶ Monsman, *Old Mortality*, 101, and Varty, ‘Crystal Man’, 258.

²⁷ Monsman, *ibid.*

²⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 138.

²⁹ Kevin Mills, *Approaching Apocalypse: Unveiling Revelation in Victorian Writing* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 19.

... a form of nonfiction that adapts the techniques of the Victorian sermon, neoclassical satire, classical rhetoric, and Old Testament prophecy to create credibility for the interpretations of contemporary phenomena, the sage, who stands apart from his audience and society. The Victorian sage is, above all else, an interpreter, an exegete, who can read the Signs of the Times. His essential, defining claim is that he understands matters that others do not – and that his understanding is of crucial value to those who see with duller eyes.³⁰

According to Landow, the sage's claim to superior vision is authenticated through his or her virtuosic acts of interpretation, which are akin to the feats of scriptural exegesis often performed by Victorian preachers. Yet such claims to vision tend to be unstable in sage discourse, since it is a genre that operates as both symptom and remedy in relation to a perception that religious discourse is losing authority. In other words, secular sage discourse has a circular relationship with religious discourse – it borrows its authority from religious discourse in its endeavour to compensate for a perceived crisis in the authority of religion.

Landow argues that sage writing follows the pattern of Old Testament prophecy insofar as the sage writer condemns the present social order, warns of the doom that the 'signs of the times' portend, and proposes redemptive change. In other words, sage writing sows both pessimism and hope, or blends, in Landow's phrase 'visionary threats with visionary promises'.³¹ This alloy of pessimism and hope also reflects the imaginative cues sage writing draws from New Testament apocalypses, particularly the Apocalypse of John, in which spectacular destruction and suffering are the birth pangs of a blessed new age of prosperity and peace, and ultimately prefigure the end of the world and the establishment of a New Jerusalem. Landow notes that sage writing tends to build toward a moment of 'prophetic closure', in which invocations of an ascent to heaven or the dawning of a new day are common.³² 'Diaphaneité' ends on just

³⁰ George P. Landow, 'Ruskin as Victorian Sage: The Example of "Traffic"', in *New Approaches to Ruskin*, ed. Robert Hewison (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 89-90.

³¹ George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 60.

³² *Ibid.*, 62.

such a ‘crescendo of visionary hope’: ‘... the type must be discontented with society as it is. The nature here indicated alone is worthy to be this type. A majority of such would be the regeneration of the world’.³³

There are other suggestions that Pater conceived of this essay as an experiment in the prophetic mode: he twice refers to his ‘diaphaneitè’ figure as a ‘prophecy’ and also characterises the figure as ‘he who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him [and] notes with a strange heedfulness the faintest paleness in the sky’.³⁴ Yet Pater refrains from the admonitory social critique that usually prepares the ground for such visionary hope within sage writing. In fact, Pater quite explicitly disclaims the role of pessimistic prophet: the world ‘is patient of doctrinaires of every degree of littleness. As if dimly conscious of some great sickness and weariness of heart in itself, it turns readily to those who theorise about its unsoundness’.³⁵ Here Pater appears to be disavowing not only the pessimism and grandiosity that often marked sage discourse, but the imperative toward direct social critique that often drove it. In this, ‘Diaphaneitè’ foreshadows the self-conscious abstention from explicit political engagement that would define Pater’s aestheticism; clearly, he never had any ambition to write works of crusading social criticism like Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843). Yet ‘Diaphaneitè’ is also clearly fascinated by the phenomenon of radical political change, and throughout the essay, Pater gestures, persistently if evasively, toward an underlying affinity between revolution and art. Pater’s diaphanous figure is defined by his irenic revolutionism: he ‘loves the lords of change’ and, like an Enlightenment *philosophe*, can ‘value’ nothing he has encountered by ‘accident, or usage, or convention’, yet he retains an essential quietism – his is ‘the revolutionism of one who has slept a hundred years’.³⁶ Critics have often understood Pater’s ‘diaphaneitè’ type as a figure for the

³³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 140.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

autonomy of art, its separation from the unbeautiful realities of political praxis.³⁷ Yet Pater's emphasis on the quietism of his ideal figure has a more specific objective than a generalised wish to quarantine art from politics. 'Diaphaneité' seeks to circumvent the Victorian tendency to conflate the questioning of orthodoxy with violence; more precisely, it fantasises about how secular utopianism might be redeemed of its association with the 'axe and the hammer' of the Reign of Terror.

Critics often remark upon the two direct references to Carlyle in 'Diaphaneité'. As Varty notes, Pater's description of the diaphaneité figure as possessed of 'a clear crystal nature' echoes Carlyle's representation of Madame Roland de la Platrière, whom he praises for her 'clear crystal nature'.³⁸ However, it seems likely that Pater's 'diaphaneité' figure is more generally inspired by the Homeric epithets that Carlyle gives the key revolutionaries in his self-consciously epic history. Many of these epithets evoke not the physical characteristics of the given revolutionary but the mystical aura that Carlyle imagines that the figure diffuses. Carlyle represents these auras according to a Manichean schema of smoky darkness and dazzling light, although he gives some revolutionaries epithets suggestive of both qualities. Pater cites two of Carlyle's aura epithets in his essay. He firstly confuses (and misquotes) Carlyle's description of Camille Desmoulins with his description of Georges Danton. This is perhaps willful misquotation, since Pater's emphasis on Danton's 'dim blackguardism' (*sic*) enables him to define his 'diaphaneité' figure against Carlyle's Danton, where quoting faithfully and at greater length would reveal similarity rather than difference:

Then that other, his slight-built comrade ... he with the long curling locks; with the face of dingy blackguardism, wondrously irradiated with genius, as if a naphtha-lamp burnt within it ... One of the sprightliest, clearest souls in these millions. Thou poor Camille, say of thee what they may, it were but falsehood to

³⁷ See for example Benjamin Morgan, 'Aesthetic Freedom: Walter Pater and the Politics of Autonomy', *ELH* 77.3 (2010), 734-736.

³⁸ Varty, 'Crystal Man', 207.

pretend one did not almost love thee, thou headlong lightly sparkling man!³⁹

Later in the narrative, Desmoulins is granted the grandeur and pathos of Milton's Satan:

The thing that Camille touches, he with his light finger adorns: brightness plays, gentle, unexpected, amid horrible confusions ... Questionable Camille, how thou glitterest when fallen, rebellious, yet still semi-celestial light; as is the starlight on the brow of Lucifer! Son of the Morning, into what times and what lands art thou fallen!⁴⁰

Carlyle's curiously tender, admiring invocation of Desmoulins surely would have appealed to Pater, who would go on to make the archetype of the gifted yet doomed young man one of his major topoi. Carlyle similarly depicts Charlotte Corday as a fallen angel, which is perhaps why Pater associated these two passages in *The French Revolution* and alluded to them both in 'Diaphaneité'. However, Pater was not simply struck by a cluster of Carlylean images; his allusions are polemically motivated.

John Rosenberg remarks that Carlyle writes of the French Revolution 'as if he were a witness-survivor of the Apocalypse'.⁴¹ Carlyle portrays the Revolution as a kind of modern bacchanal or 'Sorcerer's Sabbath', and his narrative voice lurches so abruptly between ironic and prophetic registers that the reader is often left disoriented.⁴² Key to the book's power is Carlyle's capacity to sustain an intense ambivalence about the meaning of the Revolution across hundreds of pages:

So dies Sansculottism ... Its ragged Pythian Carmagnole-dance has transformed into a Pyrrhic, into a dance of *Cabarus* Balls ... And yet a meaning lay in it: Sansculottoism verily was alive, a New-Birth of Time: nay it still lives, and is not dead but changed. The

³⁹ Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (London: Everyman's Library, 1980), 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁴¹ John Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 50.

⁴² Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 142.

soul of it still lives; still works far and wide, though one bodily shape into another less amorphous, as is the way of cunning Time with his New Births: — till, in some perfected shape, it embrace the whole circuit of the world!⁴³

Carlyle's paradoxical vision of the French Revolution as an unholy conflagration that nonetheless purged a historical epoch of 'IMPOSTURE' and ushered in a 'New-birth of Time' clearly draws upon the ambivalent status of apocalypse within the Christian imaginary, its association with violent calamity and retributive judgment as well as with hopes of renewal and salvation.⁴⁴ Yet despite his dependence upon apocalyptic rhetoric, Carlyle's vision of history was not premised on Christian eschatology but rather upon a belief in inevitable, recurrent cycles of decay and regeneration. As Rosenberg suggests, Carlyle's cyclical conception of history leads him to view the Revolution as a natural phenomenon like an earthquake or volcano, a sublime eruption that essentially confounds moral judgment and political partisanship.⁴⁵ In this, his view of history has some affinities with Pater's own renderings of cycles of cultural renaissance and decadence. Unlike Carlyle, however, Pater never adopts the posture of Old Testament prophet, nor does he invoke the apocalyptic sublime in his figurations of historical change. As Sharon Bassett observes, Pater uses the concept of 'renaissance' as an 'alternative to the Carlylean notion of apocalypse as a means of characterising historical change and possibility'.⁴⁶

Ingram Bywater, one of Pater's close friends, recalled that he 'devoured' Carlyle in his undergraduate years, although Billie Inman's study of his reading only confirms that Pater read *The French Revolution* in 1859 and it is uncertain how well Pater knew the rest of Carlyle's *oeuvre*.⁴⁷ Dellamora and Adams both suggest that 'Diaphaneitè' responds to Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), though Pater would have been well acquainted with

⁴³ Ibid., 380.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 389.

⁴⁵ Rosenberg, *Carlyle*, 96-98.

⁴⁶ Sharon Bassett, "Marius and the Varieties of Stoic Will: 'Can the Will Itself be an Organ of Knowledge, of Vision?'"', *English Literature in Transition* 27.1 (1984), 55.

⁴⁷ Inman, *Pater's Reading*, 4-7.

Carlyle's reverence for the figure of charismatic, world-changing individual if he had only read *The French Revolution*.⁴⁸ Certainly, Carlyle's description of the hero figure in that book as 'a flowing light-fountain ... of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; – in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them' seems close to the imagery of apotheosis in Pater's essay, and Pater is perhaps thinking of Carlyle's admiring portrait of Luther in *On Heroes* when he identifies Luther as a type antithetical to his own diaphaneité figure.⁴⁹ Dellamora and Adams convincingly argue that Pater's androgynous diaphaneité figure is a critique of the strenuously masculine ideal of heroism celebrated in *On Heroes*, though it is worth emphasising that Pater's critique of Carlylean ideals of masculinity actually appropriates part of its vision of androgyny from Carlyle, specifically from Carlyle's portraits of Desmoulins and Corday. Pater departs from Carlyle most crucially by filtering out from his own model of the heroic personality Carlyle's tendency to mystify violence and zeal as male creative principles.

The French Revolution is, as Marcus Wood says, 'an ecstatically violent book. Mass, murder, death, torture, dismemberment, decapitation, confusion, madness, war, conflagration and anarchy lead the prose from one delighted climax to another'.⁵⁰ While some of Carlyle's hyperbolic representation of violence stemmed from his fear that the anarchic energies that erupted in revolutionary France might also erupt in contemporary England, it also stemmed from an amoral fascination with the figure of the charismatic hero who is seemingly able to transform society by sheer force of conviction and will. Circularly, Carlyle's reverence for such figures was one consequence of his conviction that reverence and conviction were primordial virtues in themselves, and necessary remedies to the dire state of 'unbelief' into which civilisation had fallen in the eighteenth-century. As I have noted, for many Victorians, 'unbelief',

⁴⁸ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 62.

⁴⁹ *On Heroes, Hero-Worship & the Heroic in History*, Ed. Michael K. Goldberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3-4 and 109-122; and Pater, *Renaissance*, 139.

⁵⁰ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 350.

‘atheism’ and ‘scepticism’ do not simply signify lack of belief in God or the questioning of particular tenets of Christianity, but conjure images of a vortex which funnels away the integrity of the self and the familiarity of the world. This is particularly true of Carlyle. Witness, for example, this famous moment in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), where Carlyle’s semi-autobiographical protagonist, Teufelsdröckh, imagines himself crushed – or perhaps crucified – by a godless, mechanistic cosmos:

... but in our age of Downpulling and Disbelief, the very Devil has been pulled down, you cannot so much as believe in a Devil. To me the Universe was void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death!⁵¹

While the religious vision of *Sartor Resartus* is not precisely Christian but an idiosyncratic transcendentalism inspired by Carlyle’s reading of Goethe, Kant, Hegel, and Schiller, the metaphysical speculations, moral philosophy and rhetorical textures of the novel are saturated with the Calvinism of Carlyle’s childhood. As A. Abbott Ikeler remarks, ‘The world picture he paints there is as stern and ‘everlasting’ in its contrasts as any that Knox or Calvin devised; transcendentalism may have determined the general philosophy of the novel, but its frequent dichotomies are reminiscent not so much of Kant’s speculations as of Puritan sermonising’.⁵² Pater shared Carlyle’s interest in German philosophy – he actually gained his fellowship at Brasenose on account of his expertise in it – but throughout his career, he was suspicious of metaphysical idealism and tended to pathologise its proponents as cold-blooded and obsessed with abstraction.⁵³ In ‘Coleridge’s Writings’, which appeared anonymously in *The Westminster Review* two years after ‘Diaphaneité’ was delivered to the Old Mortality, Pater declared that ‘A transcendentalism that makes what is abstract more excellent than what is

⁵¹ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, eds. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 127.

⁵² A. Abbott Ikeler, *Puritan Temper and Transcendental Faith: Carlyle’s Literary Vision* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1972), 142.

⁵³ Monsman, *Pater*, 29.

concrete has nothing akin to the leading philosophies of the world'.⁵⁴ It is possible to derive an impression of Pater's likely estimation of Carlyle's effort to use German idealism as a salvation from modern scepticism from his portrait of Coleridge, whose comparable sympathy with the 'long pleading of German culture for things "behind the veil"' Pater treats as an intellectual cul-de-sac and a form of neurosis.⁵⁵

Carlyle's conviction that either divine truth lies behind the veil of appearances or we inhabit a fallen world also determines his portrait of the French Revolution:

We hail the French Revolution, as ship-wrecked mariners might the sternest rock, in a world otherwise all of baseless sea and waves. A true apocalypse, though a terrible one, to this false withered artificial time; testifying once more that Nature is *preternatural*; if not divine, then diabolic; that Semblance is not Reality; that is has to become Reality, or the world will take fire under it, - burn *it* into what it is, namely Nothing!⁵⁶

In such passages, the instabilities of Victorian sage discourse are palpable. Carlyle continually reaches for the metaphor of the apocalypse in his representation of the Revolution in order to hyperbolise the evils of secularism, yet he secularises the concept of 'apocalypse' by continually deploying it as a metaphor for a modern historical event. Peter Allan Dale observes that Carlyle continually returned to the idea that the 'unbelieving society dies not quietly and naturally but with a vast retributive conflagration produced by the release of irrational forces held in check only by religion'.⁵⁷ Of course, the most dramatic example of this paradigm is *The French Revolution*, in which Carlyle reviles Enlightenment philosophy in general and religious scepticism in particular as the 'cardinal symptom of the widespread malady' afflicting revolutionary France.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Pater, 'Coleridge', 106.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁶ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 173-174.

⁵⁷ Peter Allan Dale, *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History: Carlyle, Arnold, Pater* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 53.

⁵⁸ Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 11.

Carlyle repeats the association of secularism with nihilism and baleful vacuity he makes in *Sartor Resartus*:

Faith is gone out; Scepticism is come in. Evil abounds and accumulates; no man has Faith to withstand it, to amend it ... While hollow languor and vacuity is the lot of the Upper, and want and stagnation of the Lower, and universal misery is very certain, what other thing is certain? That a Lie cannot be believed! Philosophism knows only this: her other belief is mainly, that in spiritual supersensual matters no Belief is possible ... The five unsatiated Senses will remain, the sixth insatiable Sense (of vanity); the whole *daemonic* nature of man will remain – hurled forth to rage blindly without rule or rein; savage itself, yet with all the tools and weapons of civilization; a spectacle new in History.⁵⁹

For Carlyle, a perception of the withering of Christian faith – which is often imagined, as in the passage above, as inexorable and in its way impressive, even sublime – only exacerbates a sense of the necessity of the anti-carnal dualisms of Christianity. Central to Pater's aestheticism is an attempt to undo this association of the sensuous with the depraved side of human nature – an association which, in his early work, he generally considers a dark legacy of Christianity – and revive what he conceived of as a serene, Hellenic appreciation of the identity of sense and intellect, materiality and spirituality. The seeds of this project can be discerned in 'Diaphaneitè', where the 'the higher intellectual life' is synonymous with 'a beautiful way of handling everything that appeals to the senses'.⁶⁰

Kit Andrews notes that the concepts of apocalypse and revolution are invoked only to be suspended in 'Diaphaneitè': 'virtually every assertion of revolutionary transformation is caught in and held motionless in the thick web of Pater's qualifications'.⁶¹ For example, in the 'diaphaneitè' type, revolutionary energies are said to be 'softened, harmonised, subdued as by distance'; his is 'the revolutionism of one who has slept a hundred years'.⁶² The latter conceit perhaps

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁰ Pater, *Renaissance*, 137.

⁶¹ Andrews, 'Diaphanous Collector', 256.

⁶² Pater, *Renaissance*, 138.

has its origin in the ‘Epimenides’ chapter of Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, which, like ‘Diaphaneité’, meditates on the unconscious processes that generate historical change. Throughout the chapter, Carlyle draws on the legends of Epimenides, Peter Klaus, and Rip Van Winkle as allegorical figures for how social transformation is wrought while individual agents remain oblivious of their roles within it. However, in revolutionary periods, such ‘sleepers’ are startled into self-awareness, and recognise their power to shape history.⁶³ In ‘Diaphaneité’, Pater denatures Carlyle’s sleeping revolutionist motif so that the fairytale sleep is a symbol not of insensibility to the movements of history but rather a special, pacific wisdom. Pater’s image of his revolutionist as a kind of enchanted anachronism reinforces passages earlier in the essay when he suggests his diaphaneité figure is ‘like a relic from a classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere’ or like ‘the reminiscence of a forgotten culture that once adorned the mind’.⁶⁴ This too has a parallel in Carlyle, who at one point characterises the revolutionary energies released across Europe by the French Revolution as a quasi-miraculous awakening of the Hellenic spirit:

The Jacobins are buried: but their work is not; it continues, “making a tour of the world”, as it can. It might be seen lately, for instance, with bared bosom and death-defiant eye, as far on as Greek Missolonghi; strange enough, old slumbering Hellas was resuscitated, into *somnambulism* which will become clear wakefulness, by a voice from the Rue St. Honore!’⁶⁵

As such comparisons suggest, a Carlylean sense of visionary wonder at historical change pervades ‘Diaphaneité’, as well as Pater’s *oeuvre* as a whole. Yet in ‘Diaphaneité’, Pater sifts out the sense of horror and portent that freights such wonder in Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*; Pater’s diaphaneité figure accomplishes revolution ‘without the noise of axe or hammer’.⁶⁶ (This phrase also seems to echo Carlyle; Carlyle often refers to the guillotine as ‘the axe’ – surely

⁶³ Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 316-317.

⁶⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 137-138.

⁶⁵ Carlyle, *French Revolution*, 258.

⁶⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, 140.

preferring the earthiness of the English word to the mechanistic neologism – and he persistently uses ‘the axe’ as a metonym for the savagery of the Revolution.)⁶⁷

In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater deprecates in passing ‘the “infinite”, those eternities, infinitudes, abysses that Carlyle invokes for us so often’.⁶⁸ In context, Carlyle is being invoked as a representative of the type of modern thinker who perpetuates a pernicious ancient tendency to privilege the infinite and the abstract over the finite, tangible, and earthly. Tellingly, Pater does not discuss any of Carlyle’s avowed philosophical positions, but rather objects to Carlyle’s aesthetics, and in particular, to his predilection for the sublime. While ‘Diaphaneité’ could be said to participate in the discourse of the sublime insofar as Pater secularises Christian tropes in order to generate a sense of ineffability around his ideal figure, the sense of terror and confusion that is typically associated with the sublime is absent. Instead, Pater’s essay at once praises and seeks to illustrate the value of a poetics of the oblique and subdued: his diaphaneité figure is ‘delicate’, ‘a fine edge of light’, or ‘an evanescent shade’.⁶⁹ Similarly, the essay strives after a muted sage discourse as a counterpoint to Carlyle’s tumultuous rhetoric: Pater’s diaphaneité figure does not claim an authoritative capacity to read the signs of the times, but rather ‘notes with strange heedfulness the faintest paleness in the sky’. Implicit in ‘Diaphaneité’, then, is a thesis about the relationship between secularism and aesthetics. For Pater, a properly secular poetics involves a renunciation or at least a winnowing of certain rhetorical effects. While it is not necessary to forfeit a visionary ‘wistfulness’ or wonder in the face of history, such a poetics must repudiate some of the authority and grandeur of the high prophetic mode. However, Pater promises that the loss in rhetorical drama is compensated for by gains in subtlety of perception and in the capacity to appreciate what ‘fill[s] up the blanks’ between customary categories, such as his diaphaneité figure.⁷⁰ This call for an authentically secular poetics is articulated more boldly in ‘Coleridge’s Writings’, where Pater suggests that, since

⁶⁷ Carlyle, *French Revolution*; see for example 18 and 154.

⁶⁸ Pater, *Plato and Platonism* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 59.

⁶⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 136.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

many have ‘passed out of Christianity’ and ‘religious belief may have been refined out of our hearts’, it is necessary to cultivate a new, more supple prose style, one which does not rely on eternal fixities but rather registers the vision of minute, evanescent particulars revealed by modern science.⁷¹

The truth of these relations experience gives us; not the truth of eternal outlines effected once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change; and bids us by constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis to make what we can of these. To the intellect, to the critical spirit, these subtleties of effect are more precious than anything else. What is lost in precision of form is gained in intricacy of expression.⁷²

Pater’s desire to purge the idea of revolutionary change of its associations with zeal, violence, and apocalypse in ‘Diaphaneité’ has led some critics to claim that the essay reflects the essentially conservative or apolitical character of Pater’s aestheticism.⁷³ Yet Pater insists that it is only in the light of crude categories that his ‘diaphaneité’ figure will appear guilty of ‘indifferentism’, and at the end of essay, he specifies that his ‘diaphaneité’ figure can no more be ‘conservative’ than ‘anything rash or irreverent’.⁷⁴ In this sense, critics who find the essay apolitical or conservative fall prey to the logic that the essay aims to critique: namely, the belief that radical change inevitably culminates in or can only be accomplished by violence. Pater’s diaphaneité figure embodies the paradox that the authentically revolutionary figure could not be perceived as such, since this figure would by definition at once elude and transform established modes of perception, including the concept of ‘revolution’ itself.

‘Diaphaneité’ adroitly skirts around a key obstacle to Pater’s wish to polemicise for his ideal of the secular: secularism and the horrors of the French Revolution remained soldered together in the Victorian cultural imagination (and the memory of the Revolution itself had been rekindled by the revolutionary

⁷¹ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 127-128.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷³ See Morgan, ‘Autonomy’, and Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater’s Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 182.

⁷⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 139-140.

upheaval in France and across Europe in 1848). Twenty-seven years earlier, Carlyle had also done much to rekindle and popularise a sense of the co-implication of secularism and revolution for the English reading public, and in this respect, it is telling that Pater slights Carlyle's 'type' of hero as 'too popular for the true interest of art'.⁷⁵ It is easy to hear the elitist accent of Pater's aestheticism here, and to caricature it as part of his celebration of an entirely passive hero, too pure for the 'adulterated' world.⁷⁶ Yet Pater emphasises that 'over and over again the world has been surprised by the heroism, the insight, the passion' of his diaphaneitè figure; clearly, the value of the ideal hinges not upon its solipsistic withdrawal, but upon its power to 'surprise' the world out of conventional habits of thought.⁷⁷ Similarly, Pater asserts that 'a magnificent intellectual force is latent' in the diaphaneitè figure, who may appear merely concerned with trivial matters of 'taste'.⁷⁸ Pater's emphasis throughout the essay on the unsuspected 'force' of nuance and the 'latent' intellectual power of beauty encodes his ambitions for a new kind of critical prose, one whose sheer beauty and grace allows it to explore radical ideas with impunity. However, as was the case with Swinburne and later with Wilde, Pater's habit of handling controversial subjects with the air of urbane serenity he associated with ancient Greece would itself become a source of scandal.⁷⁹

'Neither for God nor for his Enemies': Heresy and Disinterestedness in the Critical Essays of Arnold and Pater

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ In 1877, John R. Tyrwhitt excoriated the 'Greek spirit in modern literature' – the tendency to use Hellenism as a discourse for lending a cultured ideality to anti-Christian sentiments and homoeroticism. John Addington Symonds was the ostensible target of the attack, though, as Laurel Brake notes, Pater understood that his work was also implicated. See Tyrwhitt, 'The Greek Spirit in Modern Literature', *Contemporary Review* 29 (March 1877): 552-566, and Brake, 'After *Studies*: Walter Pater's Cancelled Book, or *Dionysus* and Gay Discourse in the 1870s', in *Beauty and the Beast: Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, R.L. Stevenson and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Peter Liebrechts and Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 1996), 118.

In 1871, an anonymous writer published an article on ‘Standards of Heresy’ in the *Saturday Review*. Noting that, at its etymological root, ‘heresy’ simply means a deliberate choice or preference (‘I choose for myself’) and surveying both the bloody history of persecution for heresy in England and the sheer motley of Christian sects and beliefs that have fallen or could fall under its shifting purview, the writer concluded:

It is equally difficult to define and easy to transgress the invisible boundary which separates heresy from orthodox or innocuous belief ... Aristotle says that the man who has many friends has no friend, and when every other divine is denounced as a heretic, a suspicion is suggested that the genuine article is non-existent, or has become extinct.⁸⁰

‘Standards of Heresy’ was occasioned by the Voysey case, the latest in a cluster of mid-Victorian cases in which a clergyman was tried for heresy. Charles Voysey, a Yorkshire clergyman, had imagined that the anti-climactic outcome of the heresy trials of two of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* – in 1864, the Privy Council overturned the guilty verdicts handed down to Rowland Williams and H.B. Wilson by the Court of Arches – heralded a new climate of theological liberalism. Emboldened by the precedent, Voysey began publishing a series of sermons under the title *The Sling and the Stone*, wherein he questioned the divinity of Christ and the Inspiration of the Scriptures, and declared the doctrines of eternal punishment and the Atonement immoral.⁸¹ In 1871, he was treated to the professional martyrdom many felt he had been courting: he was convicted of heresy at the chancellor’s court of the diocese of York and stripped of his living (in this instance, the Privy Council upheld the verdict upon appeal).

The paradoxical conclusions of the anonymous writer in *The Saturday Review* – first, that the freedom with which people accuse one another of heresy shows only that it is a word without a proper referent; and second, that the frequency with which modern clergymen are prosecuted for it confirms its

⁸⁰ Anonymous, ‘Standards of Heresy’, *Saturday Review* 31.800 (1871), 235.

⁸¹ Leslie Stephen discusses Voysey in relation to *Essays and Reviews* in ‘The Broad Church’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 1.3 (1870), 319-323.

obsolescence – are instructive, for they suggest how the apparent vitality and pervasiveness of ‘heresy’ in the mid-Victorian period could engender cynicism about the category. An ironic perception of the tendency of yesterday’s heresy to become today’s orthodoxy was surely especially acute in this period because of the ongoing transformation of the cultural status of religious doubt: by the 1860s, religious doubt had been at least partially cleansed of its associations with sin and transgression, and it was increasingly common to find doubt recast not simply as a marker of intellectual and moral integrity, but as a measure of the quality of one’s faith.⁸² Yet, as Leslie Stephen remarked of the word ‘atheism’, ‘heresy’ no doubt retained ‘a certain flavour of the stake in this world and hell-fire in the next’; moreover, it retained a few concrete worldly penalties.⁸³ Unlike blasphemy, which was considered a crime against the State, heresy was a clergyman’s offence, and could only be tried in an ecclesiastical court (although secular courts could quash convictions of heresy, and provoked controversy among Anglicans when they did so.)⁸⁴ Where the men tried for blasphemy in the period were working-class radicals and militant secularists, those prosecuted for heresy were often earnest Broadchurchmen such as the Essayists and Reviewers, Bishop Colenso, and Voysey, who had presumed too far upon the latitudinarianism of the Anglican Church. The fact that Victorian clergyman heretics lost only their livings and not their lives was sometimes underscored ironically and taken as an emblem of the essentially staid and tolerant temper of the age.⁸⁵ Yet defenders of orthodoxy could also be anxious about the extent to which an aura of romance, even of holiness, clung to the archetype of the persecuted heretic – an aura hard to expunge entirely because of the obvious imaginative associations not only with early Christian, Catholic and Protestant martyrs, but with Christ himself (an image of Christ as a religious heretic was particularly encouraged by Ernest Renan, whose best-selling *La Vie de Jésus* [1863; trans. 1863] forms a key

⁸² See Lane, *Doubt*, 123-158.

⁸³ Stephen, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’, *Fortnightly Review* 19.114 (1876), 840.

⁸⁴ See W. Blake Odgers, ‘The Law Relating to Heresy and Blasphemy’, *Modern Review* (July 1883): 587-608.

⁸⁵ See anonymous, ‘Mr. Voysey and Mr. Purchas’, *Fraser’s Magazine* 3.16 (1871), 457.

context for these Victorian heresy trials).⁸⁶ The perverse glamour which could attach to the figure of the clergyman heretic is suggested by the fantasy life of a schoolboy Oscar Wilde, who – intrigued by the heresy case of the Reverend W. J. E. Bennett, vicar of Frome Selwood, who was convicted for espousing the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence in 1870 – proclaimed to his friends that he planned to be a clergyman heretic himself and to ‘go down to posterity as the defendant in such a case as *Regina versus Wilde*’.⁸⁷

In an essay he wrote toward the end of his life, Pater observed that Pascal ‘creates in us a feeling that, however orthodox one’s intention, it is scarcely possible to speak of the matters then so abundantly discussed by religious people without heresy at some unguarded point’.⁸⁸ If the fact that one could commit heresies inadvertently, while imagining that one was conforming to orthodoxy – or even, as Pater suggests in relation to Pascal, one necessarily strayed into heresy if one discussed religion at any length – is central to the fascination of the subject for Pater, so is the inverse possibility: namely, that heretical ideas could be sanctified if one fitted them closely enough to the contours of orthodoxy. As I noted, Swinburne’s formulation of his aestheticism in *William Blake* hinges upon the concept of heresy: Swinburne’s desire to assimilate Blake to his ideal of a Romanticism essentially opposed to Christian orthodoxy leads him to insist that Blake’s ‘earnestly heretical’ beliefs were the source of his creative genius. Pater also uses the concept of heresy to render the Christian past available to a secularising hermeneutic, and, like Swinburne, he is always alive to the fact that such a hermeneutic itself partakes of heresy; after all, a heresy is simply a wayward or idiosyncratic interpretation, an assertion of interpretive will over an authoritative body of interpretations. Yet, where Swinburne tends to use the

⁸⁶ See for example the anonymous article ‘The Unitarians and Mr. Voysey’, *The Sphinx* 4.149 (1871), 190. The writer attacks a tendency among Unitarians to romanticise Voysey as a Christ-like martyr. Renan’s wish to cast Christ as a persecuted heretic leads him virtually to absolve Pontius Pilate and the Roman authorities for Christ’s death and to lay the blame almost entirely on a fanatical Judaism; see *The Life of Jesus*, trans. Charles Gore (London: J.M. Dent, 1927), 220-223.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 23.

⁸⁸ Pater, ‘Pascal’, *Miscellaneous Studies*, ed. Charles Shadwell (London: Macmillan, 1899), 49-50.

concept of heresy as a means of assimilating ostensibly Christian art and culture to his own anti-Christian position, Pater tends to tarry with the indeterminacies embedded within the concept. This is not because Pater always differs markedly from Swinburne in his stance toward Christianity: at least at this early stage of his career, Pater is, like Swinburne, an apologist for a ‘secular, rebellious spirit’.⁸⁹ The key difference is that where Swinburne attacks the ambiguities of the discourses of religious doubt, Pater perceives the extent to which it is possible to critique this inheritance and advance beyond it by working within its terms. ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’, ‘Sandro Botticelli’ and ‘Pico della Mirandola’, the three essays I will discuss here, bear the influence not only of Swinburne’s identification of aestheticism with heresy, but of the critical prose of Arnold, whose emphasis upon the necessity of drawing fine distinctions in relation to the subject of religion Pater turns to self-consciously heretical ends. This appropriation has its ironic dimensions, since, as I will show, Arnold championed a literary concept of nuance precisely as a means of countering the tendency of conservative believers to detect heresy in efforts to modernise Christianity. In other words, Pater’s aestheticism – like Swinburne’s – can often be understood as retrograde: it seeks to resuscitate the very associations of religious questioning with heresy, transgression and sin which Arnold sought to finesse into innocuous subtleties. I will focus here on one of the earliest of Arnold’s controversial interventions on the subject: his essay on the heresy of Bishop Colenso, ‘The Bishop and the Philosopher’ (1863). This essay is important not only because Arnold returned to the subject of Colenso repeatedly and the controversy over the original essay influenced the reception of his subsequent religious writings, but because it reveals the extent to which Arnold’s model of cultural criticism was evolved as a means of distinguishing between literary nuance and heresy.⁹⁰

Arnold, Colenso and the Pious Fraud Tradition

⁸⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 10.

⁹⁰ See for example William Binns, ‘Matthew Arnold as a Religious Teacher’, *Theological Review* 15.60 (1878), 99. Fifteen years later, Binns interprets Arnold’s religious position through the prism of the Colenso affair.

At the core of the controversy over ‘The Bishop and the Philosopher’ was the fact that Arnold here seemed to invoke what I will call the ‘pious fraud’ tradition. I borrow the phrase from Sarah Ellenzweig, whose recent book addresses the fact that the conventional identification of the Enlightenment with attacks on religious orthodoxy applies far better to eighteenth-century France than to England, which (at least arguably) produced few literary figures whose anti-clericalism or sheer irreverence seems comparable to that of Diderot or Baron d’Holbach or Voltaire. Ellenzweig argues that the elusiveness of Enlightenment atheism in England can be accounted for partly by the fact that English sceptics tended to regard religion as a salutary fiction which undergirded the stability of the social order and the authority of the state. Writers including Aphra Behn, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester drew upon precedents in classical sources to evolve the ‘pious fraud’ or ‘two-fold’ philosophy, which is at once obliquely sceptical and profoundly conservative: while elite thinkers may be privately incredulous toward the supernatural claims of Christianity, so the argument runs, they should nevertheless commit to a ‘beliefless orthodoxy’⁹¹ in the name of civic duty. Ellenzweig traces how an impulse to demystify religion in subtle or coded ways coalesces with a countervailing imperative to sustain the political utility of religion in such works, and suggests that this tradition gave English literary freethought a distinctly conservative and elitist accent.

Joseph Carroll has noted that Arnold was deeply influenced by Swift and Pope, and partly inherited from them his controversial mixture of scepticism toward the supernatural elements of Christianity and profound investment in the social and moral utility of religion.⁹² Yet whenever the sediments of this legacy rose to the surface of Arnold’s prose, he tended to alienate his contemporaries. To a bourgeois and increasingly democratic age that had been in many ways shaped by Evangelical Protestantism, Arnold’s seeming valorisation of a double standard

⁹¹ Sarah Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking 1660-1760* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 171.

⁹² Joseph Carroll, *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 135.

in religious belief – faith for the multitude, freethinking for a caste of educated sophisticates, and outward conformity to the Anglican Church for all – had a bad odour of priestcraft on the one hand and aristocratic *hauteur* on the other. Thus, for example, in 1863 the Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice sounds not just offended but shocked at what he takes to be Arnold's suggestion that in matters of religion, 'edification is for the herd' while 'information [is] for men of literary culture'. Maurice claims that the reading public will not only be 'sorely puzzled' but 'suspect their countryman [i.e., Arnold] of a pious fraud – which [surely] he would look upon as fit only for priests'.⁹³ In a similar vein, W. R. Greg, himself a sceptic, professed bewilderment at the way that Arnold blended the dogmatism of a 'Catholic divine' with the 'naked' irreverence of a 'Pagan philosopher'.⁹⁴ These expressions of shock are rhetorical ploys, intended to highlight the egregiousness of Arnold's elitism; yet Maurice and Greg's conviction that there is something un-English and un-Protestant about Arnold's thinking on religion is surely indicative of just how alien the pious fraud tradition had come to seem by the mid-nineteenth century, despite its English and at least partly Protestant lineage.⁹⁵ As Frank Turner has argued, Evangelical religion crucially shaped the Victorian model of religious scepticism, which, at least on an emotional level, was often the ironic product of the Evangelical emphasis upon perfect sincerity and self-consistency: if one cannot believe utterly, one must follow one's conscience, whatever the cost.⁹⁶

Maurice and Greg's 'priestcraft' slurs were prompted by 'The Bishop and the Philosopher', an essay which is worth examining in detail not only because Arnold's affiliation with the pious fraud tradition is more perceptible here than

⁹³ F. D. Maurice, 'Spinoza and Professor Arnold', *Spectator* 36 (1863): 1472-1474.

Reprinted in *Matthew Arnold's Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Carl Dawson and John Pfordresher (London: Routledge, 1979), 100.

⁹⁴ W. R. Greg, 'Truth vs. Edification', *Westminster Review* 23.2 (1863), 505.

⁹⁵ Sidney Coulling details the controversy in *Matthew Arnold and His Critics: A Study of Arnold's Controversies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974), 100-136.

⁹⁶ Frank Turner, 'The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith that was Lost', *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, eds. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), 9-36.

anywhere else in his critical writings, but also because the core assumptions of this essay re-appear in modulated form in Arnold's much more famous essay, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865), a document still often treated as the seminal statement of the mission of modern literary criticism. 'The Bishop and the Philosopher' is a critique of John Colenso's *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (1862), a work which had turned into a somewhat improbable bestseller and *cause célèbre*. Colenso was the Bishop of Natal and his experience of missionary work had convinced him that it was necessary for the Anglican Church to acknowledge that the Bible was not the revealed word of God.⁹⁷ Colenso's book questioned the assumption of Mosaic authorship and sought to expose the errors and incongruities of the Pentateuch, often through statistics and mathematical demonstrations; it led to Colenso's vilification in the British periodical press, a clerical campaign to have him excommunicated, and ultimately to his being found guilty of heresy by the Bishop of Cape Town. Yet in Arnold's view, Colenso should be condemned not for heresy, but for labouring the obvious; Colenso's effort to prove that the Old Testament cannot bear literal reading makes Colenso himself guilty of a literal-mindedness that would be risible if it were not so dangerous. As Jeff Guy has pointed out, literary critics tend to reproduce Arnold's assessment of Colenso, who is often travestied in passing as a buffoon whose belief crumbled when he found that the Old Testament literally failed to add up.⁹⁸ Yet if Colenso's assumptions were naïve, the reception of his book – including the fact that Arnold was moved to such a contradictory assault on it – indicate that such naïveté about the Bible had its subversive dimensions in 1862.

Arnold's opening strategy is to suggest that Colenso's book is not scandalous but a national embarrassment. He opens his essay with a lament for the backwardness of English scholarship on the Bible and English theological speculation more generally, which risk provoking 'a titter from educated

⁹⁷ For an account of how Colenso's book grew out of his misgivings about missionary work, see Jeff Guy, 'Class, Imperialism and Literary Criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold', *Journal of South African Studies* 23.2 (1997): 219-241.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

Europe'.⁹⁹ Arnold's perception of the belatedness of the English assimilation of the insights of the Higher Criticism of the Bible is accurate. As LaPorte notes, 'Colenso ... had no concept of the state of Continental scholarship, and his [English] readers found high drama in conclusions that Strauss's first audience had taken for granted'.¹⁰⁰ Yet the tendency to treat critiques of traditional Christianity both as high drama and as a set of familiar, even banal ideas recycled from classical sources, from exploded eighteenth-century paradigms, or from suspect Continental thinkers is one of the salient features of English cultural life in the 1860s. This cultural disjunction is not simply a matter of the contrast between cosmopolitan readers *au fait* with Strauss versus a naïve general readership which could be startled by Colenso, since intellectuals like Arnold who wished to protect Christianity from certain varieties of critique often mobilised this disjunction as a strategy of containment. Thus Colenso is doubly damned by Arnold, first for telling general readers what they should already know, and second for telling them truths that they cannot handle. Arnold obscures this illogic by claiming that works on the subject of religion may be valid either because they 'enlighten' the 'much-instructed few' or they 'edify' the 'little-instructed many'.¹⁰¹ The implications of this argument become clear when it emerges that 'enlighten' and 'edify' are not synonyms: 'enlighten' refers to the rational understanding of religion that a sophisticated reader derives from a philosopher like Spinoza, while 'edify' refers to the beneficial reinforcement of piety that a less educated reader best gleans from more simplistic religious books. Colenso's book 'cannot justify itself for existing' because it destabilises the religious beliefs of the many without paving the way toward a more rational understanding of religion for the benefit of the few.¹⁰²

Arnold counterpoints his attack on Colenso with a paeon to the religious thought of Spinoza, whose work had been largely neglected in England because,

⁹⁹ Arnold, 'The Bishop and the Philosopher', *Macmillan's Magazine* 7.39 (1863): 241-256. Arnold also attacked Colenso in 'Dr. Stanley's Lectures on the Jewish Church', *Macmillan's* 7.40 (1863): 327-336.

¹⁰⁰ LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Arnold, 'Bishop', 242-243.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 253.

as Arnold notes, he was still generally regarded as a heretic.¹⁰³ Although Arnold strenuously argues for Spinoza's piety, the fact that he lauds a seventeenth-century Dutch Jewish philosopher known as a 'great heretic' but little read in England in order to condemn a contemporary Bishop whose 'heretical' book 'all England is now reading' sends a number of provocative ambiguities rippling through the essay.¹⁰⁴ Aside from the perversity of exonerating one heretic for the purposes of condemning another, the strategy calls attention to the historical fluidity of the categories of heresy and piety. Arnold's continual appeals to 'literary criticism' rather than to Christian orthodoxy and explicit desire to prosecute Colenso not 'before a Court of Arches, but before the Republic of Letters' also generates the impression that the distinction between the two might be a matter of literary taste, or at least that literary critics possess an alternative, esoteric model of piety.¹⁰⁵ Yet the most troubling instability in the essay arises – as Maurice and Greg's reactions attest – from its oddly stark exposure of the logic of the pious fraud tradition. Arnold begins his celebration of Spinoza by noting that Spinoza wrote in Latin, 'the language of the instructed few', and cites with approval Coleridge's opinion that all 'novel speculations about religion' should be written in that language.¹⁰⁶ After his careful exposition of Spinoza's Biblical hermeneutics, Arnold declares that:

Theology demands perfect obedience, Philosophy perfect knowledge: the obedience demanded by Theology and the knowledge demanded by Philosophy are alike saving. As speculative opinions about God, Theology requires only such as are indispensable to the reality of this obedience; the belief that God is, that He is a rewarder of them that seek Him, and that the proof of seeking Him is a good life. These are the fundamentals of Faith, and they are so clear and simple that none of the inaccuracies provable in the Bible narrative the least affect them, and they have indisputably come to us uncorrupted ... Nay, beyond these fundamentals, speculative opinions are pious or impious, not as they are true or false, but as they confirm or shake

¹⁰³ Ibid., 246.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 246 and 242.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 241.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

the believer in the practice of obedience. The truest speculative opinion about the nature of God is impious if it makes its holder rebellious; the falsest speculative opinion is pious if it makes him obedient. Governments should never render themselves the tools of ecclesiastical ambition by promulgating as fundamentals of the national Church's faith more than these, and should concede the fullest liberty of speculation.¹⁰⁷

Although the paragraph ends with an affirmation of liberty, Arnold leaves open the possibility that both the government and the Church would be justified in prosecuting Colenso, since his book risks 'shak[ing] the believer in the practice of obedience' (and Arnold later specifies that he thinks that clergyman have no right to liberty of speculation).¹⁰⁸ More startling is how Arnold's will to aphorism leads him to lay bare the 'pious fraud' or 'two-fold' doctrine: on the one hand, there is the baldly authoritarian reduction of religious truth to whatever elicits pious obedience, while on the other, he gestures at a special, but restricted, scope for 'liberty of speculation'. This liberty seems reserved for instances of 'heresy' such as Spinoza's – a philosopher whom, at the 'tribunal' of literary criticism, Arnold finds to be pious, and whose piety seems authenticated at least in part by the fact that he published only reluctantly, and then only in Latin.¹⁰⁹ Yet immediately following this passage, Arnold specifies exactly those ideas about religion which apparently necessitate such careful limits upon freedom of expression. Arnold acknowledges the minimalist character of his own Christianity: he rejects the possibility of miracles and holds that the Christian scriptures are a discontinuous assemblage of myths and poetry, rather than a factual record or the inspired word of God.¹¹⁰ He then contrasts his non-metaphysical, Spinozan faith with the irrational, passionate faith of the 'multitude', and his emphasis upon the radical simplicity of his own belief rubs against the grain of his overarching concern with distinguishing between the kinds of religious knowledge that ought to be disclosed to educated and uneducated readers. The two arguments produce a contradiction: the truths of religion must be carefully protected since they are too

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 250-251.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 251.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 251-252.

simple for most people to understand; in its irrationalism, the multitude will only exchange crude belief for crude unbelief. Simplicity in religious belief is a conspicuously mobile concept throughout the essay – salutary and sophisticated when it attaches to the minimalist religion of Spinoza and Arnold himself, dangerous and coarse when it issues in the miracle-mongering or facts-and-figures literalism of the multitude. Yet for all his anxiety about the democratisation of religious scepticism, Arnold expresses fatalism about this phenomenon by the essay’s end: here he affirms – rather sarcastically – the inevitability of the spread of scepticism (‘speculation is to be made popular, all reticence is to be abandoned, every difficulty is to be canvassed publicly, every doubt is to be proclaimed ...’), and hails the new age of ‘heresy’ in spite of himself, since he hopes it may signal the birth pangs of a new age of the ‘strong thought of Spinoza!’¹¹¹

Although Arnold maintained that he felt nothing but ‘sincere impenitence’ about having published ‘The Bishop and the Philosopher’, the fact that he repeatedly returned to the subject of Colenso and sought to reframe his original argument suggests that he was disturbed by the accusations of illiberalism and ‘pious fraud’ which the essay provoked.¹¹² Indeed, judging by his subsequent and more substantial forays into the Higher Criticism of the Bible – *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870), *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and *God and the Bible* (1875) – Arnold learnt his lesson: these later works are in the reforming spirit of the peroration to Spinoza in ‘The Bishop and the Philosopher’ rather than extensions of the pious fraud philosophy also articulated in that essay. In other words, Arnold came to accept the democratisation of religious doubt and sought to channel it toward a rational religion which renounced dogmatic bibliolatry in favour of an appreciation of the poetic nature of the Bible’s truths and which eschewed the finer points of theology and doctrine while preserving Christian morality and sentiment. Arnold’s conviction that if things are to stay the same, then everything must change – that is, if the Anglican Church is to remain viable and the essentials of Christianity are to be preserved, then religion must be

¹¹¹ Ibid., 256.

¹¹² Arnold, *CPWIII*, 276.

radically redefined – was pithily satirised by Wilde in ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1889) as an effort to ‘carry on the business of the old firm under the new name’.¹¹³ Yet arguably Wilde got his aphorism backward in this case: in many respects Arnold inaugurated a radically new enterprise under venerable names. The centrality of concepts of the ‘literary’ and the ‘poetic’ to Arnold’s conservative yet radical project is extremely well-charted critical territory, yet whether his overall achievement was to secularise religion, to sacralise Literature, or to create an imponderable hybrid remains a point of ambiguity in contemporary literary criticism. It attests to the ambiguities in Arnold’s perception of the relationship between the two phenomena – and in particular, to the extent to which he used the concept of the ‘literary’ to alternately collapse and fine-tune the distinction between belief and unbelief – that it is common to encounter critics who suggest that Arnold literally ‘replace[d] religion with poetry’ as well as critics who suppose that he simply celebrated the affinity of religion and literature, an affinity founded on their common use of metaphorical language to elicit sublime emotion.¹¹⁴ The first commonplace tends to posit Arnold as an agent (witting or otherwise) of secularisation, transferring the aura of a superannuated religion to a new cult of Literature, while the second tends to imagine him as the pioneer of a modernist Christianity and only up-dating the early Victorian ‘art as the handmaiden of religion’ axiom so that it might be

¹¹³ Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’, *The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 221.

¹¹⁴ The notion that Arnold sought to ‘replace religion with poetry’ can be traced to his introduction to his essay, ‘The Study of Poetry’ (1880): ‘The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry ... our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve ... The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry’; see *CPWIX*, 161. For the suggestion that Arnold is an agent of secularisation who, intentionally or unintentionally, replaced religion with a ‘church of literature’, see Dale, *Victorian Critic*, 167-168; Fraser, *Beauty and Belief*, 177-180; Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 194-197; and Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 240-278. For accounts which see Arnold as a Christian modernist who stressed the connection between religion and literature, see Ruth apRoberts, *Arnold and God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and James C. Livingston, *Matthew Arnold and Christianity: His Religious Prose Writings* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986).

relevant to an age of the higher criticism and scientific advancement. Put more simply, there is no critical consensus on whether Arnold elevated literature at the expense of religion, or saved religion under the aegis of literature. There is probably a feedback loop at work here: if Arnold has been as influential as many scholars think in at once shaping the categories of the secular and the religious within literary studies and endowing the discipline with a quasi-religious sense of its mission, then literary critics are likely to be using his slippery distinctions between literature, religion and the secular as tools with which to analyse the nature of his position and his legacy.¹¹⁵ Another problem is that specialists in Victorian literature often use Arnold as a short-hand not only for the nexus between literature and religion in the Victorian age, but for the secularisation thesis: Arnold's tendency to proffer literature and culture as panaceas to religious conflicts and anxieties has often seemed a telltale sign of an essentially – if reluctantly – secular sensibility, and this sensibility has in turn been taken as emblematic of an increasingly secular age.¹¹⁶ As McKelvy observes, scholarly efforts to appraise the emergence of a quasi-religious cult of literature in the nineteenth century may be divided into 'constructionist' and 'declinist' accounts: where 'declinists' imagine that a quasi-sacral cult of Literature occupied a vacancy created by the attenuation or demise of faith, constructionists imagine a more harmonious and equitable dance between the two, with literature drawing its power from its proximity to religion while helping religion to negotiate the challenges that it faces in a modern context.¹¹⁷ And even McKelvy's distinction only yields a further question: if religion transfers its authority or qualities to literature, how do we conceptualise this transference? Does secularisation represent the emergence of something distinctive and new, or is the secular essentially constituted by the religious paradigms which it has disavowed?¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ See Kaufmann, 'Secularization', 616.

¹¹⁶ As LaPorte notes, Arnold is often name-checked in secularisation narratives. See *Changing Bible*, 3.

¹¹⁷ McKelvy, *Devoted Readers*, 9-10.

¹¹⁸ This distinction between secularism understood as a distinctive and unprecedented modern perspective, and secularism understood as a 'bequest' of Christianity, is anatomised by Pecora. See *Secularization*, 1-24.

How a given critic interprets Arnold's conflation of literature and religion usually depends upon whether he or she thinks that Arnold was an ostensibly secular figure who was 'really' religious at core or an ostensibly religious figure who was 'really' secular at core, a question which – as Ruth apRoberts notes – partly hinges on whether 'one allows nonsupernatural Christianity as possible'.¹¹⁹ Another complicating factor is that critics are often responding to the fact that Arnold effectively split his ambivalence toward religion and parceled it out between his poetry and his prose: crudely, where the austere melancholy of the poetry seems to tell the inward story and has often been taken as a testament to the spiritual anguish of the age and the declining fortunes of Christianity, the prose presents the smiling public man, and his famously playful, ironic, and sanguine prose persona everywhere affirms that the age's religious crises are opportunities for Christianity to rejuvenate itself.¹²⁰

I noted that a tempered version of the pious fraud argument re-appears in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Arnold here seems chastened by the hostile reaction to 'The Bishop and the Philosopher', since he abstains from reproducing his earlier distinction between the kinds of religious speculation to which the many and the few should be exposed. Yet Colenso remains a troubling figure for Arnold; indeed, there is a sense in which Colenso embodies the problem that Arnold develops his model of cultural criticism to solve. As in the earlier essay, Arnold laments the fact that English intellectual culture has not digested the insights of the higher criticism, though now he pits Colenso against Renan rather than against Spinoza.¹²¹ The new comparison alters the substance of the argument, for Renan's *La Vie de Jésus* was widely read in England and constituted a popularisation of the higher criticism rather than a work of groundbreaking scholarship.¹²² Thus Arnold no longer seeks to impugn Colenso for popularising scepticism about the Bible *per se*

¹¹⁹ apRoberts, *Arnold and God*, 200.

¹²⁰ James Walter Caufield clarified this critical dualism for me in his unpublished PhD dissertation, 'Arnoldian Renouncements: Ethical Exemplarity and Modern Thought' (University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 254-255.

¹²¹ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 276-280.

¹²² For Renan's English reception, see LaPorte, *Changing Bible*, 77.

but only impugns the quality of the scepticism Colenso has purveyed. Arnold notes that Frances Power Cobbe had bracketed Colenso and Renan together in a recent journal article on the state of religion in Europe, and he claims that her failure to draw a distinction between them is symptomatic of the impoverished state of the ‘critical spirit’ in England.¹²³ Arnold unfolds his own ideal of cultural criticism as a means of drawing such a distinction between Colenso (who is oddly conflated with Voltaire) and Renan:

M. Renan’s attempt is, for criticism, of the most real interest and importance, since, with all its difficulty, a fresh synthesis of the New Testament *data*, – not making a war upon them, in Voltaire’s fashion, not a leaving them out of mind, in the world’s fashion, but putting a new construction upon them, the taking them from under the old, traditional, conventional point of view and placing them under a new one, – is the very essence of the religious problem, as now presented; and only by efforts in this direction can it receive a solution.¹²⁴

In other words, Arnold’s ideal cultural criticism is a method for distinguishing between good and bad kinds of religious scepticism: where the former seeks to modernise or ‘put a new construction’ upon Christianity, the latter critiques without reconstructing and thus threatens Christianity’s survival. Arnold then adds a caveat: it is the ‘duty of criticism’ to endorse new ‘constructions’ upon Christianity only as far as they tend to preserve ‘historic Christianity’; more radical projects which beckon toward a ‘religion of the future’ also ‘fall short’ of criticism’s ‘high and perfect ideal’.¹²⁵ Aside from the inadvertent comedy of Arnold’s effort to use ‘cultural criticism’ as a kind of Goldilocks principle which enables one to tell when religious scepticism is just right, his valorisation of Renan – like his valorisation of Spinoza – produces ambiguities. Remarking upon the aesthetic and emotional appeal of Renan’s *La Vie de Jésus* had rapidly become an overdetermined cliché in England, and was at the core of the controversy which surrounded the book: whether Renan’s stylistic grace and

¹²³ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 287.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

sympathetic evocation of the humanity of Christ compensated for the fact that the book denied Christ's divinity and idealised Christianity only in humanist terms was a question which divided readers.¹²⁶ While some devout English critics simply pronounced Renan an infidel in sheep's clothing, others found that his literary gifts and nostalgic tenderness toward Christianity made his book palatable, even passably devout.¹²⁷

Arnold knew the risk of seeming to make a cult of subtlety: as he noted in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', 'it will be said that it is a very subtle and indirect action which I am thus prescribing for criticism, and that by embracing in this manner of the Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life, it condemns itself to slow and obscure work.'¹²⁸ Yet Arnold suggests that if his ideal of criticism errs on the side of quietism or obscurantism, this should be understood as a social tonic, since the real evil of the age is that there is no scope for 'the free play of the mind'; all intellectual inquiry finds itself mired in religious controversy or party politics before it can come to fruition.¹²⁹ As becomes apparent in the following passage, Arnold is thinking of the drubbing he received in the press for 'The Bishop and the Philosopher'. Ironically, the ideal of intellectual freedom famously celebrated in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' was at least partly forged as a defense of his previous, incendiary attempt to define the limits of intellectual freedom. Arnold characterises the outcry over his attack on Colenso as an example of the kind of partisan group-think which his ideal cultural criticism will transcend: where he was vilified for pointing out the shortcomings of 'a brother liberal' (i.e., Colenso), a more civilised culture would recognise the value of his maverick position, his commitment to the critic's 'duty to refuse or ... at least cry with Obermann:

¹²⁶ See Jennifer Stevens, *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination 1860-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 41-43.

¹²⁷ For a critic who is willing to understand Renan as quasi-devout, see Richard Holt Hutton's 'Renan's *Life of Jesus*', *National Review* 34 (1863): 524-563; for a hostile response, see the anonymous notice, '*Vie de Jesus*', *London Quarterly Review* 21.42 (1864): 235-300.

¹²⁸ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 274.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

Périssons en résistant.¹³⁰ The circularity of Arnold's argument – he wishes to be honoured as a liberal maverick for having denounced another liberal for presuming to be a maverick – returns us to the pious fraud logic submerged in the essay: Arnold at once reserves the right to critique religion in his preferred, oblique style, and the right to anathematise any critique of religion which threatens the stability of the social order because of its blunt language or reductive logic.

Leslie Stephen was exasperated by Arnold's conflation of religion and literature. From Stephen's perspective, Arnold's stylish proselytising on behalf of a Broad Church Anglicanism opened yet another front in the war between secular and religious opinion.¹³¹ In 1872, implicitly in reaction to Arnold's *St. Paul and Protestantism* and *Literature and Dogma*, Stephen attacked what he regarded as a new tendency to construe 'religious truth as merely a variety of artistic truth' and subject doctrine to the 'test of imaginative harmony, instead of the scrutiny of the verifying faculty'.¹³² Stephen labeled this liberal form of Christianity 'religion as fine art', and insisted that its palatability told against it, since it merely reflected an 'effeminate dislike of all that is severe and melancholy in the old creeds'.¹³³ Stephen concluded:

One may manufacture a dilettante religion; something which to professors of aesthetics will appear to be exceedingly graceful and pretty, but which will fail really to touch the hearts and consciences of mankind. But surely it is better ... to look our perplexities in the face; to give up this feeble attempt at vamping old dogmas to look as good as new.¹³⁴

Stephen's distaste for 'religion as fine art' prompted him to question the continuing viability of art itself. If art and religion were as close as the new Christianity claimed, he reasoned, the two were then locked in a deadly embrace:

¹³⁰ Ibid., 276-277.

¹³¹ See Jeffrey von Arx, *Progress and Pessimism: Religion, Politics and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 23-28.

¹³² Leslie Stephen, 'Religion as Fine Art', *Fraser's Magazine* 5 (1872), 161.

¹³³ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 167-168.

art and religion were sure to infect each other with self-consciousness and insincerity. An artistic culture that is so ‘parasitical’ upon the ‘decorative’ aspects of a deed creed was, Stephen prophesied, doomed to decay into mere antiquarianism.¹³⁵ Published the year before Pater’s *Renaissance*, Stephen’s critique is prescient insofar as it captures part of the logic behind the decadent strain within aestheticism: the idea that art can only be ornamental, perverse, or self-conscious because it depends on a decaying creed for its effects. As I will suggest in relation to ‘Pico della Mirandola’, Pater sometimes positions his aestheticism as ‘decadent’ in this sense: it is a means of keeping religion ‘alive in the grave’ as an ironic aesthetic experience. Yet this is less than half the story. Pater’s early aestheticism also tries to pass beyond the terms of such critique by suggesting that art derives its power not from religion but from a primordial enchantment with the secular.

‘Room for a Noble Antinomianism’: Arnold, Heresy, and Pater’s *Renaissance*

Damon Franke has drawn attention to the way in which the concept of ‘heresy’ underwrites Pater’s work, although his analysis produces a contradiction which is worth prying apart. Franke’s book as a whole emphasises the primacy of the ‘synthetic’ or ‘syncretic’ type of heresy in Victorian and modernist literature: flouting Christ’s prohibition against putting new wine in old bottles, many writers pursued self-consciously ‘heretical’ projects which sought to fuse the ancient and the modern, the Christian and the non-Christian.¹³⁶ Pater is Franke’s key example of a Victorian synthesiser, and he argues that Pater sought to reconcile the Christian and the pagan at the level of both aesthetics and values. Yet much of Franke’s discussion of Pater pulls against the idea of ‘reconciliation’ insofar as he focuses overwhelmingly on Pater’s efforts to critique Christianity and frequently registers the extent to which Pater ‘yokes together [the] two terms to privilege ...

¹³⁵ Ibid., 165-166.

¹³⁶ Damon Franke, *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883-1924* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 2-3 and 16-17.

paganism'.¹³⁷ Franke's contradictory reading is in fact faithful to Pater's early work, which frequently deploys an Arnoldian rhetoric of reconciliation in a way that is clearly skewed toward the pagan and the secular, concepts which Pater conflates. (Pater attempts a more even-handed treatment of Christianity and paganism in *Marius*, but 'reconciliation' is perhaps an inadequate term for characterising the elaborately wrought ambiguities of that novel.) In the three essays I examine here, Pater's preoccupation with the concept of heresy stems not from a commitment to the synthesis of paganism and Christianity but from a bid to locate and glorify moments of secular rupture within Christian culture and art.

Along with the book's actual 'Preface', 'Aucassin and Nicolette' is a kind of prolegomenon to *The Renaissance*: it introduces not only the preoccupations of the book, but the logic behind Pater's idiosyncratic method as a critic. Pater famously begins not with the Renaissance as it was conventionally conceived – as a moment of cultural efflorescence in fifteenth-century Italy – but with the grand pronouncement that the Renaissance is in fact a trans-historical imperative in human life. Pater loosens the 'Renaissance' not only from its temporal and geographical moorings – he chooses medieval France as his example – but from its association with the West's classical inheritance. The recovery of antiquity is 'but one element or symptom' of what Pater takes to be a much more sweeping and primordial phenomenon: namely, a secular eudaemonism which is as basic to human nature as sexual desire and which re-asserts itself perennially, even as it meets with persecution and is forced to conceal itself 'under all sorts of disguises'.¹³⁸ In other words, for Pater, the word 'Renaissance' names an always resurgent, if often repressed, endeavour to prioritise the desire for happiness in the here and now, and by definition, this must be an emotional, sensuous and present-oriented project rather than a merely scholastic or backward-looking one. The most striking feature of 'Aucassin and Nicolette' is its incantatory accumulation and repetition of simple words which call on the pleasure principle, often in such a way as to elide intellectual and sexual seduction, or artistic creativity and

¹³⁷ Ibid., 146.

¹³⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 9 and 16.

procreation: for example, in a brief essay which runs to only nine pages, ‘pleasure’, ‘pleasurable’, or ‘pleasant’, appear eight times, ‘passion’ or ‘passionate’ appear seven times, and ‘sweet’ or ‘sweetness’ appear five times, often in charged proximity to each other. Pater harps on the hedonic not simply to enact a kind of seduction of the reader, but to convey the kind of propulsive energy required for a Renaissance or ‘outbreak of the human spirit’ to take place, and to measure the force of the repressions it must overcome.¹³⁹ The repetitions of ‘enjoyment’, ‘desire’, ‘sweetness’, ‘prompting’, ‘sources’, ‘new’, and ‘revival’ try to approximate in prose the mesmeric effects of the repetitive, often circular forms of medieval Provençal poetry. Pater’s repetition of hedonic catch words also seeks to mime the way new ideas circulate and fructify, with one core idea – ‘a more liberal and comely way of life’ – reproducing itself into a brood of associated ideas. Meanwhile, Pater’s emphasis upon fertility – upon the ‘seeds’ and ‘sources’ of renewal – literalises the metaphor of a ‘Renaissance’ in order to push us to a recognition of what he takes to be its logical implication: namely, that such moments of cultural and intellectual re-birth have sexual desire at their origins.

As David DeLaura has noted, Pater’s valorisation of ‘sweetness’ is an appropriation of Arnold’s advocacy of Hellenic ‘sweetness and light’.¹⁴⁰ As an appropriation, it borders on abuse, since Arnold recommended Hellenic ‘sweetness and light’ not as a supreme good in itself, but as a regulative principle.¹⁴¹ Arnold imagined that what he called ‘Hebraism’ – a combination of moral zeal and the mystical dimensions of religion – was oppressively predominant in Victorian culture, and that Hellenism was required to civilise it. His endorsement of ‘sweetness and light’ was an injunction not to individualistic pleasure but to rational enquiry; insofar as it is a Hellenic ideal, it is a decidedly Apollonian one, aspiring toward clarity and objectivity, and its ‘sweetness’ names

¹³⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴⁰ David DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 242-243.

¹⁴¹ Arnold, *CPWV*, 180-181.

not a pleasure principle but a code of intellectual civility.¹⁴² Both sides of Arnold's dichotomy imply self-renunciation: for the sake of Hebraism, we submit to a moral law, and relinquish some freedom; for the sake of Hellenism, we submit to an intellectual law, and relinquish some (religious) imagination. When Arnold effects a reconciliation, he does so by combining these self-renunciations, and enjoining humanity to serve two exacting masters, reason and religion: we must make 'reason and the will of God prevail'.¹⁴³

Pater unpicks the logic of Arnold's Hellenism/Hebraism dichotomy by suggesting that 'reason' was never divorced from imagination in the first place. In Pater's definition, a Renaissance is 'an outbreak of the reason and the imagination', 'an assertion of the liberty of the heart', and a 'search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination'.¹⁴⁴ In effect, Pater here seizes upon the association of Enlightenment reason with the validation of ordinary, sensuous experience as the pathway to knowledge, and takes it as a means of conflating intellectual inquiry with erotic desire. Pater's 'reason' thus requires not self-renunciation, but self-discovery; not a sober effort to 'see things as they really are' but an emancipated, sensuous imagination. Yet Richard Dellamora creates artificial distance between Arnold and Pater when he suggests that Pater's ideal of the Renaissance simply counters Arnold's 'authoritarian' and 'erotophobic' Hellenism/Hebraism dichotomy.¹⁴⁵ It is precisely because the rigidities of Arnold's schemas often only reveal themselves to an extremely conscientious reader, and his own hedonic catchphrases – 'sweetness and light', 'pleasure of the free disinterested play of the mind', 'the desire after the things of the mind simply for their own sakes and for the pleasure of seeing them as they are' – have such resonance that his work was susceptible to Pater's appropriation.¹⁴⁶ Arnold was himself accused of merely promoting a 'refined eudaemonism' in his cultural criticism, and his efforts to redeem aesthetic and intellectual pleasure, coupled

¹⁴² Ibid., 165-170.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 91-93.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 10, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 103-105.

¹⁴⁶ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 271; and *CPWV*, 91.

with his confluences of religion and literature, were to a great extent always open to being read as codes for the aestheticist project that Pater explicitly undertook.¹⁴⁷ It is also worth noting that when Pater and Swinburne rose to prominence, Arnold was himself scrutinised through the lens of aestheticism by critics who suspected him of pursuing an anti-religious agenda by stealth: for example, in 1867, Peter Bayne, an Evangelical Scots journalist, claimed that Arnold was merely more surreptitious than Swinburne when heaping ‘disdain upon all who persist in accepting Christianity as Divine’, and denounced them both as proponents of a demoralising secularism which ‘throw[s] the wisdom of Tennyson and Browning into the shade’.¹⁴⁸

It is the concept of heresy that enables Pater to posit a Renaissance ‘within the limits of the middle age’, and, by extension, discover ‘a secular, a rebellious spirit’ within the limits of the Golden Age of faith.¹⁴⁹ Like Swinburne, Pater was alert to the extent to which the notion that Christianity was in decline hinged upon the perception that there was a pre-modern golden age in which piety was stable and universal. The question of the depth and reach of medieval Christianity remains one of the vexed issues in modern debates over the secularisation thesis, since the postulation of a decline in religion obviously demands a point of vitality against which decline can be measured, and the idea of a Golden Age of faith, with all of its suspicious allure as a narrative about a prelapsarian past and a fallen present, is now often rejected by historians as a myth.¹⁵⁰ Yet the idealisation of the medieval period as the age of pure faith was at the core of much nineteenth-century medieval revivalism, from the Anglo-Catholic and Oxford movements to Ruskin and Tennyson’s varieties of Romantic medievalism; it was also, albeit ambiguously, implicit in some of the medievalist productions of the pre-Raphaelite circle. A considerable part of Swinburne’s *oeuvre* is devoted to

¹⁴⁷ Henry Sidgwick, ‘The Prophet of Culture’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 16 (1867), 277.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Bayne, ‘Mr. Arnold and Mr. Swinburne’, *Contemporary Review* (November 1867), 342.

¹⁴⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ For a defense of the concept of the ‘Golden Age of Faith’ as a plank in the secularisation thesis, see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 45-59.

contesting this glorification of the medieval period as a lost paradise of Christianity while sustaining a Romantic investment in the period as the site of a more authentic and passionate form of life. It is from Swinburne that Pater learns how the concept of heresy enables one to retain a full-blown Romantic vision of an enchanted medieval past while repudiating the Christian nostalgia which conventionally inflected such a discourse in the Victorian period. As Donald Hill points out, ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’ was inspired by Swinburne’s *William Blake*, which also takes heresy – specifically the Albigensian crusades – as a means of reading the medieval period against the Victorian grain.¹⁵¹ This is also one of the most forceful of Swinburne’s early articulations of his aestheticist philosophy:

Take the medieval period in its broadest sense; not to speak of the notably heretical and immoral Albigeois with their exquisite school of heathenish verse ... see by such poems as Chaucer’s *Court of Love*, absolutely one in tone and handling as it is with the old Albigensian *Aucassin* and all its paganism, how the poets of the time, with their eager nascent worship of beautiful form and external nature, dealt with established opinion and the incarnate moralities of church or household. It is easy to see why the Church on its own principle found it (as in the Albigensian case) a matter of the gravest necessity to have such schools of art and thought cut down or burnt out. Priest and poet, all those times through, were proverbially on terms of reciprocal biting and striking. That magnificent invention of making ‘Art the handmaid of Religion’ had not been stumbled upon in the darkness of those days. Neither minstrel nor monk would have been caught up the idea with any rapture. As indeed they would have been unwise to do: for the thing is impossible.¹⁵²

Swinburne idealises the Middle Ages as a period in which art and religion were engaged in an honest *agon*, rather than forced into the sorts of ambiguous reconciliations he finds so dissatisfying in Victorian culture. A casual reader might infer from Swinburne’s argument that the Albigensians were an avowedly pagan sect, and this distortion is of course willed. (Although little is known of the details of Albigensian theology, they espoused a radical dualism akin to

¹⁵¹ See notes to *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: the 1893 Text*, ed. Donald Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 303.

¹⁵² Swinburne, *Blake*, 88-90.

Manichaeism, and regarded matter as evil; their heresy consisted in accusing orthodox Christianity of having confounded the spiritual and the material.)¹⁵³ Swinburne's aestheticism is here a flamboyantly tendentious way of reading Christian history in secularising terms, although Swinburne, unlike Pater, is eager to justify his logic:

Observe especially in Chaucer's most beautiful of young poems that appalling passage, where, turning the favourite edgetool of religious menace back with point inverted upon those who forged it, the poet represents men and women of religious habit or life as punished in the next world, beholding afar off with jealous regret the salvation and happiness of Venus and all her servants ... expressly punished, these monks and nuns, for their continence and holiness of life, and compelled after death to an eternity of fruitless repentance for having willfully missed of pleasure and made light of indulgence in this world: which is perfect Albigeois. Compare the famous speech in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, where the typical hero weighs in a judicial manner the respective attractions of heaven and hell; deciding of course dead against the former on account of the deplorably bad company kept there: priests, hermits, saints and such-like, in lieu of knights and ladies, painters and poets.¹⁵⁴

As can be felt here, Swinburne enjoys radical oppositions between Heaven and Hell, the spirit and the flesh, since he thinks that they make the superiority of worldly things unmistakable – a superiority affirmed by the fact that Aucassin would rather love Nicolette in Hell than suffer the tedious company of the pious in Heaven. When Pater appropriates Swinburne's anti-Christian reading of *Aucassin et Nicolette* and the Albigensian heresy, there is no such clarification of his logic. He also muddies the water by linking the Albigensian heresy to the Antinomian heresy (although he uses 'antinomian' in a loose, metaphorical sense):

One of the strongest characteristics of that outbreak of the reason and the imagination ... which I have termed a medieval Renaissance, was its antinomianism, its spirit of rebellion and

¹⁵³ See Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages: The Relation Between Religion, Church and Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 30.

¹⁵⁴ Swinburne, *Blake*, 89.

revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the age. In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal; and their love became a strange idolatry, a strange rival religion ... The perfection of culture is not rebellion but peace; yet on the way to that end there is room for a noble antinomianism. This element in the middle age, so often ignored by those writers on it, who have said so much of the 'Ages of Faith', this rebellious and antinomian element ... is found alike in the history of Abelard and the legend of Tannhäuser ... The Albigensian movement, connected so strangely with the history of Provençal poetry, is [also] deeply tinged with it.¹⁵⁵

Immediately following this passage, Pater supplies a long, untranslated quotation from Aucassin's speech about his preference for a beautiful Hell over a vapid paradise. Pater registers the decadent, proto-Baudelairean quality of Aucassin's speech by noting that the antinomian imperative has its 'sinister' aspect, but this is the only critical remark that he makes about his medieval Renaissance throughout the essay. Indeed, aside from this one ambiguous qualification – within the decadent idiom that Pater was starting to cultivate, 'sinister' could serve as a term of aesthetic appreciation – Pater's medieval Renaissance is a wholly idealised phenomenon: it is a glorious affirmation of all that is most vital in human nature. Pater's ambition here is nothing less than to essentialise and universalise the 'secular spirit' by identifying it with a libidinal life-force that is always affirmed in art, even where it is apparently condemned or disavowed. Positing a Renaissance in the Middle Ages also enables Pater to detach secularism from its associations with modern scientific reason and imagine it in terms of a rigged competition between Christ and Venus, or between ascetic self-denial and *eros*. Pater had already played with this idea in his 1868 review of William Morris's poetry, an essay which was also formed the basis of the 'Conclusion' to the *Renaissance*. Here Pater claimed that one of the striking novelties of Morris's poetry was, paradoxically, Morris's revival of Arthurian legends, and in particular, his use of those legends to explore the antagonism

¹⁵⁵ Pater, *Renaissance*, 16.

between Christianity and ‘sensuous love,’ an antagonism dramatised as the ‘strange suggestion of a deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover’.¹⁵⁶ Pater argues that Morris’s work clarifies the extent to which medieval Provençal poets never really found it hard to choose between the two. Deploying the same logic that Swinburne applied to the Albigensian heresy, Pater asserts that Christian asceticism, pushed to any pitch of intensity, always betrays its ‘secret’ wishes and rebounds into sensuous passion:

That religion shades into sensuous love, and sensuous love into religion, has been often seen ... Only by the inflaming influence of such idols can any religion compete with the presence of the fleshly lover. And so in these imaginative loves, in their highest expression the Provençal poetry, it is a rival religion with a new rival cultus that see. Coloured through and through with Christian sentiment, they are rebels against it ... The jealousy of that other lover, for who these words and images and strange ways of sentiment were first devised, is the secret here of a triumphant colour and heat. It is the mood of the cloister taking a new direction, and winning so a later space of life that it never anticipated. Who knows whether, when the simple belief in them has faded away, the most cherished sacred writings may not for the first time exercise their highest influence as the most delicate amorous poetry in the world?¹⁵⁷

Here is a secular way of appropriating all the Christian past: to read sacred writings as ‘amorous poetry’ from a modern, secular perspective does not rationalise them or betray their spirit, but actually restores them to their original meaning, since religion could only compete with ‘fleshly lover[s]’ through a transvaluation of the amorous in the first place. And like Swinburne, Pater insists that the more a given artifact of culture seems ‘coloured through and through with Christian sentiment’, the more one can perceive that it actually exceeds and ‘rebels’ against such sentiment. Pater goes on to argue that Morris’s use of Hellenism in *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) represents a radical advance on such medieval conflicts between flesh and spirit, an awakening to ‘a better daylight’ metaphorically akin to the Renaissance or the Enlightenment; it shows

¹⁵⁶ Pater, ‘Poems By William Morris’, *Westminster Review* 34.2 (1868), 301.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

the embodied nature of human experience released from the Christian burden of sin, and celebrated in purely secular terms: ‘Desire here is towards the body of nature for its own sake, not because a soul is divined through it’.¹⁵⁸ At this stage of his career, Pater, like Swinburne, will not rest content with simply celebrating the carnal; he must specify its thoroughly secular nature, the absence of any religious or metaphysical extension to it.

Pater also inherits from Swinburne the tendency to stage confrontations between Christianity and a secular eudaemonism, where the latter force is both doomed to repression and destined for an ultimate victory. This motif of victory-in-defeat can be found in Pater’s portrait of Abelard, whom he chooses as a key representative for his theory of a medieval Renaissance in ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’. Asserting that ‘everyone knows the legend of Abelard’, Pater supplies only a few suggestive facts and arranges these in a paratactic fashion which prompts the reader to infer the missing connections.¹⁵⁹ Abelard is used to exemplify Pater’s thesis that great moments of intellectual awakening are traceable to moments of sexual awakening: Abelard’s forbidden love for Héloïse is inseparable from the fact that they ‘refine’ upon the ‘nature of abstract ideas’ in their lessons together, with the implication that their intellectual discourse draws them out of the ‘shadowy’ abstractions of theology and toward an apprehension of the sensuous, embodied character of knowledge.¹⁶⁰ Pater specifies that Abelard’s very facility with abstract ideas meant that he did not over-estimate their value, and this in turn led him to ‘relax’ the restraints of Christian sexual morality.¹⁶¹ The focus here is entirely upon Abelard as the archetypal ‘great lover’ and upon the correlation between sexual and intellectual discovery.¹⁶² With typically charged diffidence, Pater neglects to mention that Abelard was grotesquely punished for wandering ‘beyond the bounds of the primitive Christian ideal’: when Héloïse’s uncle learnt of her affair with Abelard, he ordered Abelard’s

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 305-306.

¹⁵⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 10.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 10.

castration.¹⁶³ He also fails to clarify that Abelard's rebelliousness extended beyond his love affair: his career was marked by theological controversy and he was twice convicted of heresy, once at the council of Soissons in 1121 for his heterodox interpretation of the Trinity, and again at the council of Sens in 1140, for his treatise *Theologia Christiana*. Instead, Pater uses a quotation from Michelet to gesture at the persecution Abelard faced:

At the foot of that early Gothic tower, which the next generation raised to grace the precincts of Abelard's school on the 'mountain' of Saint Genevieve, the historian Michelet sees in thought 'a terrible assembly; not the hearers of Abelard alone, fifty bishops, twenty cardinals, two popes, the whole body of scholastic philosophy: not only the learned Héloïse, the teaching of languages and the Renaissance, but Arnold of Brescia – that it to say, the revolution'.¹⁶⁴

Michelet presented Abelard as an agent of secularisation who unwittingly dismantled medieval theology by virtue of his sheer intellectual brio: 'He treated religion courteously and handled her gently, but she melted away in his hands. Nothing embarrassed the fluent speaker: he reduced religion to philosophy, and morality to humanity'.¹⁶⁵ Michelet's interpretation breathes through Pater's vision of Abelard as the ideal type of humanist freethinker, for whom there is a necessary relation between the 'free play of human intelligence' and the embrace of 'earthly passion'.¹⁶⁶ Michelet's vatic pronouncement that Abelard is father not only to the Reformation, but to the French Revolution, also dovetails with Pater's desire to posit the Renaissance as a trans-historical phenomenon, always latent where it is not manifest.¹⁶⁷ (Arnold of Brescia was Abelard's protégé and is often read as a proto-Protestant heretic because of his crusade against ecclesiastical

¹⁶³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁵ Jules Michelet, *History of France*, vol. 1, trans. G. H. Smith (New York: Appleton & Company, 1847), 224.

¹⁶⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, 10.

¹⁶⁷ As Hill notes, Pater's use of a lower-class 'r' in his translation obscures the fact that Michelet is referring to the French Revolution. See Pater, *Renaissance: 1893*, 307. Perhaps Pater wished to make it sound as if Michelet were invoking 'revolution' as a transhistorical imperative.

corruption; he was executed in 1155 for his pivotal role in the Commune of Rome.) Pater's choice of quotation here thus enables him to conceive of Abelard as triumphant, his 'spirit going abroad' even if he was persecuted in his lifetime. In this way, Pater suppresses the negative elements in the Abelard story in order to produce a utopian fable about the lure of sexual desire and heretical ideas, which will always radiate from literature whenever they are repressed by social authority (Pater suggests that Abelard's legacy 'penetrated the early literature of Italy and finds an echo in Dante'), and which will in any case win the longer historical game.¹⁶⁸

As DeLaura has suggested, Pater's celebration of Abelard as the heroic agent of modern intellectual liberty is perhaps a response to Arnold's tentative inclusion of Abelard within his pantheon of men who might be considered exemplars of 'sweetness and light' in *Culture and Anarchy*.¹⁶⁹ Arnold invokes Abelard in the context of a discussion about the essentially democratic character of past golden ages of culture and celebrates him as an 'apostle of equality' who disseminated his work as widely as possible; to this extent, his characterisation of Abelard dovetails with Pater's.¹⁷⁰ Yet Arnold only praises Abelard in qualified terms, noting his 'many imperfections' (one assumes this refers to his illicit love affair, but it may also refer to his heresies – as we have seen, Arnold has little sympathy for figures who court theological controversy). Arnold ultimately subsumes Abelard under the category of men who 'diffuse sweetness and light, to make reason and the will of God prevail': such men manifest a critical, Hellenic spirit not to contend against religion, but to perfect and rationalise it.¹⁷¹ Arnold's wider concern is to emphasise that democracy need not have a coarsening effect on culture, for periods of cultural renaissance are instigated by the transmission of elite values – 'the best that is known and thought in the world' – to the mass of humanity.¹⁷² Aside from the fact that Pater clearly gives an erotic and secular gloss

¹⁶⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 11.

¹⁶⁹ DeLaura, *Hebrew*, 243.

¹⁷⁰ Arnold, *CPWV*, 113.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁷² Arnold, *CPWIII*, 268.

to cultural enlightenment where Arnold absorbs it into his ideal of a reasonable Christianity, Pater is simply less anxious than Arnold about the process by which enlightenment passes from intellectuals to the multitude: where Arnold pleads for rationality and moderation, Pater freely rhapsodises about rebellion. As Linda Dowling has argued, Pater often appears remarkably insouciant about the possibilities of what she calls ‘aesthetic democracy’ – that is, the belief that the democratisation of high culture and aesthetic taste can underwrite liberal progress. Dowling shows that where other partisans of aesthetic democracy such as Arnold were wary of how this ideal might be perverted and thus framed it in restrictive terms, Pater tended to espouse it blithely, without concern for its thornier implications or how it might actually work within the social fabric of Victorian England.¹⁷³

Ironically, however, Pater found in Arnold’s work a sanction for this tendency to gesture grandly at the utopian vistas revealed by art without particular concern for their practical ramifications. As I have noted, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ sanctifies cultural criticism as a space in which ideas may be explored with special freedom, and without their practical implications – particularly their political and religious implications – foreclosing the ‘play of the mind’. I suggested that this ideal retains traces of the pious fraud tradition; it is inscribed with Arnold’s qualms about the spread of religious doubt, and with his desire to make fine distinctions between Renan and Colenso, or between types of scepticism which seem only to recast religion, and those which endanger it. Yet Arnold’s solution – he rendered the capacity to make fine distinctions and to be alive to the literary subtleties of religious questions as the cardinal virtues of cultural criticism – could easily be appropriated by a secular sensibility such as Pater’s, which had no interest in making the types of distinction Arnold had in mind. Moreover, insofar as Arnold’s effort to carve out a space for the free play of ideas seemed to depend upon a quasi-aristocratic ideal of fine sensibility, it made room – in Pater’s phrase – for a ‘noble antinomianism’:

¹⁷³ Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 80-81.

it could generate the impression that to the cultural critic, all things are pure, and any sentiment or subject, including a far more radical kind of secularism, may be rendered permissible if it is handled with sufficient finesse. In other words, Pater makes explicit the element of ‘noble antinomianism’ always implicit in Arnold’s use of cultural criticism as a means of differentiating between types of religious scepticism; he appropriates the idea that scepticism is a prestigious, quasi-aristocratic secret that demands sensitive handling, but he evinces none of Arnold’s fear that its dissemination might have ill effects on the social order. By registering this difference, we can bridge the apparent gap between Dowling’s influential account of Pater’s aestheticism as essentially egalitarian in its assumptions, and the older view of Pater as the high priest of a cult of rarefied sensibility who sought to address only ‘an elite band of Oxonian souls’.¹⁷⁴ Like Arnold, Pater often seems to associate religious scepticism with the ‘delicacies of the higher morality of the few’, but unlike Arnold, Pater rarely makes caveats about the ‘many’, and his invocations of the few thus often seem to have a democratic aimlessness: while he clearly cherishes the association between scepticism and quasi-aristocratic sensibility, he does not seem to mind who cracks the code.¹⁷⁵

‘Our Antagonist is Our Helper’: Pater, Arnold, and the Cult of Nuance

Pater’s ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’ is clearly written in a Swinburnean rather than an Arnoldian key – its fervent rhetoric and bold juxtapositions between asceticism and *eros* strive to make medieval Christianity confess to being secular after all, in love with the sensuous, material world no matter how much it affected to have other priorities. Yet in the following two essays in the *Renaissance* – ‘Pico della

¹⁷⁴ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 230.

¹⁷⁵ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 126.

Mirandola' and 'Botticelli' – Pater explores heresy in a more mellow, Arnoldian tone, attending to fine distinctions and apparently subjecting his polemical tendencies to the discipline of reserve and detachment. Nonetheless, Pater practices the Arnoldian virtue of disinterestedness here in order to pursue the kind of radical secularism that Arnold evolved his model of cultural criticism to contain.

When critics compare Arnold and Pater, they conventionally present Arnold as the architect of an impersonal, objective, and – by some accounts – authoritarian mode of criticism which Pater appropriated and turned to impressionistic, subjectivist or even narcissistic ends.¹⁷⁶ What this commonplace fails to capture is the extent to which Pater often makes explicit the element of projection and fantasy involved in appreciating a work of art or literature in order to dramatise the problematics of interpreting the West's cultural inheritance through a secular optic. This problematic often surfaces in *The Renaissance*, but it receives its most complex treatment in 'Botticelli'. Here, as in the case of 'Aucassin and Nicolette', Pater seems to evolve his own position in dialogue with Swinburne and Arnold: it is well established that Pater drew upon Swinburne's 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence' (1868) for this essay, and it is also an attempt to use Arnoldian disinterestedness as a means of reading sacred art in secular terms.

Pater is not content to project his own secularising imperatives onto Botticelli's paintings in an avowedly fanciful, anachronistic way. Instead, he argues that Botticelli's paintings on sacred themes are only superficially religious; their real theme is the desire to be relieved of the burdens of religion, and the longing for a joyful, unmediated habitation of this world. As I noted, it was Pater's interpretations of Botticelli that Oliphant chose as her prime example of his perversity as a critic. Even John Addington Symonds, himself a sceptic and an aesthete, thought that Pater assigned to Botticelli 'a far greater amount of

¹⁷⁶ See for example Wendell V. Harris, 'Arnold, Pater, Wilde and the Object as in Themselves They See It', *Studies in English Literature* 11.4 (1971): 733-747; and Jeffrey Wallen, 'Reflection and Self-Reflection: Narcissistic or Aesthetic Criticism?', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 34.3 (1992): 301-322.

skeptical self-consciousness than he was at all likely to have possessed' and noted that what Pater took as evidence of Botticelli's peculiar 'antagonism' toward Catholicism was just *pro forma* workmanship.¹⁷⁷ While such objections are reasonable, they overlook the sly self-reflexivity of Pater's essay. In particular, they overlook the nature of the secularism which Pater ascribes to Botticelli: rather than simply suggesting that his sacred paintings have a secular undercurrent, he claims such paintings allegorise Botticelli's desire to break free of the Christian frameworks that were imposed upon him. In other words, Pater makes the desire to dispense with an alien burden of meaning the very substance of Botticelli's supposed secular impulse, and thus installs the obvious objection to his own methodology – that is, that he is merely imposing his own agenda upon Botticelli – at the centre of what he alleges to find in Botticelli's art.

As in the case of 'Aucassin and Nicolette', Pater here uses heresy as a point of departure for his own heretical mode of interpretation. Pater derives from Vasari the story that Botticelli was accused of heresy because of a painting of the Assumption (a painting which was in fact by Fransesco Botticini, but Pater follows Vasari's false attribution). Pater suggests that the origin of the heresy lay with the commissioner of the painting, Matteo Palmieri: he was the author of a theological poem called 'La Città Divina' which 'represented the human race as an incarnation of those angels who, in the revolt of Lucifer, were neither for God nor for his enemies'.¹⁷⁸ While allowing that the story may be apocryphal, Pater nonetheless freely embroiders it, arguing not only that Botticelli's most representative work is imbued with this 'wayward dream of Palmieri', but that Palmieri's assessment of humanity – it is angelic in its very neutrality and lack of loyalty to God – is an apt metaphor for the autonomy of art, and particularly for art's disaffiliation from religious concerns.¹⁷⁹ Pater audaciously uses Dante, who would seem such a prestigious and incontestable example of the unity of religion and art in Western culture, as a means of identifying orthodox faith with prosiness

¹⁷⁷ John Addington Symonds, Review of the *Renaissance*, in *Walter Pater: the Critical Heritage*, ed. R. M. Seiler (London: Routledge, 1980), 59.

¹⁷⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 31.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

and artistic failure: in contrast to Botticelli's alleged heresies, Dante's 'conventional orthodoxy', particularly his reduction of 'all human action to the easy formula of purgatory, heaven, and hell ... leaves an insoluble element of prose in the depths of his poetry'.¹⁸⁰ It is worth noting how Pater deploys metaphors of surface and depth to disturb the conventional identification of religion with art: just as Dante's theological commitments embed prose in the 'depths' of his poetry, with the implication that the surface religious content creates mysterious, subterranean imperfections, Botticelli's genius inheres in the fact that, while he painted religious subjects, he 'painted them with an under-current of original sentiment which touches you as the real matter of the picture through the veil of its ostensible subject'.¹⁸¹ In other words, Pater's secular ideal is itself an occult phenomenon insofar as it has to be sifted from the theological sediment in the depths or discerned through the veils of religion, despite the fact that its value supposedly inheres in the fact that it 'touches' one as what is most immediate and forcibly 'real'.

Pater boldly applies Palmieri's heresy to his reading of Botticelli's Madonnas: as rendered by Botticelli, the Madonna is 'one of those who are neither for God nor for his enemies, and her choice is on her face'.¹⁸² This suggestion of a conspicuous choice is a crucial hinge in the essay. The first time Pater glosses the 'neither for God nor for his enemies' idea in relation to Botticelli, he makes it sound like a pacific abstention from choice, and then celebrates this non-committal attitude as the supreme desideratum of art:

Just what Dante scorns as unworthy alike of heaven and hell, Botticelli accepts, that middle world in which men take no side in great conflicts, and decide no great causes, and make great refusals. He thus sets for himself the limits within which art, undisturbed by any moral ambition, does its most sincere and surest work.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸² Ibid., 32.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Yet in the ensuing discussion, not choosing between God and Lucifer, or adhering to an aestheticist ideal, turns out to be a distinctive choice: it implies not neutrality but the choice of a secular sensibility over a religious one. And this secular sensibility is not simply indifferent to religion; rather, it seems to entail an active iconoclasm. As Paul Tucker has shown, Pater's ekphrasis systematically de-sacralises the figure of the Madonna.¹⁸⁴ Pater's suggestion that Botticelli represents the Madonna as a figure coerced into a theological drama from which she would rather 'shrink' and who just desires secular, mortal life, or 'a warmer, lower humanity', clearly encodes Pater's perception that while art may be coerced into religious aims, it always betrays a wish to be free from such obligations and to dedicate itself wholly to the things of this world.¹⁸⁵ Pater urges the intuitiveness of his own secularising logic by presenting it in terms of what is everywhere and plain to see if we would only look: the real choice of Botticelli's Madonna, the fact that the 'high cold words' of Christianity 'have no meaning for her', is quite simply 'on her face'.¹⁸⁶ (Pater articulates his sense that a secular orientation is always written 'on the face' of art even more forcefully in his 'Winckelmann' essay, where he announces, 'For a time art dealt with Christian subjects as its patrons required; but its true freedom was in the life of the senses and the blood – blood no longer dropping from the hands in sacrifice, as with Angelico, but, as with Titian, burning in the face for desire and love'.)¹⁸⁷ Yet if Pater's suggestion that Botticelli's Madonnas are 'peevish-looking' because they resent having been co-opted by Christianity strikes us as scandalous or counter-intuitive, Pater implies that he is only mirroring Botticelli's own wayward imagination.¹⁸⁸

The genius of which Botticelli is the type usurps the data before it as the exponent of ideas, moods, visions of its own; with this interest it plays fast and loose with those data, rejecting some and isolating others, and always combining them anew. To him, as to

¹⁸⁴ Paul Tucker, 'Reanimate Greek: Pater and Ruskin on Botticelli', *Transparencies*, ed. Brake et al., 124.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32 and 34.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

Dante, the scene, the colour, the outward image or gesture, comes with all its decisive and importunate reality; but awakes in him, moreover, by some subtle structure of his own, a mood which it awakes in no one else, of which it is the double or repetition, and which it clothes, that all may share it, with sensuous circumstances.¹⁸⁹

In this twisting sentence, we are invited to lose track of the referent of the pronouns, and to perceive that Pater is insinuating himself as a ‘double or repetition’ of Botticelli: like Botticelli himself, Pater plays ‘fast and loose’ with the religious content of Botticelli’s paintings to locate within them a sensuous ‘mood’ of his own – and yet, Pater suggests, he is only being true to Botticelli’s art by ‘usurp[ing]’ its ‘data’ in this fashion.

Pater derived part of his heretical reading of Botticelli from Swinburne, who also found a ‘love of soft hints and veiled meaning’ in Botticelli’s art, and who proposed that a ‘suppressed leaning to grotesque invention and a hunger after heathen liberty ... break out whenever [Botticelli] is released from the mill-horse round of mythologic virginity and sacred childhood’.¹⁹⁰ Although Swinburne’s language is blunter, Pater goes further than he in attributing anti-Christian intentions to Botticelli; where Swinburne only claims to detect a repressed paganism in Botticelli’s paintings, Pater claims to find elaborate allegories of secular aestheticism hidden within them. It is thus surprising that John Coates thinks that Pater’s ‘Botticelli’ essay is a critique of the ‘rhetoric of anti-Christian rebellion and sexual unorthodoxy’ that Swinburne projected onto Botticelli.¹⁹¹ Coates arrives at this argument partly by overlooking what Oliphant and Symonds found so flagrant in Pater’s essay, yet the fact that it is susceptible to Coates’s reading is itself revealing. Coates elevates Pater above Swinburne by suggesting that Swinburne’s anti-Christian position propels him to a perverse and tendentious reading of Botticelli, while Pater’s mode of criticism, through its ‘reticence,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁰ Swinburne, ‘Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence’, *Fortnightly Review* 4.19 (1868), 23-25.

¹⁹¹ John Coates, *The Rhetorical Use of Provocation as a Means of Persuasion in the Writings of Walter Pater: Pater as Controversialist* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 19.

restraint and self-conscious detachment', permits Pater a more subtle perception of the 'interfusion' of pagan and Christian elements in Botticelli, and of the necessary balance between flesh and spirit.¹⁹² While this seems to me a misreading – Pater's interpretation of Botticelli is, if anything, more tendentious than Swinburne's – it is nonetheless an illuminating misreading, since it is produced by praising Pater in such signally Arnoldian terms: Pater is detached, nuanced, urbane and discriminating because he resists Swinburne's strongly anti-Christian stance.¹⁹³ In effect, Coates responds to the affinity between Pater's 'neither for God nor his enemies' ideal of aestheticism and the Arnoldian ideal of critical disinterestedness, even if Coates misses the extent to which Pater's ideal is loaded with the secularising logic that Arnold was trying to mitigate.

Arnold's ideal of 'disinterestedness' can be concisely defined by reproducing his choice of epigraph to *Essays in Criticism*, which is a quotation from Edmund Burke:

Our antagonist is our helper. This amicable conflict with difficulty obliges us to an intimate acquaintance with our object, and compels us to consider it in all its relations. It will not suffer us to be superficial.¹⁹⁴

As this suggests, Arnold's ideal of disinterestedness was never an aspiration toward an absolute objectivity, but rather a method for refining one's perspective by exposing it to the rigours of contending points of view. To this extent, Arnold valorises something akin to John Stuart Mill's model of liberalism, in which open and dynamic conflict of opinion is necessary for good ideas to flourish; yet Arnold explicitly wishes for his own form of 'amicable conflict' to be a refuge from practical politics, and at times it can seem to be a fantasy of a serene perspective from which one can survey all opinion without endangering one's own.¹⁹⁵ Arnold's contemporaries were certainly alive to this, and often

¹⁹² Ibid., 5 and 17.

¹⁹³ See 10, 11, 17, and 19.

¹⁹⁴ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 2.

¹⁹⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 20-61.

bristled at the ‘Olympian’ aloofness and complacency he was felt to manifest when venturing onto controversial territory, particularly religion.¹⁹⁶ Pater thought that the ideal of critical disinterestedness was actually a surrogate for a lost religious transcendence:

The spiritualities of the Christian life have often drawn men on, little by little, into the broader spiritualities of systems opposed to it ... Many in our own generation, through religion, have become dead to religion. How often do we look for some feature of the ancient religious life, not in a modern saint, but in a modern artist or philosopher! For those who have passed out of Christianity, perhaps its most precious souvenir is the ideal of a transcendental disinterestedness.¹⁹⁷

Pater’s sensitivity to the extent to which the ideal of ‘disinterestedness’ retains a spiritual ambience even when it marks a critical distance from Christian belief is also clear in his essay on ‘Botticelli’, where the aestheticist ideal of being ‘neither for God nor for his enemies’ self-consciously imagines secularism in terms of an angelic transcendence of conflict. And as Pater seems to calculate, the fact that he is using the ideal of disinterestedness to suggest indifference or apathy toward religious claims to transcendence does not entirely disperse the transcendental aura of the ideal.

Arnold’s essay ‘Pagan and Medieval Religious Sentiment’ (1864) is a good place to observe how his ideal of disinterestedness functions in relation to religion. It is also, as DeLaura has shown, a crucial text for appraising the relationship between Pater and Arnold: Pater probably heard Arnold deliver the essay in Oxford in 1864, and some of its catchphrases are deployed in ‘Winckelmann’, as well as in ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’.¹⁹⁸ Arnold here posits ‘disinterestedness’ as a stance which enables an impartial weighing of the merits of medieval Christianity and paganism: he declares, ‘I wish to decide nothing as of my own authority; the great art of criticism is to get oneself out of the way and

¹⁹⁶ For a discussion of Arnold’s tendency to construct himself as a ‘spectator *ab extra*, an alien who disdainfully comments on a polity in which he has no concern’, see Hewlett, “‘The Strayed Reveller’”, 543.

¹⁹⁷ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 127.

¹⁹⁸ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 203.

to let humanity decide'.¹⁹⁹ Yet Arnold's Victorian audience would broadly take the superiority of the Christian to the pagan sentiment as a cultural given, and Arnold's disinterestedness thus only requires some effort to give paganism, the conventionally subordinate term of the opposition, more generous consideration than usual. In this respect, 'disinterestedness' does not demand any real renouncement of loyalty to one's position; it is rather a calculated self-resistance which allows one to experiment with an alternative view, so that one may assimilate its virtues and inhabit one's own position more richly. The real opposition which underpins this essay is not between paganism and medieval Christianity, but between 'the acrid tone and temper of the fanatic' – that is, an anxious Christianity which needs to hyperbolise the evils of non-Christian perspectives – and Arnold's own ideal of a civilised Christianity, which can allow itself to feel the temptation of some such perspectives without defensiveness.²⁰⁰

This essay is also instructive insofar as it clarifies the way in which the pious fraud tradition survives in a denatured form within Arnold's ideal of disinterestedness. Arnold identifies paganism as a 'religion of pleasure' which, while it has 'grace and beauty', is nonetheless a 'manifest failure' because the human lot is defined not by pleasure but by suffering; thus medieval Christianity, a 'religion of sorrow', answers more fully to human needs.²⁰¹ Yet Arnold does not claim an absolute superiority for Christianity, since his disinterestedness prompts him to be tactically disloyal to own his commitments; he makes a universal judgment on behalf of the mass of humanity, but also concedes that some exceptional individuals might escape the terms of his distinction:

One man in many millions, a Heine, may console himself, and keep himself erect in suffering, by a colossal irony of this sort, by covering himself and the universe with the red fire of this sinister mockery; but the many millions cannot, - cannot if they would. That is where the sentiment of a religion of sorrow has such a vast advantage over the sentiment of a religion of pleasure; in its power

¹⁹⁹ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 217.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 222-227.

to be a general, popular religious sentiment, a stay for the mass of mankind, whose lives are full of hardship.²⁰²

As DeLaura notes, the ‘religious appeal to the multitude becomes the essay’s criterion of religious authenticity’.²⁰³ The fact that Arnold has recourse to the concept of the multitude to decide in favour of the ‘religion of sorrow’ makes the essay sound like a more compassionate iteration of the pious fraud argument; while Arnold emphasises the consolations of religion rather than the dangers of scepticism spreading from the few to the many, his emphasis remains upon the collective utility of religion, while his effort to claim a disinterested position creates the impression of a sceptical distance from Christian belief. Although Arnold’s portrait of Heine as an example of an exceptional individual who manages to sustain a preference for the ‘religion of pleasure’ through self-lacerating feats of irony is meant to be damning, it nonetheless opens up the possibility that the question of paganism versus Christianity might tell differently when assessed from a subjective, literary or elite perspective rather than abstracted into a thesis about the multitude.

Arnold’s assessment of paganism and the medieval Christianity is constructed on the model of an ancient *agon*, and while Christianity seems the sure victor through most of the essay, Arnold ultimately imagines paganism besting Christianity in literary terms: after supplying a translation from Sophocles, Arnold proclaims, ‘Let St. Francis – or Luther, either – beat that!’²⁰⁴ In other words, Arnold’s concern with adjudicating the claims of paganism and Christianity in relation to the multitude recedes, and the question of their relative aesthetic value becomes paramount. Arnold’s aesthetic preference for paganism is carefully tethered to the fact that he has already reconciled the terms for himself: Christian mysticism and morality can be fused with the sensuousness and rationality of paganism to produce his ideal of ‘imaginative reason’.²⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the fact that the argument culminates in a glorification of paganism

²⁰² Ibid., 229.

²⁰³ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 203.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 231.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 230.

at the expense of Luther and St. Francis reflects how Arnoldian disinterestedness allows, even demands, continuous flirtation with transgressive ideas. This is also clear in the essay on Marcus Aurelius in the same volume. Here Arnold displays a remarkable degree of estrangement from his own apparent sympathies: his vivid capacity to imagine just how distasteful early Christianity must have seemed to any civilised onlooker leads him to exonerate Aurelius almost completely for his persecution of Christians.²⁰⁶ At such moments, Arnold's 'my antagonist is my helper' axiom seems to extend into a kind of nonchalant sympathy with the devil, and the principle of disinterestedness to be a means by which the apparently Christian critic constructs himself as a connoisseur of anti-Christian ideas. (Donald Stone even suggests that Arnold's 'Socratic impudence in tone and manner' resembles Nietzsche's.)²⁰⁷ At the very least, Arnold's continuous efforts to 'return ... upon himself' – the quality he admired in Burke – serve not to suspend the reader's suspicion about Arnold's real investments in his subject matter but rather to tease the reader with the spiraling complexity of those investments.²⁰⁸

The desire to rend the veil of Arnold's disinterestedness and find personal agendas in his 'sinuous, easy, unpolemical mode of proceeding' was not first felt by politically vigilant late twentieth-century critics, but rather marked the reception of his work from the start of his career.²⁰⁹ The 'neither for God nor for his enemies' credo of Pater's 'Botticelli' essay re-inscribes the concept of heresy within Arnold's ideal of disinterestedness and playfully reveals the extent to which an apparently angelic non-position has its choice 'on its face'. Yet the core preoccupation of Pater's self-reflexive essay is perhaps so not much with catching

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 144-145.

²⁰⁷ Donald Stone, *Communications with the Future: Arnold in Dialogue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 83.

²⁰⁸ Arnold, *CPWIII*, 267.

²⁰⁹ Arnold's characterisation of the style he cultivated in his critiques of Colenso's work. See *Letters of Matthew Arnold 1848-1888*, ed. George W. E. Russell (London: Macmillan, 1895), 243. For an account of the contemporary hostility to Arnold's attempts to use literature or high culture to transcend political and religious partisanship, see James Walter Caufield, "'Poetry is the Reality": Matthew Arnold Tackles the Athletes of Logic (and Theory)', *Cambridge Quarterly* 39.3 (2010): 237-259.

the secular within the religious or the interested within the disinterested, but with demonstrating how smoothly a traditional reverence for the mysteries represented in sacred art can be transmuted into an irreverent fascination with the enigma of an artist's intentions.

'Homer Must be Made to Speak Agreeably to Moses': Pater, Arnold, and the Ideal of Reconciliation

Although Pater is sometimes counted with Arnold as one of the Victorian 'reconcilers' who sought to syncretise pagan and Christian ideas or to balance religion and scepticism, Pater's early work often cast suspicion on 'reconciliation' as an intellectual ideal.²¹⁰ This can be strongly felt in his first published essay, 'Coleridge's Writings', in which he dismisses Coleridge's efforts to 'reconcile' the conflict between faith and reason as 'insipid' and 'factitious'.²¹¹ In 'Pico della Mirandola', this kind of asperity has been diluted, but Pater honours Pico's attempt to wed the pagan and the Christian as a poignant failure rather than as a viable tradition:

... with this flood of erudition came the generous hope, so often disabused, of reconciling the philosophers with each other, and all alike with the Church ... Like some knight-errant of philosophy, [Pico] offered to defend nine hundred bold paradoxes drawn from the most opposite sources, against all comers. But the Pontifical Court was led to suspect the orthodoxy of some of the propositions, and even the reading of the book which contained them was forbidden by the Pope ... [He is] an early instance of those who, after following the vain hope of an impossible reconciliation from system to system, have at last fallen back unsatisfied on the simplicities of their childhood's belief.²¹²

As Franke notes, Pater's Pico is a touchingly naïve heretic, so magnanimous he failed to notice that he was hazarding the impossible, or that he

²¹⁰ See for example U.C. Knoepflmacher's 'Pater's Religion of Sanity: "Plato and Platonism" as a Document of Victorian Unbelief', *Victorian Studies* 6.2 (1962):152-168.

²¹¹ Pater, 'Coleridge', 115.

²¹² Pater, *Renaissance*, 27.

risked being burned at the stake (Pico ultimately saved himself by withdrawing his theses and consenting to work in a Dominican order.)²¹³ Yet despite Pater's sympathy with Pico's project – particularly Pico's effort to 'help man onward to that reassertion of himself, [the] rehabilitation of human nature, the body, the senses, the heart, the intelligence' – he emphasises the 'false basis' of Pico's syncretism, and persistently inserts caveats that make it clear that he will only acquiesce in the rhetoric of reconciliation insofar as it flatters the pagan at the expense of the Christian.²¹⁴ This is observable in the opening paragraph, in which a genial, Arnoldian emphasis upon the possibilities of reconciliation modulates swiftly into a more combative and Swinburnean emphasis upon an essential 'rivalry' between Christ and Hellas.²¹⁵ That Pater has Arnold in his sights here is also suggested by his invocation of 'many-sided intellectual culture': 'many-sidedness', a type of disinterested receptivity to diverse influences, was the Hellenic (and Goethean) virtue that Arnold posited as the goal of *bildung* and the means of social regeneration in *Culture and Anarchy*.²¹⁶ Yet, as DeLaura observes, Pater adopts a 'conciliatory', Arnoldian tone only to privilege paganism over Christianity.²¹⁷ As a whole, the essay celebrates paganism as the lifeblood of Renaissance humanism, and marginalises Christianity as the medieval legacy which hobbled the modern, optimistic programme: although Pico made valiant efforts to assert 'the dignity of human nature, the greatness of man', he was contending against the 'tendency of medieval religion to depreciate man's nature, to sacrifice this or that element in it, to make it ashamed of itself ...'²¹⁸ Although Pater acknowledges that Pico partly derived his perception of the 'dignity of man' from Christianity, he emphasises that this perception was dependent upon a false cosmology, and he underscores the differences between this 'childish dream' of the cosmic importance of humanity and modern apprehensions of nature, which elicit 'strange new awe and superstition' precisely because they displace the

²¹³ Franke, *Heresies*, 155.

²¹⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 24.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18; and Arnold, *CPWV*, 185.

²¹⁷ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 233-234.

²¹⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 18.

human from a God-given centrality.²¹⁹ When Pater makes more ecumenical gestures, they serve not to reconcile paganism and Christianity but to subject both to a secularising reduction in which all religions are to be appreciated as perishable human artifacts: ‘the basis of the reconciliation of the religions of the world would thus be the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself, in which all religious alike have their root, and in which all alike are laid to rest’.²²⁰

Carolyn Williams argues that ‘Pico della Mirandola’ is a self-reflexive meditation on allegorical reading: throughout, Pater contrasts the ‘quaint’ allegorical hermeneutics Pico deployed in order to harmonise Christianity and paganism with his own more sophisticated aesthetic historicism.²²¹ I would suggest that Pater’s essay itself solicits an ironic allegorical reading. Although Pater treats the effort to reconcile paganism and Christianity as a beguiling curiosity from a less enlightened age, the reconciliation ideal actually had a strong grip on the Victorian imagination, and – as Pater was certainly aware – not all such ‘reconciliation’ projects were as secular and demystifying in orientation as his distinctions between Renaissance humanism and modern historicism imply. As Louis notes, a Romantic impulse to reconcile paganism and Christianity persisted in Victorian culture long after the establishment of comparative mythology as a secular academic discipline.²²² Perhaps the most proximate example of this Romantic strain of mythography in relation to Pater’s essay is Ruskin’s *Queen of the Air* (1869). Although Ruskin does not explicitly seek to syncretise Christianity and paganism, he emphasises the anti-materialistic and ethereal dimensions of Greek myths, and his tone is, as Dinah Birch remarks, ‘pervasively biblical and hortatory’; he hoped that the book would be received as ‘a religious work’.²²³ The late 1860s and early 1870s saw other attempts to align pagan and Christian spirituality. In 1869, William Ewart Gladstone published

²¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²²¹ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 103-110.

²²² Louis, *Persephone*, 10-16.

²²³ Dinah Birch, *Ruskin’s Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 124.

Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age, a follow up to his earlier *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858), and a work inspired by the conviction that elements of the ‘Olympian religion’ correlate ‘with the Hebraic traditions, as conveyed in the books of Holy Scripture’.²²⁴ And in 1871, Jowett published his *Dialogues of Plato Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions*, which, Turner has shown, posited Plato’s idealism as an antidote to secular materialism and stressed the congruence between Platonic and Christian ethics.²²⁵

In the introduction to ‘Pico della Mirandola’, it is possible to find an allegory of Victorian intellectual culture embedded within Pater’s account of Renaissance humanism. Pater’s contrast between an early phase of humanism which regarded the classical past as an archive of pleasing images and poetic conceits and a later phase which perceived the vital and transformative power of that legacy has an obvious, if loose, parallel with the modern classical revival in England: an initiatory, Augustan investment in the perfection of classical aesthetics expands into more ‘ardent and serious’ endeavour to reclaim antiquity as a ground of authentic spiritual experience. Although Pater is himself very much part of this endeavour and would later venture his own form of Romantic mythography in the essays which are gathered together in *Greek Studies* (1895), here he sets secular limits upon his enthusiasm for such a Romantic spiritualisation of antiquity.²²⁶ He stipulates that for the ‘modern scholar’, the ‘question of the reconciliation of the religion of antiquity with the religion of Christ’ is an anthropological pursuit which regards ‘all religions ... as natural products’ and seeks to find the ‘common laws’ which govern their ‘growth and decay’.²²⁷ There is also an implicit condescension toward reconciliation projects

²²⁴ W. E. Gladstone, *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 202. Hill also cites Gladstone as a counter-example to Pater’s secularising assumptions. See Pater, *Renaissance: 1893*, 325.

²²⁵ Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 414-431.

²²⁶ For a discussion of Pater’s Romantic mythography in *Greek Studies*, see Stefano Evangelista, “‘Outward Nature and the Moods of Men’: Romantic Mythology in Pater’s *Essays on Dionysius and Demeter*”, in *Transparencies*, Brake, et al., 107-118.

²²⁷ Pater, *Renaissance*, 19-20.

such as Arnold's, which resist the 'organic' life-and-death cycles of religions and are engaged in an endeavour as artificial as Pico's:

In their attempts to reconcile the religions of the world they were thus thrown back on the quicksand of allegorical interpretation. The religions of the world were to be reconciled, not as successive stages in a gradual development of the religious sense, but as subsisting side by side, and substantially in agreement with each other. 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 ...²²⁸

Although Arnold's method for reconciling Christianity with Hellenism was dialectical rather than allegorical and he certainly subscribed to a developmental theory of religion, it is possible to detect a critique of Arnold's efforts to make Homer 'speak agreeably' to Moses here. Pater's critique of Pico's over-ingenious interpretations and reliance upon 'every sort of figure and analogy, on the double meanings of words, the symbols of the Jewish ritual, the secondary meanings of obscure stories' seems to double as a critique of Arnold's Biblical hermeneutics in *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1869).²²⁹ In that work, Arnold reaffirmed his intention to reconcile Hebraism and Hellenism, but this time he explicitly applied this search for a higher synthesis to Biblical criticism and to an apologia for the Anglican Church.²³⁰ Anticipating the argument of his more famous *Literature and Dogma*, Arnold sought to demonstrate that the doctrines which led the dissenting sects to reject the Anglican Church largely stemmed from a failure of 'critical tact' in reading St. Paul, and in particular, from a failure to appreciate the figurative nature of Paul's language.²³¹ While Arnold's chief aim is to undercut particular dissenting doctrines such as the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, he also construes in anti-metaphysical and

²²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²²⁹ Ibid., 26.

²³⁰ Arnold, *CPWVI*, 124-126.

²³¹ Ibid., 20.

metaphorical terms more mainstream tenets of Christianity, such as the Resurrection.²³² Arnold relies upon a distinction between primary and secondary orders of meaning and divides Paul's writing into two styles: at his best, Paul 'Orientalises' – that is, uses richly figurative language; at his worst, he 'Judaisises' – that is, treats language in an 'arbitrary and uncritical fashion', as if it were invested with 'talismanic' powers.²³³ Arnold emphasises that neither the primary, poetic Paul, nor the secondary, Judaising Paul ought to be understood literally or resolved into metaphysical dogma. Arnold's ambitious reconstruction of Christianity was predictably greeted with alarm and irritation by many critics, and even reviewers who were broadly sympathetic to his project often felt that his interpretations were dubiously belletristic.²³⁴ Yet even his sharpest critics often praised him as a stylist in order to castigate him for his audacities as an amateur theologian: thus, for example, Edith Simcox asserts that Arnold's reading of St. Paul has 'enough eloquence to make it a favourable example of the literary chaos in which we shall be plunged when everybody has all his faculties cultivated at once'.²³⁵ When Pater writes of Pico that 'he will not let one go; he wins one on in spite of oneself ... although we know already that the actual solution proposed in them will satisfy us as little as perhaps it satisfied him', the judgment is very close to contemporary attitudes to Arnold's efforts to reconcile Christianity and modern thought, which were often found compelling as exercises in literary style and unconvincing as theological argument.²³⁶ It is also easy to perceive how Arnold's emphasis upon the irreducibly literary nature of the Bible and of Christian belief can modulate into Pater's aestheticist desire to elevate the 'figured style' or sensuous surfaces of works of art or literature over their putative religious content with only a minor alteration of the terms.²³⁷

²³² Ibid., 51-54. Arnold also suggests that the Resurrection is best understood metaphorically in *Culture and Anarchy*. See *CPWV*, 182-183.

²³³ Ibid., 20-23.

²³⁴ For a reception history of *St. Paul and Protestantism*, see Dawson and Pfordresher, *Critical Heritage*, 33-39.

²³⁵ 'H. Lawrenny' (pseudonym of Simcox), rev. of *St. Paul and Protestantism*, *Academy* 11 (August 1870), 283.

²³⁶ Pater, *Renaissance.*, 28.

²³⁷ Ibid., 26.

Despite the fact that Pater treats the ideal of reconciliation with wry detachment throughout, ‘Pico della Mirandola’ covertly performs a reconciliation of its own. Although Pater adopts a self-consciously modern, rationalistic perspective on religion, he also seeks to sustain an investment in it as a source of imaginative vitality and a means of conferring profound value upon art.²³⁸ This is clear when Pater emphasises that the ‘impassioned’ religiosity of fifteenth-century Italy was paradoxically what stimulated some to revere the classical legacy as a viable alternative to Christianity. (When Pater notes that it was also this religious sincerity which drove Renaissance culture to ‘consecrate’ art objects almost indiscriminately, the implied parallel with his own age seems unmistakable.)²³⁹ While Pater emphasises that Pico’s quest for reconciliation has negligible intellectual worth, he nevertheless prizes the imaginative heat generated by the effort. Pater sets up an analogy between Pico and himself: just as Pico sought to ‘renew what time had made dim’ and to revivify a dead religion, so Pater seeks to recuperate Pico’s work as an aesthetic experience.²⁴⁰ If Pater’s aestheticisation of Pico’s endeavour seems ironic and detached – he savours its ‘quaint conceits’ and ‘picturesque union of contrasts’ – there is also an unabashed admiration for Pico’s religious sincerity, his ‘deep and passionate emotion’ and ‘the glow and vehemence in his words’.²⁴¹ In case we miss the dual character of Pater’s perspective, his desire to at once take his rational distance from and to sustain the imaginative and emotional potencies of religion (at least insofar as these serve to consecrate art or to fuel a serious passion for antiquity), he twice affirms that ‘nothing which has ever interested the human mind can wholly lose its vitality’.²⁴² Pater’s determination to have it both ways – to insist that Pico’s dream of reconciliation is at once intellectually dead and aesthetically alive – culminates in the Gothic epiphany of Pico as one ‘alive in the grave ... with that sanguine clear

²³⁸ Robert Crawford thinks that Pater’s sceptical treatment of Christianity in ‘Pico della Mirandola’ is indebted to Andrew Lang’s anthropological work on myth. See Crawford, ‘Pater’s *Renaissance*, Andrew Lang, and Anthropological Romanticism’, *ELH* 53.4 (1986): 876-879.

²³⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 18.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28 and 27.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 21 and 28.

skin ... as with the light of morning upon it'.²⁴³ As Jeffrey Wallen notes, the metaphor here is of vampirism, an idea that Pater foreshadows through his interpolation of an extract from Heine's 'Gods in Exile' (1853) toward the beginning of 'Pico della Mirandola'.²⁴⁴ Heine's essay fantasises that the Greek gods were forced to take up alternative employment 'under all sorts of disguises' when Christianity vanquished paganism; we learn that Apollo so bewitched some Austrian villagers that even after they had executed him, they felt compelled to 'drag him from the grave again, that a stake might be driven through his body, in the belief he had been a vampire'.²⁴⁵ Pater relishes Heine's fable because it affirms paganism as an ineradicable if shadowy presence in Western culture, though he is also clearly invoking vampirism to underscore an element of the uncanny in the process by which the 'dreams of a dead religion' are resurrected in order to nourish an apparently living one.²⁴⁶ The sense of something perverse in this process is also registered when Pater returns to his earlier, rationalistic account of religion as a form of organic growth and recasts the metaphor so that the Western tradition reappears as a lush hybrid:

When the ship-load of sacred earth from the soil of Jerusalem was mingled with the common clay in the Campo Santo of Pisa, a new flower grew up from it, unlike any flower men had seen before, the anemone with its concentric rings of strangely blended colour ... Just such a strange flower was the mythology of the Italian Renaissance which grew up from the mixture of two traditions, two sentiments, the sacred and the profane.²⁴⁷

Here Pater segues from his apparently cool, anthropological estimate of religion into a richly coloured aestheticisation of religion as a principle of cultural vitality. The imagery of vampires and strange flowers courts the charge of decadence, and certainly Pater here seems to hint that his secular aestheticism

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Jeffrey Wallen, 'Alive in the Grave: Walter Pater's *Renaissance*', *ELH* 66.4 (1999), 1042.

²⁴⁵ Pater, *Renaissance*, 19.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

effectively keeps religion, like Pico's work, 'alive in the grave', preserving its exotic 'qualities' while slighting its aspirations to 'actual knowledge'.²⁴⁸

The notion that Pater's aestheticism has a vampiric relation to religion is a familiar one, and while Pater himself seems to entertain this idea at times, to a large extent the cliché takes as self-evident an assumption that Pater's work often sets out to contest: the primacy of religion, and the secondariness both of art and of secular imperatives. Some of the terms of this argument can be found in embryo in 'Pico della Mirandola', where Pater suggests that the aesthetic power of Pico's work should be attributed not to his mystical tendencies but to the simple inspiration of mortality.²⁴⁹ Pater is clearly averse to Pico's Christian Platonism; he notes with disappointment that Pico ultimately succumbed to 'the chilling touch of that abstract disembodied beauty which the Platonists profess to long for ...'²⁵⁰ Pater's scepticism about the extent to which anyone has ever desired 'abstract beauty', and his suggestion that such passions really take their 'glow' from the conditions of mortal life, clearly resonate with the argument of the 'Conclusion', his most famous statement of the logic behind his aestheticism, and the focus of the final section of this chapter.

Throughout the *Renaissance*, Pater calls attention to the fact that his chosen artists and thinkers were heretics who had 'the credit or discredit of attracting some shadow of ecclesiastical censure' or, in the more ambiguous cases of Michelangelo, Leonardo and Winckelmann, were men who only temporised with religious authority in a worldly fashion.²⁵¹ Overall, the book forms a series of anti-hagiographies, with its subjects honoured as secular saints for choosing worldly pleasure over asceticism, or art over orthodoxy. Yet – and this is a difference between the aristocratic Swinburne, free to valorise transgression without worrying overmuch about its personal consequences, and Pater the lower-middle-class don, beholden to Oxford University – the figure of the subversive

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 31. The only essay in which Pater does not dwell upon the heretical or ambiguous relation between his chosen subject and orthodox Christianity is 'Luca della Robbia'.

insider, bound to critique orthodoxy from within prescribed limits, finds special favour in Pater's work. In this context, it is worth noting that Pater was unable to take holy orders because his close friend, John McQueen, was scandalised by his suggestion that it would be amusing to be ordained without believing 'a single word of what you are saying'; McQueen wrote to the Bishop of London to warn of Pater's infidelity, and thereby kept Pater from the priesthood.²⁵² Pater actually seems to admire Winckelmann partly *because* of the 'insincerity of his religious profession'; he does not simply condone the fact that Winckelmann converted to Catholicism for expediency, and 'entered Rome ... with the works of Voltaire in his possession', but implies, by quoting a rather repulsive remark of Goethe's, that such dissimulation gives piquancy to Winckelmann's work.²⁵³

[Goethe] speaks of the doubtful charm of renegadism as something like that which belongs to a divorced woman, or to 'Wildbret mit einer kleinen Andeutung von Fäulniss' [i.e. 'meat with a little touch of rotteness].²⁵⁴

By contrast to 'apostasy' or 'infidelity', 'heresy' is by definition an intramural affair, or, as Valentine Cunningham puts it, a form of 'insider trading': one can be a heretic only by professing to question a tradition intimately, as a true believer. Surveying the history of Christian heresy, Cunningham observes that heresies are frequently such 'close kin to the orthodoxies they shadow as to make you wonder how their various proponents kept their fine distinction in mind'.²⁵⁵ It is often noted that Pater's aestheticism is in some sense a heretical reading of Arnold's criticism: as DeLaura puts it, 'the terms were in Arnold, but when they reappear [in Pater's work] they are "the same yet different"'. Arnold is a father of Aestheticism but only in an oblique and problematical way'; or, as Stefano

²⁵² See Monsman, *Pater*, 23-24.

²⁵³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 91.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 'Renegadism' is doing double duty, allowing Pater to convey the 'charm' of both Winckelmann's unbelief and his homosexuality, and to imply a kinship between the kinds of dissimulation these tendencies necessitate.

²⁵⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *Figures of Heresy: Radical Theology in English and American Writing 1800-2000* (Brighton: Sussex Press, 2006), 3 and 7.

Evangelista puts it, Pater's work 'perverts' rather than 'subverts' Arnold's.²⁵⁶ Such judgments are only more moderate versions of T. S. Eliot's damning assessment: Arnold beat Christian belief to an airy thinness by conflating it with literature and high culture, and Pater's work is so many pages torn from Arnold's heretical prophecy.²⁵⁷ Yet efforts to account for the fine distinctions between Arnold and Pater are always inevitably entangled in the fact that Arnold's most provocative and ambiguous legacy to Pater is his emphasis upon 'fine difference[s], of nuances or proportion in things'.²⁵⁸ Like Arnold, though perhaps more insistently, Pater is also self-conscious about the extent to which a style devoted to fine differences has the power both to court and to deflect suspicions of heresy:

Pascal's charges are those which seem to lie ready to hand against all who study theology, a looseness of thought and language, that would pass nowhere else, in making what are professedly very fine distinctions; the insincerity with which terms are carefully chosen to cover opposite meanings; the fatuity with which opposite meanings revolve into one another, in the strange vacuous atmosphere generated by professional divines.²⁵⁹

'Experience Itself is the End': John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Aestheticism in Pater's 'Coleridge's Writings' and the 'Conclusion' to the *Renaissance*

In its original incarnation, the 'Conclusion' formed the final paragraphs of Pater's 'Poems By William Morris'. Here, we recall, Pater celebrates the idea that 'the earlier, more ancient life of the senses' always inhabited the transcendentalism of medieval Christianity and subverted it from within. Yet, like Swinburne, Pater prizes the friction between Christianity and the 'ancient life of the senses' because it throws the glories of sensation into vivid relief. He elaborates what might be

²⁵⁶ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 230; and Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 37.

²⁵⁷ Eliot, 'Arnold and Pater', *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 387.

²⁵⁸ Pater, *Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1993), 82.

²⁵⁹ Pater, 'Pascal', 50.

called his secular *felix culpa* trope: the fall from a transcendental, two-worlds perspective into a purely secular, materialistic one at least temporarily grants an enchanted perception and makes the world seem paradisiacal:

Just so the monk in his cloister, through the ‘open vision’, open only to the spirit, divined, aspired to and at last apprehended a better daylight, but earthly, open only to the senses. Complex and subtle interests, which the mind spins for itself may occupy art and poetry or our spirits for a time; but sooner or later they come back with a sharp rebound to the simple elementary passions ... and what corresponds to them in the sensuous world ... This reaction from dreamlight to daylight gives, as always happens, a strange power in dealing with morning and things of the morning ... Everywhere there is an impression of surprise, as of people first waking from the golden age, at fire, snow, wine, the touch of water as one swims, the salt taste of the sea. And this simplicity at first hand is a strange contrast to the sought-out simplicity of Wordsworth. Desire here is towards the body of nature for its own sake, not because a soul is divined through it.²⁶⁰

By contrast to the ‘simplicity’ of Wordsworth, who loves the natural because the divine is immanent within it, Pater’s ideal ‘simplicity’ is ‘strange’ because it remembers that it has disavowed the divine and so finds it exotic to love ‘the body of nature’ for ‘its own sake’. Pater’s evocation of strange ‘things of the morning’ is a submerged allusion to Lucifer – ‘How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! [Isaiah 14:12] – though the suggestion of evil is neutralised by his emphasis upon a kind of primordial innocence attained by such a fall into a secularised nature. Nevertheless, Pater’s monk can discern the ‘better daylight’ of an ‘earthly’ perspective only by contrast with the spirituality he has forfeited; the new daylight retains a magic vestige of the ‘dreamlight’, and takes its paradisiacal radiance from the Christian imaginary it renounces.

For Pater, secular enlightenment is an uncanny reminiscence in another sense: even as he emphasises that it grants a childlike sense of novelty, he also insists that there is nothing new under the sun – it is only a return to the ‘ancient life of the senses’, a rediscovery of the ‘one law of the life of the human spirit,

²⁶⁰ Pater, ‘Morris’, 305-306.

and of which what we call the Renaissance is only a supreme instance'.²⁶¹ In other words, an 'earthly' or secular perspective, while initially rendering the world 'strange', is really only a 'sharp rebound' to what is most elemental, and thus comes as a flash of *déjà vu*. In a similar way, Pater often seeks to reassure us that 'materialism' only returns us to what we knew all along; thus, for the hero of *Marius the Epicurean*, Epicureanism is at once an exciting novelty and a confirmation of 'the deep original materialism or earthliness of human nature itself, bound so intensely to the sensuous world ...'²⁶² Likewise, for Pater's Winckelmann, secular materialism is not a radical departure but a homecoming; he is emancipated not by modern ideas but by embracing what he always intuited:

How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding when once we have apprehended it! That is the more liberal life we have been seeking for so long, so near to us all the while. How mistaken and roundabout have been our efforts to reach it by mystic passion and religious reverie; how they have deflowered the flesh; how little they have emancipated us! ... There, is an instance of Winckelmann's tendency to escape from abstract theory to intuition, to the exercise of sight and touch.²⁶³

Pater's tendency to posit secular materialism as an intuitive, poetic and ancient insight rather than as a legacy of the Enlightenment, of scientific discovery, or of the demystified Bible of the higher critics, has been the source of some critical confusion about his work. Like Swinburne, Pater tends to draw on modern science tacitly rather than explicitly, rather preferring to invoke Lucretius, Epicurus and Heraclitus than Tyndall, Huxley, or Darwin. This often leads scholars to suggest that Pater's aestheticism is an attempt to create an imaginative refuge from scientific materialism. For example, Robert and Janice O'Keefe claim that Pater's 'Conclusion' 'paints the frighteningly secular, post-Christian world that must be transformed through the hierophantic act of criticism ... If there is salvation from Pater's modernist hell, it is only possible through an even greater

²⁶¹ Ibid., 305.

²⁶² Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), 97.

²⁶³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 90.

concentration of vision than that required of the scientist'.²⁶⁴ According to Billie Inman, the 'Conclusion' advocates 'intense aesthetic consciousness' as a 'compensation' for the fact that both modern science and philosophy leave us 'equally disillusioned, because neither gives us any basis for metaphysical certainty'.²⁶⁵ Also in reference to the 'Conclusion', Denis Donoghue asserts that Pater is not 'endorsing the scientist's account of what we call life' but only 'tempting himself with the vertigo of an alien vocabulary', and experimentally 'supposing himself a materialist or an objectivist and letting modern science have its destructive way'.²⁶⁶ Even Dawson, the scholar who has done most to demonstrate the extent to which scientific materialism underpins Pater's thinking, assumes that Pater championed 'aesthetic experience' as a palliative for the 'stark version of human existence predicated by recent scientific and philosophical discoveries'; he finds the 'Conclusion' 'ruthlessly cold-blooded in [its] terse acceptance of mortality'.²⁶⁷

Seeking imaginative alternatives to a 'destructive' or even 'hellish' scientific materialism was not a controversial enterprise in Victorian culture. If Pater's 'Conclusion' were *In Memoriam* in prose, it would have been read from pulpits rather than denounced from them.²⁶⁸ Even the commonplace that the 'Conclusion' caused a scandal because it was thought to advocate libertinism or sensual self-indulgence is slightly puzzling on inspection. Like John Stuart Mill, Pater frames the hedonic principle in rather refined, even chaste terms: its highest instantiation is the pursuit of art or intellectual inquiry, and, again like Mill, Pater leaves open the possibility that his hedonism might be compatible with Christian

²⁶⁴ Robert and Janice A. Keefe, *Walter Pater and the Gods of Disorder* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 34-35.

²⁶⁵ Billie Inman, 'The Intellectual Context of Pater's "Conclusion"', in *Walter Pater: An Imaginative Sense of Fact* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1981), 13.

²⁶⁶ Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 48-49.

²⁶⁷ Dawson, *Darwin*, 98.

²⁶⁸ As I have noted, quotations from *In Memoriam* were frequently woven into sermons. Pater's former tutor at Queen's, W. W. Capes, inveighed against the 'Conclusion' from the university pulpit in November, 1873.

sentiment (we can attain Paterian ‘ecstasy’ through ‘religious enthusiasm’).²⁶⁹ Dawson persuasively accounts for part of the scandal by demonstrating the overdetermined nature of the connection between scientific materialism and sexual immorality in Victorian culture.²⁷⁰ Yet I would add that a large part of the provocation of the ‘Conclusion’ lay in its sheer exuberance, its will to wrest pleasure and enchantment from the ‘modern thought’ which Pater’s contemporaries often found unbearably bleak. I have noted that a considerable part of Swinburne’s *oeuvre* is an effort to critique the ways in which melancholy over religious scepticism had been assimilated into Christian belief in mid-Victorian culture. Pater pursues a similar critique more gently on the whole, wistfully suggesting that ‘perhaps one day we may come to forget the horizon, with full knowledge to be content with what is here and now’.²⁷¹ Even so, his contemporaries certainly caught – and in some cases thrilled to – the hortatory tenor of the ‘Conclusion’, which William Buckler aptly calls ‘a vocalisation of the “good news” of aestheticism’.²⁷² Pater’s contemporaries also grasped the implication of such an ardent ode to mortality: namely, that belief in immortality was savourless, a form of sleeping before evening. As Susan Navarrette notes, Pater manipulates Biblical cadences – for example, the paratactic distillation of human existence into ‘birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave’ – in order to lend grandeur to his secular sermon (though the final flourish here – the image of flowers growing from a grave, which seems to symbolise a kind of poetic resurrection for materialists – depends not on the Bible but on an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*).²⁷³ Like one of Swinburne’s minor *carpe diem* poems, the ‘Conclusion’ strives to embody the evanescence it

²⁶⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 121.

²⁷⁰ Dawson, *Darwin*, 82-115.

²⁷¹ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 132.

²⁷² William Buckler, ‘Introduction’, *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*, ed. Donald Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 13.

²⁷³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 118; and Susan Navarrette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 108. Navarrette also alerted me to the fact that Pater’s image suggests a secular resurrection. Hill notes that the phrase is an allusion to Laertes at Ophelia’s grave: ‘Lay her i’ th’ earth,/And from her fair and unpolluted flesh/May violets spring’ (Act 5, scene 1); see Pater, *The Renaissance: 1893*, 454.

celebrates: in its very brevity and its impatient-seeming effort to compress the insights of modern science and philosophy into crisp images – ‘it rusts iron and ripens corn’; ‘this short day of frost and sun’ – the essay dramatises the quest to get as much as possible into the ‘given time’. The ‘Conclusion’ is also akin to Swinburne’s *carpe diem* poems insofar as it seeks to construct a wholly materialistic view of death not as bad tidings from ‘modern thought’ but as an eternal verity. As the closing flourish to the *Renaissance*, the ‘Conclusion’ implies that the precepts of modern science and philosophy need not dishearten unduly because they essentially reinforce the core truths of the ‘pagan spirit’, and thus should be recognised as a return to ancient wisdom rather than bemoaned as an unprecedented rupture. In its original incarnation, the ‘Conclusion’ was preceded by this paragraph:

One characteristic of the pagan spirit these new poems have which is on their surface – the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the bloom of the world and gives new seduction to it; the sense of death and the desire of beauty; the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death. ‘*Arrière!*’ you say, ‘here in a tangible form we have the defect of all poetry like this. The modern world is in possession of truths; what but a passing smile can it have for a kind of poetry which, assuming artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself, passes by those truths ... to spend a thousand cares in telling once more these pagan fables as if it had but to choose between a more and less beautiful shadow?’ It is a strange transition from the earthly paradise to the sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy. But let us accept the challenge; let us see what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it, and the relation of this to the desire for beauty.²⁷⁴

The refusal to be fazed by the purportedly ‘modern’ is a keynote of Pater’s work. Using metaphors akin to those of the ‘Conclusion’, he declares in *Plato and Platonism*, ‘the seemingly new is old also, a palimpsest, a tapestry of which the actual threads have served before, or, like the animal frame itself, every particle of

²⁷⁴ Pater, ‘Morris’, 309.

which has already lived and died many times over'.²⁷⁵ Elsewhere he asserts that 'the germs of almost all philosophical enquiry were unfolded in the mind of antiquity'.²⁷⁶ Pater's use of a quotation from Heraclitus as an epigraph for the 'Conclusion' ('[All] things are in motion and nothing at rest') similarly gestures at the idea that 'modern thought' is not so very modern. In effect, Pater brandishes antiquity as a kind of apotropaic device against the threat that modern science and philosophy seem to pose to the value of art and the imagination: he seeks not an 'alternative stance' but rather to find comfort in the idea that *we have been here before*, or more grandly, *things were ever thus*. Nonetheless, Pater is clearly somewhat anxious about the fate of art in a world of scientific truths, and his 'Conclusion' is an effort to demonstrate that art, far from being an anachronistic hankering after a realm of 'beautiful shadows', is sister to science insofar as it 'rouses us to sharp and eager observation' and reveals a world of dazzling colour and kineticism.²⁷⁷ Instead of protesting that modern thought is disillusioning, Pater's solution is to claim that art has always answered to the most crucial insight of science (as well as of modern philosophy): all things are in motion and nothing at rest. In this, the 'Conclusion' repeats a maneuver that Pater had already made in 'Coleridge's Writings', where he similarly valorises art and science as manifestations of the modern, 'relative spirit', and contrasts both to the paralysis of theology and idealist philosophy, which seek 'something fixed where all is moving'.²⁷⁸

That the 'Conclusion' was an effort to counter the perception that a secular materialism entails anguish and disenchantment is clearer in its original form in 'Poems By William Morris', which included this bridging paragraph:

Such thoughts seem desolate at first; at times all the bitterness of life seems concentrated in them. They bring the image of one washed out beyond the bar in a sea at ebb, losing even his personality, as the elements of which he is composed pass into new

²⁷⁵ Pater, *Plato*, 8.

²⁷⁶ Pater, 'Coleridge', 107.

²⁷⁷ Pater, *Renaissance*, 119.

²⁷⁸ Pater, 'Coleridge', 132.

combinations. Struggling, as he must, to save himself, it is himself that he loses at every moment.²⁷⁹

‘Seem’ and ‘at first’ are crucial qualifications here. This passage appears between Pater’s delineation of the axioms of ‘modern thought’ – the relativity and subjectivity of human knowledge and the material basis of identity – and the heady closing paragraphs of the ‘Conclusion’, which enjoin us to enrich our sense of life’s value by ‘quicken[ing]’ our awareness of mortality. The image of the stable, unified self as an ideal lost at sea is perhaps taken from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, which, as I have noted, frequently figures scientific materialism both as a death-by-drowning and as an organic process of dissolution at sea. Like Tennyson, Pater conflates these concepts, so that the imagined figure is somehow drowning and decomposing simultaneously, as if materialism dealt a double death, and produced a dying corpse. Yet in the context of the previous paragraphs, in which Pater observes that the body is in a constant process of death and renewal – in particular, he notes the ‘waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye’ – the image of a body that is at once drowning and decomposing implies no surreal telescoping of time: the drowning body *is* a process of decomposition and re-composition, and by extension, the self that one would save is constituted by the forces from which one would save it.²⁸⁰ In the final paragraphs of the ‘Conclusion’, Pater attempts to counter the perception that this is simply a ‘desolate’ insight, not by denying that ‘all the bitterness of life is concentrated’ in it, but by underscoring that all the beauty of life is concentrated in it also.

Pater’s effort to persuade us that we are, or else should be, in love with mortality is given a small but telling amplification in the revised, 1888 version of the ‘Conclusion’. Where in the first version he wrote of Rousseau, ‘An undefinable taint of death had clung always about him, and now in early manhood he believed himself stricken by mortal disease’, in the later version, he changes ‘stricken’ to ‘smitten’.²⁸¹ As is so often the case, Pater uses etymology to put his finger on a paradox: ‘smitten’ here registers in both its Biblical sense – to be

²⁷⁹ Pater, ‘Morris’, 311.

²⁸⁰ Pater, *Renaissance*, 118.

²⁸¹ Pater, *Renaissance: 1893*, 190.

struck or afflicted, often as a punishment by God – and in the poetic sense of being enamoured (this latter use has been common in English since the seventeenth century [OED]). Pater also implies that Rousseau’s morbidity is a kind of vivacity when he characterises it as a ‘mortal’ rather than as a ‘fatal’ disease: Rousseau’s superstitious sense of ‘taint’ is also an ‘awakening’ to the human condition, and, by extension, to his vocation as a writer.²⁸² (Pater quotes Victor Hugo to the same effect: a prisoner who faces a death sentence only experiences an exaggerated version of a universal predicament). Yet instead of suggesting that art provides a compensatory sense of permanence or an intimation of immortality – or even sagely noting *ars longa, vita brevis* – Pater bids us turn to art in order to exacerbate our awareness of this double bind (that is, the interpretation of life and death, passion and morbidity, desire and loss), and thereby savour it as a kind of seductive paradox. It follows that art cannot serve as any kind of remedy or compensation for mortality in the ‘Conclusion’, since its very function is to make us hyperaware of our mortality, or, more precisely, to sensitise us to the extent to which the ‘splendour of life’ is insolubly tied to its ‘awful brevity’.²⁸³ And hyperawareness of mortality is both cure and disease: rather like an addiction, it allows ‘ecstatic’ experience, but only at the price of quickening the need for such ecstasy. This circularity inheres in the word ‘quicken’, which appears twice in the final paragraphs of the essay. On an obvious level, Pater means that the only way to make the most of life is to acquire a vivified consciousness, but since ‘quicken’ suggests acceleration as well as vivification, his solution is really a restatement of the original problem: his ideal consciousness is principally characterised by – indeed, derives its capacity to move ‘swiftly from point to point’ and ‘maintain its ecstasy’ from – its ‘desperate’ recognition of life’s brevity. Sensing this circularity, contemporary critics often echo Pater’s Victorian detractors in finding the ‘Conclusion’ morbid or overwhelmingly melancholic. We may well be unconvinced by Pater’s bid to beautify materialism; we might feel the poignancy more than the excitement, and

²⁸² Pater, *Renaissance*, 120.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

suspect Pater is in mourning for a lost metaphysical certainty. Nonetheless, we muffle what seemed distinctly provocative about the ‘Conclusion’ – and about Pater’s early aestheticism more broadly – if we assimilate it too quickly into a conventional identification of secularisation with melancholy and disenchantment; indeed, we fold it into the Victorian paradigm it was seeking to contest.

J. B. Bullen rightly situates the ‘Conclusion’ in the context of a philosophical dispute between Henry Longueville Mansel and John Stuart Mill which loomed large on the Victorian intellectual scene in the late 1850s and throughout the 1860s.²⁸⁴ It seems fair to assume that Pater, as a young philosophy don, took at least a passing interest in the controversy, which gathered cultural resonance as it began to intersect with the controversies over Colenso, *Essays and Reviews*, and *On the Origin of Species*.²⁸⁵ The argument between the two men, which unfolded across several books and much-discussed lectures, held the attention of the Victorian intellectual world partly because it reverberated as a *kulturkampf* between the forces of conservative politics and orthodox theology and the forces of liberalism and secular humanism, though the ways in which these ideological stakes mapped onto the contending philosophical positions were far from straightforward.²⁸⁶ Mansel, the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Oxford, and from 1868, the dean of St. Paul’s, appropriated Kantian frameworks in an effort to indemnify Christianity against sceptical attack. Mansel argued that God and the attributes conventionally associated with him – the Absolute, the Unconditioned, the Infinite – cannot be grasped by reason, since the mind can apprehend only the relative and the phenomenal, not things in themselves; thus Christianity ‘leads us ultimately to rest not on Reason but on Faith; appeals, not to our knowledge, but to our ignorance ... as there are real

²⁸⁴ J. B. Bullen, ‘Pater, Mill, Mansel and the Context of the “Conclusion” to the *Renaissance*’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 21.1 (1999): 1-15.

²⁸⁵ Commentators increasingly situated the argument between Mill and Mansel in the context of these contemporaneous controversies. See the anonymous article, ‘Recent British Philosophy’, *Examiner* 19 (August 1865), 523.

²⁸⁶ The most thorough account of the controversy is Jean Clark Roth’s unpublished PhD thesis, ‘Victorian Religious Thought and Necessary Truth: Reactions to the Debate Between Henry Longueville Mansel and John Stuart Mill’, 1997, Stanford University.

temptations to sin which nevertheless do not abrogate the duty of right conduct, so there are real temptations to doubt, which nevertheless do not abrogate the duty of belief'.²⁸⁷ Mansel was regarded as a sparkling orator and writer, and his expositions of his thought, particularly his Bampton lectures in 1858, reportedly captivated many (Pater would have also been aware of Mansel's reputation as one of the most charismatic tutors of undergraduates at Oxford).²⁸⁸ Mansel's pious affirmation of human nescience in relation to God was one of the key matrices of Victorian agnosticism, and for this reason, he has a role in the next chapter; here, I will focus on Mill's reaction to Mansel.

Mill was appalled by the way Mansel laid down sceptical arguments to buttress dogmatic faith, and he set out to wrest the doctrine of the 'relativity of human knowledge' away from the mystifications of theology, a task he undertook principally via a critique of the work of Mansel's acknowledged precursor, Sir William Hamilton. Mill's exhaustive *An Examination of the Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865) was widely read and reviewed; it received much more attention upon its first publication than either the now-more-famous *System of Logic* (1843) or *On Liberty*, and it ultimately ran to four editions, each updated with Mill's replies to his critics.²⁸⁹ Mill charged Hamilton with having buried the radical implications of his own insight – that is, the relativity of human knowledge, or, in Hamilton's own famous phrase, 'to think is to condition' – and cycled back to the premise that the mind can in fact glimpse things in themselves via its innate intuitions, a retreat which, in Mill's view, paved the way for Mansel's irrationalism. Mill's animus toward any postulation of innate ideas stemmed partly from his conviction that such philosophy poured concrete over human nature and placed it beyond the reach of political reform; as Christopher Herbert notes, Mill imagined that his assault on Hamilton and Mansel in the *Examination* were of a piece with the libertarianism he advocated in *On Liberty*

²⁸⁷ Henry Longueville Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures*, 5th edition (London: John Murray, 1870), xix.

²⁸⁸ See Alan Ryan, 'Introduction', in John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), xviii-xix.

²⁸⁹ See John Robson, 'Textual introduction', in Mill, *Hamilton*, lix.

(1859). Herbert remarks, '[Mill's] antagonism toward Hamilton and Mansel is clearly proportionate to his sense of their betrayal of their own potentially liberating discoveries out of servitude to what he took to be the very worst of the agencies of mental subjugation, Christian religion ... The Absolute is for Mill just a euphemism, finally, for that dire category, "authority", and relativity is its philosophical antithesis'.²⁹⁰ It was Mansel's insistence that we revere and obey an incognisable Absolute that provoked Mill to his famous *non serviam*:

If in ascribing goodness to God I do not mean what I mean by goodness, what do I mean by calling it goodness? And what reason have I for venerating it? ... Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing that he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.²⁹¹

As Bullen notes, placing the 'Conclusion' in the context of the Mill and Mansel controversy helps to explain why Pater's essay, which makes only passing and apparently innocuous reference to religion, was seized upon as if it were a subversive intervention in a theological debate.²⁹² Nonetheless, Bullen somewhat over-simplifies the nature of the controversy when he implies that it was a contest between Mill's atheistic relativism and Mansel's absolutist theology, or even a confrontation between materialist and idealist philosophies.²⁹³ Certainly, Mill's 'to hell I will go' pronouncement led some conservative journals to clamour over his 'Satanic' attitude and 'repellent ... Atheism'.²⁹⁴ But for other believers, particularly Broad Church men such as Kingsley and F. D. Maurice, Mill was on the side of the angels, defending human reason and the possibility of a knowable and moral God against Mansel's avant-garde obscurantism.²⁹⁵ And at key points

²⁹⁰ Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 49.

²⁹¹ Mill, *Hamilton*, 103.

²⁹² Bullen, 'Pater, Mill, Mansel', 14-15.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²⁹⁴ Roth, 'Victorian Religious Thought', 245.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 245-248.

in the *Examination*, Mill specifies that his arguments do not entail atheism.²⁹⁶ (The degree to which Mill's positions could be construed as sympathetic to Christianity would become clearer with the posthumous publication of his *Three Essays on Religion* [1874]). On the other hand, the empiricism Mill expounded in the *Examination* might seem as much an affront to common sense or to the scope of reason as Mansel's agnostic theology insofar as Mill denied that we have knowledge of the reality of matter or of an external world. Bullen quotes Mansel declaring that 'Mr. Mill is one of the most distinguished representatives of that school of Materialism which Sir W. Hamilton denounced as virtual atheism', but 'materialism' is here an aspersion that should not be taken on trust.²⁹⁷ Strictly speaking, Mill's 'sensationalism' or 'phenomenalism' was not materialist but in the tradition of Bishop Berkeley's immaterialist empiricism, and in the *Examination*, he famously averred that 'Matter ... may be defined, a Permanent Possibility of Sensation'.²⁹⁸

Mill's scepticism about the existence of matter is crucial for Pater's 'Conclusion'. In the second and third paragraphs of the essay, Pater traces the way in which a strict empiricist epistemology such as Mill's, which admits only the testimony of sense experience, can unfurl into an idealist position that renders the self a phantasmagoria of fleeting impressions and vaporises the reality of the world. Pater's point is that empiricism – often caricatured in Victorian culture as a kind of Gradgrindish fixation on hard facts, scientific objectivity, and the palpably material at the expense of the mysteries of faith or imagination – can have the ironic effect of etherealising our perception of ourselves and of the world.²⁹⁹ Thus, although the empiricist's appeal to 'experience' initially seems to tether us to 'sharp importunate reality', it ultimately leaves us floating in a 'dream of a

²⁹⁶ Mill, *Hamilton*, 193.

²⁹⁷ Bullen, 'Pater, Mill, Mansel', 5.

²⁹⁸ Mill, *Hamilton*, 183. For a close analysis of the apparent gulf between the materialist Mill of *A System of Logic* and his immaterialist position in the *Examination*, see Laura Snyder, *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 138-141.

²⁹⁹ For an analysis of the reputation of empiricism in both Victorian culture and contemporary scholarship, see Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 13-70.

world', haunted by the question of what might be '*real*' (Pater's italic).³⁰⁰ Critics often assume that Pater is invoking Hume in these passages rather than his own age's most energetic exponent of empiricism, presumably because Mill's name is associated with a kind of stout common sense rather with the kinds of phantasmal images of the self that Pater conjures in the 'Conclusion'.³⁰¹ Certainly in the *Examination*, Mill does present his phenomenalism as if it were robustly commonsensical – or as if he rather wished to play Dr. Johnson kicking the stone even as he defends a Berkeleian position:

Matter, then, may be defined as a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. If I am asked, whether I believe in matter, I ask whether the questioner accepts this definition of it. If he does, then I believe in matter: and so do all Berkeleians. In any other sense than this, I do not. But I affirm with confidence, that this conception of Matter includes the whole meaning attached to it by the common world, apart from philosophical, and sometimes from theological, theories ... It is hardly necessary ... to mention Dr. Johnson, or any one else who resorts to the *argumentum baculinum* of knocking a stick against the ground.³⁰²

Nonetheless, it is likely that Pater was aware that the more counterintuitive and recondite implications of a rigorously pursued empiricism had been given fresh currency by Mill in his efforts to undercut the arguments of Hamilton and Mansel. Critics tend to dwell upon the more proto-modernist and Gothic nuances in Pater's imagery in these paragraphs, particularly his suggestion that an empiricist and/or idealist epistemology immures the self in solipsism, or reduces it to a welter of ghostly sensations.³⁰³ Yet Pater's evocation of both empiricist and idealist epistemologies – in short, his evocation of a Millian phenomenalism – is

³⁰⁰ Pater, *Renaissance*, 118-119.

³⁰¹ See for example Inman, 'Intellectual Context', 20; Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62-64; and *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1986).

³⁰² Mill, *Hamilton*, 183.

³⁰³ For example, Donoghue claims that these paragraphs are 'like a story from Kafka'; see *Pater*, 50. Leighton remarks that 'the passage out of the prison of the self leads simply to disintegration'. See Leighton, 'Aesthetic Conditions: Returning to Pater', in *Transparencies*, eds. Brake, et al., 19. Williams claims that Pater is representing the 'anxious agonies of solipsism'; see Williams, *Transfigured World*, 21.

not simply fearful, and his emphasis is not upon the agonies of fragmentation. Indeed, Pater is clearly quite taken with the at once purely sensuous and dematerialised model of the self apparently mandated by such logic. Just as in the opening paragraph of the ‘Conclusion’ Pater strives to find beauty and enchantment in a materialist model of the self, here he showcases his capacity to aestheticise an immaterialist one. He characterises the apparent dissolution of the self not in terms of loss or terror but as ‘a trick of magic’, and imagines it as a process of rarefaction whereby the self becomes gossamer-like, ‘a tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself on the stream’ or a ‘strange, perpetual’ process of ‘weaving and unweaving’.³⁰⁴ The passages gain an exhilarated, almost ecstatic momentum as the self loses its solidity and attains to a kind of pure receptivity, with the implication that ‘modern thought’ achieves a sort of mystic kenosis by other means. The fact that the ‘Conclusion’ implicitly enthrones the aesthetic consciousness – that is, the appreciator or connoisseur of art – above the creative imagination of the artist means that the traditional problem of a Millian empiricism, its postulation of a passively receptive self, is not really a problem for Pater; indeed, an empiricist logic licenses his wish to construct passive receptivity not as an alarming predicament but as aesthetic rapture. It is also worth recalling that these passages were originally composed as part of an argument about the undiminished vitality of art, particularly of a type of neo-pagan poetry, in an age of science: their purpose is not to lament the incapacitating effects of empiricism but to underscore the extent to which empiricists dwell among ‘beautiful shadows’ just as lovers of poetry do.

In the second half of the essay, Pater does not disavow empiricism but simply appeals to it in its more reassuring guise as an epistemology which validates ‘sharp and eager observation’ and makes ‘experience itself’ the measure of things. Likewise, the materialist model of the self that was depicted in the opening paragraph of the essay reappears here not as an inexorable truth but as a desirable condition that we should maximise by paying rapt attention to it.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 119.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Pater swerves from description into prescription: the self as posited by modern thought – an apparently passive confluence of material forces or a private chamber of flickering sensations – is now advocated as a *modus vivendi* and an aesthetic ideal. Jesse Matz captures this leap of logic when he observes that Pater has ‘snuck empirical fact into proof of aesthetic quality’ and turned the ‘Humean impression [into] an Epicurean passion, and a bridge from the scepticism of mechanistic science to the pleasures of love and art’.³⁰⁶ Yet Pater would not have regarded his conjunction of modern empiricism and Epicureanism as novel or strange, and insofar as he wished to make empiricism the ground of a rehabilitation of pleasure which reserved a special place for aesthetic contemplation, he had the example of Mill’s utilitarianism as a contemporary touchstone.

At first sight, drawing a link between Mill’s utilitarianism and Pater’s aestheticism seems counterintuitive. As an affirmation of the glorious uselessness of art, ‘aestheticism’ is frequently imagined to be in polemical opposition to ‘utilitarianism’, at least in the popular sense of that word. Yet for Pater’s contemporaries, who were more attuned to the nexus between utilitarianism and Epicureanism, the extent to which Pater was an idiosyncratic student of Bentham and both James and John Stuart Mill seemed more obvious. Reviewing *Marius*, Pater’s friend Mrs Humphry Ward observed: ‘*Marius*’ carries on the train of reflection begun by the ‘*Studies*’ [i.e., the *Renaissance*], and the upshot of the whole so far is a utilitarian or Epicurean theory of morals. For, stripped of its poetic dress, the ethical argument of ‘*Marius*’ is essentially utilitarian’.³⁰⁷ Of course, Pater’s prose cannot be ‘stripped of its poetic dress’: the fact that his engagements with philosophy are notoriously unsystematic and imagistic is a key to his aestheticism, rather than a door blocking the way to its hidden meaning. Nonetheless, utilitarianism has a clear affinity with Pater’s aestheticism insofar as it represented an effort to legitimate pleasure and happiness as the supreme human objectives, and it did so within an explicitly secular frame. And if Mill’s

³⁰⁶ Matz, *Impressionism*, 61-62.

³⁰⁷ Mrs Humphry Ward, ‘*Marius the Epicurean*’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 52 (June 1885), 137.

utilitarianism was often depicted as a coldly mechanical form of reasoning, it had the opposite connotation for Pater, who describes Mill in his 'Wordsworth' essay as one who 'meditated very profoundly on the true relation of means to ends in life, and on the distinction between what is desirable in itself and what is desirable only as machinery'. (Pater is praising Mill for having recognised that the world would still need poetry after the 'battle which he and his friends were waging had been won').³⁰⁸

Timothy Weiss simply defines Pater as an 'aesthetic utilitarian', and he finds suggestive echoes of both Bentham and Mill in the 'Conclusion'. Weiss hears a cunning reformulation of Bentham's felicific calculus or 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' principle in Pater's fetishisation of the quantitative and the maximal, his invocations of a 'counted number of pulses', the 'greatest number of vital forces', 'as many pulsations as possible' and a 'multiplied consciousness': Pater effectively turns Bentham's calculus from 'collectivity to subjectivity, and from commonweal to consciousness'.³⁰⁹ Weiss also argues that Pater's emphasis upon momentary, ecstatic pleasure and his famous image of a 'hard, gem-like flame' may be traced to this passage in Mill's 'Utilitarianism':

A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught us that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive ...³¹⁰

Weiss rightly observes that Pater 'shifts the utilitarian focus ... from society to psyche'.³¹¹ Yet he misses the fact that in making such a transformation

³⁰⁸ Pater, *Appreciations*, 61.

³⁰⁹ Timothy Weiss, 'Walter Pater: Aesthetic Utilitarian', *Victorians Institute Journal* 15 (1987), 110.

³¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, 'Utilitarianism', in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, 143-144.

³¹¹ Weiss, 'Aesthetic Utilitarian', 111.

and distilling it into a *carpe diem* imperative, Pater delivers utilitarianism back into the hands of its critics. In ‘Utilitarianism’, Mill refines upon Bentham’s work by drawing a distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ pleasures: where Bentham notoriously averred that ‘pushpin is as good as poetry’, Mill elevates aesthetic and intellectual pursuits over frivolous and purely physical pleasures.³¹² In this, Mill was explicit about the fact that he sought to cleanse utilitarianism of the sordid reputation it shared with Epicureanism: that is, as an ‘eat, drink and be merry’ doctrine, a gospel for gluttons and voluptuaries. However, instead of trying to dissociate utilitarianism from the taint of Epicureanism, Mill sought to rehabilitate Epicureanism by pointing out that it too advocated moderation and contemplativeness as the ideal means of securing pleasure and avoiding pain.³¹³ As I noted, Pater seems to follow Mill’s lead when he valorises intellectual and aesthetic pleasure above other kinds. Yet Pater departs from Mill’s efforts to make ‘pleasure’ a respectable ideal in that he *does* demand a ‘life of rapture’: the ‘Conclusion’ calls not for the rational management of pleasures, but for ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘ecstasy’ fuelled by a consciousness of the proximity of death. (In this, the ‘Conclusion’ is also unfaithful to Epicureanism, which tried to free its adherents of anxiety about death and prized self-mastery and *ataraxia* [i.e., tranquility], not passion or incessant stimulation.) In ‘Utilitarianism’, Mill has nothing to say about the relationship between pleasure and mortality, presumably because the traditional equation of Epicureanism with a *carpe diem* ethic is precisely what he seeks to neutralise. In other words, Pater’s ‘Conclusion’ releases the genie that Mill laboured so hard to put in the bottle: Pater takes ancient, discredited ideas which Mill sought to reframe as rational, moral, and civic-minded, and recasts them in such a way as to confirm the worst suspicions of many Victorians about the real thrust of secular thought.

Pater found Mill attractive because he satisfied his ideal of the Montaigne-like sceptic who takes the question of happiness seriously and maintains an optimistic view of human nature. In *Plato and Platonism*, Pater extols the

³¹² Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 136-148.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 138.

‘wholesome scepticism of Hume and Mill’ for its ‘appeal ... to the authority of the senses’ and its capacity to disperse the ‘insane speculative figments’ of rationalist and transcendental philosophies.³¹⁴ Pater shared Mill’s antipathy toward the concept of the Absolute; as Inman notes, Pater had ‘the peculiar habit of assuming that a hard, renunciatory attitude accompanied the tendency to seek Absolute truth’.³¹⁵ And in ‘Coleridge’s Writings’, Pater endorsed the countervailing ‘relative spirit’ – or as he construed it in his own version of Hamilton’s dictum, ‘nothing is or can be rightly known except relatively under conditions’ – as wholly benevolent and emancipatory.³¹⁶ ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ has not found favour with Pater’s modern critics; the few who have discussed it in detail seem to consider its attacks on metaphysics, and its efforts to align art with science, callow and abrasive in their triumphalism.³¹⁷ Certainly there is some irony in the way in which Pater seizes upon the ‘relative’ as the key to all the mythologies, the absolute axiom which will dethrone the Absolute at last; and this line of thinking is connected to Pater’s early tendency to essentialise the secular as an intuitive and perennial core of human nature that will be revealed once the encrustations of religion have been cleared away. Yet the fact that Pater embarks on his publishing career by proclaiming that art will march onward under the banner of positivism rather than religion usefully reveals the assumptions which underlay his early thinking, particularly since he would never again explicate his position so candidly and in such crystalline prose. By the time he composed ‘Poems By William Morris’, Pater had already begun to position himself more cagily with respect to established models of secularism; thus, the ‘Conclusion’ warns us not only against Hegel’s idealism, but against Comte’s positivism, contemning them both as ‘facile orthodoxy’ (Mill was a leading English

³¹⁴ Pater, *Plato*, 31.

³¹⁵ Inman, “Sebastian van Storck”: Pater’s Exploration into Nihilism’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.4 (1976), 460.

³¹⁶ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 107.

³¹⁷ Donoghue is especially harsh; see *Pater*, 274-278. Robert and Janice O’Keefe dislike its ‘air of intellectual superiority’; see *Gods of Disorder*, 94. William Shuter gives a measured account but contrasts it unfavourably to Pater’s later work. See Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52-56.

proponent of Comte's religion of humanity).³¹⁸ One wonders which English philosophical paradigm Pater is alluding to when he also warns us against submitting to any orthodoxy 'of our own'; Franke suggests that Christianity is the implicit target, but it could be Mill's positivism, which Pater may have regarded as one of the orthodoxies at Oxford in the 1860s.³¹⁹ As Dale notes, 'by the time Pater came up to Oxford in 1858 and in the ensuing years when he was an undergraduate and young Fellow, Mill's thought and the empiricist outlook in general had begun to penetrate University intellectual life, and the curriculum, to an unprecedented extent'. Yet, as Dale goes on to argue, Pater's aestheticism is not a simple revolt against Mill's positivism: 'Pater's intellectual tone was set at least as much by Mill and the positivist thought of the day as by those other more obviously aesthetic and antipositivist sources such as Winckelmann, Goethe, Hegel, Heine, Ruskin, and T. Gautier'.³²⁰ Yet, like Swinburne, Pater often evolves his own aestheticist position out of dissatisfaction with the concessions made by a previous generation of secular thinkers such as Mill, as well as in reaction to the paradigm of regretful religious doubt.

The ardent positivism of 'Coleridge's Writings' was perhaps inspired by Mill's 1840 essay on Coleridge, which compares Bentham's utilitarianism to Coleridge's mixture of German idealism and Anglican orthodoxy. While, like Pater, Mill makes it plain that he has little intellectual sympathy with Coleridge, he is more respectful toward Coleridge's legacy than is Pater, and as a whole, the essay calls for a truce in the 'bellum internecinum', the contest between empiricist and transcendentalist philosophies; indeed, the essay is sometimes thought to reflect Mill's desire to arrive at a kind of Romantic utilitarianism, one which can yield to the imaginative power of Coleridge's vision even as it remains faithful to Bentham's principles.³²¹ The purpose of Mill's essay is thus reconciliation, not iconoclasm: he graciously suggests that 'whoever could master the premises and

³¹⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, 120.

³¹⁹ Franke, *Heresies*, 147.

³²⁰ Dale, *Victorian Critic*, 174.

³²¹ Mill, *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, introd. F. R. Leavis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), 110. On Mill's desire to reconcile Romanticism and utilitarianism, see R. J. Halliday, *Political Thinkers: John Stuart Mill* (London: Routledge, 1976), 36.

combine the methods' of Bentham and Coleridge 'would possess the entire English philosophy of his age'.³²² Nonetheless, Mill regarded what he dubbed the 'Germano-Coleridgian' school of transcendentalism as a threat to his own programme, and he bluntly declares his loyalties: the 'truth' lies with 'Locke and Bentham'; 'we see no ground for believing that anything can be the objects of our knowledge except our experience, and what can be inferred from our experience by the analogies of experience itself'.³²³ Over two decades later, Pater's essay takes up the cudgels for empiricism and against Coleridge with enthusiasm, and he rehearses many of the complaints against transcendentalism which Mill tenders with seeming reluctance (the possibility that Mill's essay informs Pater's is also suggested by the fact that, like Mill, Pater repeatedly compares Coleridge to Bentham).³²⁴ Yet if in his 'Coleridge' essay Mill in fact aimed to borrow some of the affective magic of Coleridge's Romanticism for his own cause, it is in Pater's essay on Coleridge that the rhetoric equal to such a task is to be found: Pater disparages Coleridge's mysticism in unblushingly Romantic terms, demanding to know 'who would change the colour or curve of a roseleaf' for the sake of what is 'colourless, formless, intangible'?³²⁵ Unlike Mill, Pater refuses to cede the trophies of sentiment and imagination to Coleridge's transcendentalism. Part of Pater's reasoning is that secular spirits need not go to Coleridge for solace because they can always just read Wordsworth, who Pater depicts as a contented naturalist, more or less innocent of metaphysics.³²⁶ By contrast, Coleridge's quest for the absolute 'congeal[s]' his thought and clings 'like some contagious damp to all his writings'; it renders his language 'greyer and greyer' and 'his thoughts *outré*, exaggerated, a kind of credulity or superstition exercised upon abstract words'; he is like a 'born Epicurean, who by some strange wrong has passed the best of his days in a prison'.³²⁷ Pater's insistence that Coleridge's transcendentalism is not just mistaken but morbid, '*ennuyant*, depressing', reflects

³²² Ibid., 102.

³²³ Ibid., 108 and 114.

³²⁴ Pater, 'Coleridge', 124 and 127.

³²⁵ Ibid., 108.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid., 122, 108, 117.

his determination to pry apart what Romanticism had apparently soldered together even for secular thinkers like Mill: the associations between transcendental ideals, emotional fulfillment, and aesthetic pleasure.³²⁸ Pater does not think that secularism needs to make any very costly concessions:

What chains men to a religion is not its claim on their reason ... but the glow it affords to the world, its 'beau ideal' ... 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 ... God has commanded them, still less because they are means of obtaining a reward, but because like culture itself they are remote, refined, intense ... If there is no other world, art in its own interest must cherish such characteristics as beautiful spectacles. Stephen's face, 'like the face of an angel', has a worth of its own, even if the opened heaven is but a dream.³²⁹

As Dowling remarks, Pater 'continually describe[s] all ... transcendental ambitions in his chosen vocabulary of reproach, persistently associating transcendentalism and abstraction with words like *dry*, *cold*, *freezing*, *inaccessible*, *colourless*'.³³⁰ And the corollary of this tendency – the identification of the secular with heat, colour, and kineticism – is also observable throughout Pater's work, though it issues most famously in his construction of the *carpe diem* imperative as an effort 'to burn always with a hard, gemlike flame'.³³¹ The 'Conclusion' embodies Pater's conviction that nobody can be wooed by reason alone; if a secular view of reality is to compete with a religious one, it can only do so by the strength of the 'glow it affords to the world, its 'beau ideal''.

There is some irony in the fact that the 'Conclusion', often considered the manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement and therefore an apotheosis of art, actually seeks in an important sense to clip the wings of art. For Pater, the value of art inheres in the fact that it inculcates vigilance toward the limits of secular temporality; it 'comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest

³²⁸ Ibid., 112.

³²⁹ Pater, 'Coleridge', 126.

³³⁰ Dowling, *Aesthetic Democracy*, 84.

³³¹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 120.

quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake'.³³² Rather than offering a foretaste of transcendence or providing imaginative moments purified of time, art only returns mortality to us in vivified form; it gives us 'the highest quality' to our moments as they pass by concentrating our awareness on the fact that they *are* passing, and the likelihood that we will protest that this is not much of a gift is acknowledged in the first part of the clause (art comes to us 'professing frankly to give nothing'.) For Pater as for Swinburne, aestheticism was not an assertion of the transcendent powers of art, but rather, an assertion of art's capacity to inspire a strenuously affirmative attitude toward the triumph of time.³³³ The fact that Pater glosses the 'art for art's sake' slogan as an affirmation of a *carpe diem* ethic in the final sentence of the 'Conclusion' reflects the extent to which arguments for the autotelism of art could double as arguments for the autotelism of life: that is, as arguments for life's immediate, intrinsic value, independent of the possibility of immortality or of another, transcendent realm.

³³² Ibid., 121.

³³³ Cf. Wolfgang Iser, who argues that Pater's 'Conclusion' posits 'temporality [as] the hallmark's life's deficiencies, which instead of being imitated have to be transcended ... the aim of [art] is to relieve man of the burden of his finiteness'; he defines Pater's 'aesthetic moment' as an effort to 'defy time by freezing the transient into a permanent image. The need for such a quality is directly connected to Pater's awareness of ever-increasing secularisation'. See Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 35-37.

Chapter Four: ‘Inheriting its Strange Web of Belief and Unbelief’: George Eliot’s *Romola*, Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, and the Aura of Agnosticism

‘What Face is Behind it?’: Pater’s *Marius*, Art, and Agnosticism

‘Writing in old age, [Euripides] is in that subdued mood, a mood not necessarily sordid, in which (the shudder at the nearer approach of the unknown world coming over him more frequently than of old) accustomed ideas, conformable to a sort of common sense regarding the unseen, oftentimes regain what they may have lost in a man’s allegiance. It is a sort of madness, he begins to think, to differ from the received opinions thereon. Not that he is insincere or ironical, but that he tends, in the sum of probabilities, to dwell on their more peaceful side; to sit quiet, for the short remaining time, in the reflexion of the more cheerfully lighted side of things; and what is accustomed ... comes to seem the whole essence of wisdom, on all subjects; and the well-known delineation of the vague country, in Homer or Hesiod, one’s best attainable mental outfit, for the journey thither ... Euripides has said, or seemed to say, many things concerning Greek religion, at variance with received opinion; and now, in the end of life, he desires to make his peace – what shall at any rate be peace with men. He is in the mood for acquiescence, or even for a palinode; and this takes the direction, partly of mere submission to, partly of a refining upon, the authorised religious tradition; he calmly sophisticates this or that element of it which had now seemed grotesque; and has, like any modern writer, a theory of how myths were made, and how in lapse of time their first signification gets to be obscured among mortals; and what he submits to, that he will also adorn fondly, by his genius for words’.¹

Pater’s characterisation of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (circa. 404 BC) as the work of an iconoclast mellowed by age and reconciled to ‘accustomed ideas’ regarding religion will likely strike readers who turn from *The Renaissance* to *Marius the Epicurean* as one of many moments of thinly veiled self-portraiture in Pater’s writing.² The passage belongs to the introduction of an essay that Pater published

¹ Pater, ‘The Bacchanals of Euripides’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* 60: 355 (1889), 63. Reprinted in *Greek Studies* (1895).

² Monsman is the key proponent for reading Pater’s works as experiments in autobiography. See Monsman, *Walter Pater’s Art of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

in *Macmillan's* in 1889 but which was probably written around 1878 – about two years before he began the four-year labour of composing *Marius*.³ It is revealing that Pater was at this moment brooding over the implications of a rapprochement with religious orthodoxy and, by extension, considering the kinds of rhetorical complexity that a late, palinodic style might afford. Significantly, Pater invites us to wonder if Euripides made peace with the gods or with his culture. While he suggests that Euripides became more afraid of death in old age, he also implies Euripides did not so much change his religious beliefs (or lack of them) as change his ‘mood’ about the beliefs of others; he came to approve of the communal dimensions of religion, and craved the ‘peace’ of affirming a consensus view. Pater does not really probe the question of how far Euripides inwardly assented to the truth of orthodoxy; he is more engaged by what he takes to be Euripides’s enjoyment of the ‘quiet’ pleasures of social conformity, won by his belated recognition of the futility of contesting conventional wisdom on matters which can only be considered a ‘vague country’. Yet Pater also emphasises that there is no getting back to the garden, no simple recuperation of lost belief; a late convert to orthodoxy is also an apostate from apostasy, and is likely to appear ‘ironical’, ‘insincere’, even ‘sordid’. This kind of questionable, even corrupt double consciousness in relation to religious belief is precisely what Pater increasingly comes to link with aestheticism in his post-*Renaissance* work. This association of aestheticism with the atheist who has ‘second thoughts’ is explicit in Pater’s discussion of Euripides, where Pater comes close to suggesting that Euripides shifted ‘allegiance’ because it allowed him a peculiarly flexible rhetorical position – on the one hand, his former detachment from orthodoxy allows him to ‘sophisticate’ the undesired elements of religion, and, like a decadent artist in the pattern of Baudelaire or Swinburne, thus beautify the ‘grotesque’; on the other, his new willingness to ‘submit’ is also a creative stimulant, since he must find

³ Although the essay was published in 1889 in *Macmillan's*, Pater’s friend and editor Charles L. Shadwell claimed that Pater composed it around 1878 and intended to include it in a volume that he subsequently abandoned; it appeared posthumously in *Greek Studies*. See Shadwell’s Preface to *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 2-3. Pater began research for *Marius* in the spring of 1881; see Monsman, *Pater*, 81.

ways to ‘adorn fondly’ what he is glad to accept in conventional piety.⁴ As is often the case with Pater’s constructions of both pagan and Christian religion in *Marius*, there is also an obvious framing irony in the above quoted passage that qualifies Pater’s apparently sympathetic imagining of Euripides’ late religious turn. The notion of an ancient Greek playwright embracing traditional religion because he has come to revere tradition as such is of course ironic from the perspective of a much later age that inherits and values that religion largely as an element within a literary tradition; the idea of Euripides deferring to Homer or Hesiod as authorities on theology only underscores the kind of historical relativism which unsettles any such hopes of locating a point of fixity in ‘common sense regarding the unseen’.

So far, I have largely bracketed the problem of the two Paters – that is, the interpretive quandaries created by the fact that Pater became a far more circumspect writer in the wake of the scandal caused by the *Renaissance*, and increasingly censored his earlier, irreligious statements, most famously by removing the ‘Conclusion’ from the second, 1877 edition (it was restored, with some revisions, in the 1888 edition), and by bowdlerising essays such as ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ and ‘Poems By William Morris’ when they were reprinted under different titles in *Appreciations* (1889).⁵ The problem is thorny because a simple distinction between a youthful, firebrand Pater and a late, penitent Pater does not obtain as neatly as this process of self-censorship might imply. As I have indicated, Pater’s early, secular aestheticism was often pursued under the ambiguous sign of ‘heresy’, rather than straightforward iconoclasm; it works both through and against the ambiguities of the forms and modalities of Victorian doubt. Thus, distinguishing between the ambiguities of the early, heretical Pater and those of the late, palinodic Pater is a tortuous undertaking, even if the late prose style is appreciably more difficult and evasive than the early one: as

⁴ ‘Second thoughts’ is the title of a chapter in *Marius*; see 167.

⁵ ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ was revised and republished as ‘Coleridge’ and ‘Poems By William Morris’ revised and republished as ‘Aesthetic Poetry’, though Pater came to regret even the revised version of the latter essay and omitted it from the second, 1890 edition of *Appreciations*.

Williams puts it, ‘*all Pater is late Pater*’, insofar as the self-cancelling gestures of the late Pater can be found in the early Pater too.⁶ At stake in these distinctions is the question of how far Pater moved toward Christian belief in his later life, a question which has been best answered by Shuter, who argues that, insofar as Pater did turn toward Christianity, he turned toward it using the very language, tropes, and arguments that he had previously used to reject it.⁷ Yet this apparently perverse logic was not just an idiosyncrasy of Pater’s: it reflects the extent to which his aestheticism was always a close commentary on the paradoxes of Victorian religious doubt. The difference between the provocations of *The Renaissance* and the evasions of *Marius* can be traced at least partly to the fact that those paradoxes had become even more culturally salient in the late 1870s than they had been in the 1860s.

In this chapter, I argue that *Marius* meditates on the implications of the integration of religious doubt and agnosticism into the mainstream of cultural life in the 1870s and early 1880s. As is in the case of his earlier work, Pater uses aestheticism as a means of revitalising debates about religious doubt which he felt had become stale and conventionalised. However, where in his early career Pater exploited ambiguities within the discourses of Victorian doubt in order to polemicise for a utopian, quasi-pagan vision of the secular, one which he imagines to be ‘heretical’ or rebellious, from the late 1870s, as religious doubt attained new philosophical prestige and social acceptability with the popularisation of ‘agnosticism’, Pater apparently felt less impetus to construct aestheticism as a radical discourse, and more free to posit it as a natural extension of a prevailing cultural mood. Nonetheless, I will suggest that Pater remained resistant to the melancholic, apocalyptic, and strongly moralistic models of unbelief he critiqued in his earlier work, and his aestheticism continues to advertise itself as religious doubt with a difference – that is, as an especially subtle and imaginatively liberated way of engaging with the faith-and-doubt question. Pater also continues to present aestheticism as a neutral realm beyond

⁶ Carolyn Williams, ‘On Pater’s Late Style’, *Nineteenth Century Prose*, 24.2 (1997), 144.

⁷ Shuter, *Pater*, 39-60.

all religious controversy; however, where claims of impartiality or disinterestedness in Pater's early work are aligned with a secularising agenda, the extraordinarily dense, convoluted and ambiguous character of *Marius* aims to render entirely illegible Pater's own position in relation to religious belief: the novel everywhere invites and frustrates readerly attempts to discover the commitments of its author.⁸

Pater's perception that religious doubt had been exhausted as a literary theme is apparent in his review of Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888). While Pater is generous in his praise of the novel – he and Ward moved in the same Oxford circles – a note of impatience is detectable when he analyses Ward's handling of religious doubt. Observing that 'the sorts of doubts which troubled Robert Elsmere are no novelty in literature', he complains that Ward's understanding of the debate is *passé*: where Ward's clergyman hero is so troubled by doubts about the literal truth of Christianity that he abandons the Church, Pater avers that the debate has 'advanced' beyond questions of evidence of the kind raised by Renan and onto a more philosophical plane.⁹ Pater points out that a 'a large class' of Christians regard 'philosophic uncertainty' as compatible with faith – Pater even expresses irritation with the self-consciously modern type of liberal clergyman who 'dwell[s] on nothing else but the difficulties of faith and the

⁸ For an overview of the contemporary reception of the novel, see Franklin Court's 'The Critical Reception of Pater's *Marius*', *ELT* 27.2 (1984): 124-139. For readings which argue that *Marius* is a Christian novel or reflects Pater's own re-conversion to Christianity, see for example Hanson, *Decadence*, 210-217; Monsman, *Pater*, 71-104; James Russell Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 196-224; and Martha Salmon Vogeler, 'The Religious Meaning of *Marius the Epicurean*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19.3 (1964): 287-299. For critical interpretations which challenge or complicate the Christian reading of the novel, see for example Joseph Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 323-347; Gowan Dawson, 'Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and the Discourse of Science in *Macmillan's Magazine*: "A Creature of the Nineteenth Century"', *English Literature in Transition* 48.1 (2005):38-54; U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), 189-223; and Maureen Moran, 'Pater's Great Change: *Marius the Epicurean* as Historical Conversion Romance', in *Transparencies*, ed. Brake et al.,170-188.

⁹ Pater, 'Robert Elsmere', *Essays From 'The Guardian'* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 66.

propriety of concession to the opposite force' – and argues that if Elsmere had possessed a more 'philosophical or scientific temper,' he would have 'hesitated' before he repudiated Christianity.¹⁰ Although he does not use the word 'agnostic', Pater is clearly gesturing at the tendency of many late Victorian intellectuals, both committed Christians and secularists, to emphasise the limits of knowledge and situate themselves along an agnostic continuum when defining the nature of their belief. Pater suggests that at least in sophisticated circles, the 'religious question' has paradoxically been settled – there are no longer 'unconquerable differences' between believers and unbelievers – because the enlightened have arrived at a consensus about its insolubility.¹¹

Critics sometimes cite Pater's review of *Robert Elsmere* in order to demonstrate his shift toward Christianity in this period in his life, and certainly he sounds more like a committed Christian here than anywhere in his published work.¹² This may be partly because the (unsigned) review was written for the Anglican *Guardian*; Pater's use of an editorial plural voice that posits a Christian reader – 'to us, the belief in God, in goodness at all, in the story of Bethlehem, does not rest on evidence so diverse in character and force as Mrs. Ward suggests' – indicates his self-consciousness about his audience. Pater's sympathy with Christianity is couched in agnostic terms – he writes of 'mak[ing] an allowance' for 'a great possibility' – but, in a direct inversion of his position in his early essays and *The Renaissance*, he elevates Christianity above secular humanism on aesthetic grounds.¹³ Perhaps the most telling part of the review is where he observes, 'At his death Elsmere has started what to us would be a most unattractive place of worship, where he preaches an admirable sermon on the purely human aspect of the life of Christ', but then questions the aesthetic value of any creed which dispenses with a sense of the 'infinite' nature of Christ, since it must then also renounce the poetry of 'all such sayings as that 'though He was

¹⁰ Ibid., 66-68.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² See for example Vogeler, 'Religious Meaning', 290.

¹³ Ibid., 68-69.

rich, for our sakes He became poor'.¹⁴ There is perhaps a snobbish subtext here: the audience to whom Elsmere preaches in his 'unattractive place of worship' consists largely of lower-class secularists (though Ward's own aversion to this vulgar type of unbelief is palpable in this section of the novel).¹⁵ Nonetheless, Pater's choice of quotation from Saint Paul would be jarring to even a casual reader of *Robert Elsmere*, since it creates the impression that what he thinks is lacking in Elsmere's creed is commitment to love or charity, but Ward's novel earnestly constructs Elsmere as a Christlike martyr to the cause of a secular humanitarianism – Elsmere devotes his life more heroically to the poor *because* of his apostasy. Arguably, Pater's distinction here is aesthetic (and latently political), not moral or religious: he is not suggesting that that Elsmere's humanitarianism fails by the lights of Christ's identification with the poor, but that it fails by the lights of Paul's poetic rendering of that identification. Pater's sense of the aesthetic crudity of Elsmere's secular church mirrors his sense of the intellectual crudity of Ward's supposition that the 'religion question' turns on empirical evidence. The thread of logic in this critique, which seems to swerve so abruptly from a protest against Elsmere's lack of 'philosophic' rigour to a protest against the aesthetic deficiencies of his creed, is the same as that which is woven through *Marius*: once it is widely acknowledged that the 'religion question' is a philosophical crux, it yields to being understood as a personal choice in which one's 'class of mind', especially one's aesthetic sensibility, is the decisive consideration.¹⁶ In other words, the undecidability of truth claims about religion – the fact that philosophy gives us no firm ground on which to either accept or reject it – now licenses the individual to ask of Christianity, *mutatis mutandis*, the same self-consciously bold question that he famously enjoins us to ask in the 'Preface' to *The Renaissance*: 'What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of

¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the refined doubt/coarse atheism binary that structures Ward's novel, see Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 167-8.

¹⁶ Pater, 'Elsmere', 68.

pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?’¹⁷ Yet – as is often the case in *Marius* – Pater adds a jarring note which renders his position obscure. In the midst of making the case for remaining receptive to Christianity, he approvingly quotes a remark of Ward’s which asserts a gulf between Christianity and modern enlightenment and elevates the latter over the former: there are ‘two estimates of life – the estimate which is the offspring of the scientific spirit, and which is forever making the visible world fairer and more desirable in mortal eyes; and the estimate of Saint Augustine’.¹⁸

The popularisation of T. H. Huxley’s coinage, ‘agnosticism’, and in particular, its protean life in the Victorian periodical press in the 1870s and 1880s, is a crucial context for the enigmatic impression that *Marius* generally leaves on readers. From the moment of Huxley’s invention of the word in 1869, ‘agnostic’ did not simply name a conciliatory, intermediate position but introduced a slippery signifier which contaminated commonsense distinctions between belief and atheism, particularly since – like ‘doubt’ – it rapidly came to occlude the possibility of the latter. It was widely understood that Huxley and other spokesmen of natural science proselytised on behalf of ‘agnosticism’ partly in a bid to cleanse natural science of its besmirching associations with atheism and materialism.¹⁹ However, whether ‘agnosticism’ represented a transparent *modus vivendi* between natural science and established religion, or a means by which the partisans of science pursued a secularist agenda by stealth, was a confusing and contested issue. As George Levine observes, the desire to reconcile science with religion, or to believe in ‘something like ‘non-overlapping magisteria’’, was frequently claimed by both sides of bitter disputes over the proper authority of each in the Victorian period, and this in turn made both sides suspicious of apparently conciliatory terms such as ‘agnosticism’.²⁰

¹⁷ Pater, *Renaissance*, 3.

¹⁸ Pater, ‘Elsmere’, 69.

¹⁹ Dawson, *Darwin*, 18-21.

²⁰ George Levine, *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 54.

The tendency of most late Victorian advocates of natural science to disclaim ‘atheism’ and ‘materialism’ while many advanced views which often seemed to the public indistinguishable from conventional definitions of those terms could serve to render atheists and materialists a spectral group at the very moment they were widely imagined to be making dramatic encroachments upon the cultural life of the nation.²¹ As Edward Plumptre, Dean of Wells, drily remarked in 1881, ‘Though many men of science hold premises which logically lead to Atheism, no one, I suppose, except the junior member for Northampton [i.e., Bradlaugh] is an Atheist’.²² The fact that the devout generally invoked ‘atheism’ more freely than anyone whose views actually approximated to the term meant that to a large extent the word retained its ancient character as an insult or an accusation, rather than an avowable identity, throughout the late Victorian period. Huxley’s coinage actually created schism within the organised secularist movement, with many members refashioning themselves as ‘agnostics’ while Bradlaugh cleaved to the word ‘atheist’ as a form of political resistance.²³ By Huxley’s own account, he coined the term because it seemed

a fit antithesis to gnostic – the gnostics being those ancient heretics who professed to know nothing – Agnostic therefore in the sense of a philosophical system is senseless: its import lies in being a confession of ignorance – a warning set up against philosophical and theological phantasms which was never more needed than at the present time when the ghost of the ‘Absolute’ slain by my masters Hume and Hamilton is making its appearance in broad daylight.²⁴

Huxley’s studied humility in the face of the unknown, his suggestion that ‘agnosticism’ is allied with righteous Christianity against the heretical

²¹ For an account of the tendency of late Victorian scientific naturalists to disavow ‘atheism’ and ‘materialism’, see Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 16-18 and 22-26.

²² E. H. Plumptre, ‘The Fields of Conflict Between Faith and Unbelief’, *Contemporary Review* 40 (August 1881), 170.

²³ See Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1886-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 116-119.

²⁴ Quoted in Lightman, *Agnosticism*, 13.

‘gnosticism’ of Christian theology, and his name-checking of Hamilton (balanced with a bow to Hamilton’s sceptical compatriot, Hume), all typify the way Victorian agnostics appropriated Christian discourses to ambiguous ends. Bernard Lightman, who has written the most comprehensive intellectual history of Victorian agnosticism, accentuates the distinctly religious and Kantian valences of the term and demonstrates the fact that its key proponents, Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Stephen, were self-conscious about the degree to which their shared emphasis upon the ineluctable limits of human knowledge dovetailed with theological (and Kantian) arguments mounted by Hamilton and Mansel.²⁵ Like some Victorian commentators, Lightman also dwells on the slippage between agnosticism and religiosity in Spencer’s concept of the ‘Unknowable’, which – to the displeasure of some secularists, such as Frederic Harrison – could sound tellingly reminiscent of the *agnostos theos* or ‘hidden God’ of the New Testament (Acts 17:23).²⁶ (The *agnostos theos* of Saint Paul was rumoured to have inspired Huxley’s coinage, though Huxley himself denied this.)²⁷

The fact that the Victorian agnostic could seem like the uncanny double of the orthodox believer inevitably bestowed an equivocal value upon the term. On the one hand, it could make ‘agnosticism’ seem like an olive branch extended to the devout, or even a viable philosophy for the committed Christian; on the other, it furnished secularists with an instrument for subjecting Christianity to an immanent critique. The latter phenomenon is epitomised by Stephen’s influential essay, ‘An Agnostic’s Apology’ (1876), in which ‘agnosticism’ could scarcely be taken for a conciliatory or quasi-religious position: while Stephen claims that the term is an ‘advance in the courtesies of controversy’, he clearly conceives of it as a trenchant method for exposing the vacuity of theological speculation, and his ‘agnostic’ attacks on Christian belief were well known for their remorseless logic and confrontational style.²⁸ Huxley, Spencer, and Stephens all savoured turning

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-90. Harrison expresses qualms about Spencer’s Unknowable in ‘Agnostic Metaphysics’, *Nineteenth Century* 16.91 (1884), 353-378.

²⁷ Lightman, *Agnosticism*, 12.

²⁸ Stephen, ‘Agnostic’s Apology’, 840.

theological arguments against Christian believers by suggesting that they were actually impious in their anthropomorphic fantasies about an unknowable deity, or by pointing out that the fideistic tradition within Christianity could leave theologians vulnerable to the charge of ‘scepticism’ they usually leveled at supposed atheists.²⁹ By the early 1880s, the devout had grown wise to this ‘agnostic’ habit of using theology or scripture to fashion anti-theological arguments and some began to claim that ‘agnosticism’ was – just as prominent agnostics liked to imply – entirely indistinguishable from Christian belief. For instance, H. G. Curteis asserted that ‘no religious man need shrink from saying, “I am a Christian Agnostic. I hold firmly by the doctrine of St. Paul, who exclaims, in sheer despair of fathoming the unfathomable, ‘O the depth of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and inscrutable His ways!’ ... And in so holding, I am in full accord with the Church”’.³⁰ (Curteis had noticed the continuities between Spencer’s Unknowable and apophatic theology.)³¹ In 1887, William Fremantle, then a Canon of Canterbury, caused a scandal when he claimed in the *Fortnightly* that the Anglican church was undergoing a ‘new reformation’ under the aegis of agnosticism: in his view, the resolution ‘we must be content henceforward to be Christian Agnostics’ epitomised modern theological thought, even for theologians ‘not insensible to a reputation for orthodoxy’.³² Fremantle’s judgment received a cautious vindication when, in 1892, William Sanday, professor of divinity and canon of Christ Church, Oxford, revealed in the *Contemporary Review* that he considered himself ‘something of an

²⁹ Lightman, 113-115. See also Stephen, ‘The Scepticism of Believers’, *Fortnightly Review* 22.129 (1877): 355-376.

³⁰ H. G. Curteis, ‘Christian Agnosticism’, *Nineteenth Century* 15.84 (1884), 337.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 338.

³² W. H. Fremantle, ‘The New Reformation’, *Fortnightly Review* 41.243 (1887), 442. According to S. J. D. Green, this essay was ‘denounced from the university pulpit’ and Fremantle was subsequently ‘debarred from lecturing on the English Reformation as one of the official theology faculty lecturers, and even forbidden by the rural dean of Oxford from holding an informal conference of theological tutors to promote religion among the undergraduates’. See Green, ‘W. H. Fremantle’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/view/article/53896?docPos=3> (accessed November 18 2011).

agnostic' and suggested (apparently in earnest) that Huxley ought to be respected as a theologian.³³

Lightman isolates a passage from Huxley's *Hume* (1878) as a compact definition of Victorian agnosticism: 'the limitation of all knowledge of reality to the world of phenomena revealed to us by experience'.³⁴ Yet as the origin of this quotation in a discussion about Hume suggests and as Lightman himself concedes in a footnote, one could conceive of a more Humean and less distinctly religious genealogy for agnosticism than he pursues.³⁵ The fact that both Huxley and Stephens frequently claimed Hume – whose scepticism was often construed as godless and materialistic – as the father of modern agnosticism certainly suggests that, to informed readers, the assumptions behind 'agnosticism' would have seemed less clearly affiliated with Kant or with Anglican orthodoxy than Lightman sometimes implies.³⁶ While Lightman's emphasis upon the points of convergence between agnosticism and Christian theology underpins my reading of *Marius*, I will emphasise that 'agnosticism' had a less certain philosophical pedigree and a more Janus-faced life in late Victorian culture than his intellectual history seeks to unearth. 'Agnosticism' not only provided a short-hand for epistemological problems in relation to religious faith, but also produced such problems insofar as it could make the distinction between belief and unbelief appear esoteric or arbitrary.

If on a philosophical level 'agnosticism' could claim kinship with theology and some liberal theologians embraced it, on a semantic level it was more usually treated as a euphemism for atheism, and, unsurprisingly, it was the euphemistic possibilities of the word that often exercised more conservative religious thinkers. The idea that defining oneself as an 'agnostic' rather than an 'atheist' or 'unbeliever' is a fashionable distinction-without-a-difference is a commonplace in the periodical press in the 1870s and 1880s, where Huxley's

³³ W. Sanday, 'Professor Huxley as a Theologian', *Contemporary Review* 62 (September 1892), 340.

³⁴ Quoted in Lightman, *Agnosticism*, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁶ For Hume's Victorian reputation, see Garratt, *Empiricism*, 43-71.

neologism is frequently characterised as a kind of parvenu admitted into society on the strength of false credentials. Some devout critics used the terms ‘atheist’ and ‘agnostic’ interchangeably for polemical purposes, or maintained that ‘agnosticism’ was really more odious than atheism since its vaunted ‘neutrality’ amounted to ‘contemptuous indifference’; others worried that atheism would piggy-back on the respectability of ‘agnosticism’.³⁷ For instance, in 1880 the Unitarian philosopher Charles Upton, indignant that Louisa S. Bevington had promulgated ‘practical Atheism’ in the pages of the *Nineteenth Century*, suggested that her audacity confirmed that ‘agnosticism’ was a slippery slope:

It is evident that the Agnostic unintentionally helps the Atheist to a social recognition, which the latter could hardly otherwise obtain ... So near, indeed, are the two, that the intellect of the majority of good people fails to distinguish clearly between them; and hence it comes to pass that since Agnosticism, as being the creed of so many eminent and popular *savants* and philosophers, is, of course, perfectly respectable, Atheism – its next-door neighbor on the negative side – gets the full benefit of this close association, and can now confidently show its face at the fashionable *conversazione* ... without fear of being frowned upon as a disreputable intruder.³⁸

If ‘atheism’ and ‘agnosticism’ were often treated as fungible terms, the cachet of the new word ironically made the shadowy status of the older one more perceptible. For instance, a critic in the *Saturday Review* observed that it was a ‘truism to say that in nine cases out of ten “Agnosticism” is but atheism writ large’ and suggested that widespread acceptance of Huxley’s coinage clarified the extent to which ‘atheist’ had always primarily constituted a calumny rather than a tenable subject position.³⁹

We suspect that the popular antipathy to atheism attaches as much to the name as to the thing named, though it is of course a further question how the name originally attracted to itself this evil connotation ... Atheism was the favourite taunt hurled against the

³⁷ See for example Hutton, ‘The Atheistic View of Life’, *Fraser’s* 605 (May 1880), 653. For the ‘contemptuous indifference’ of agnostics, see Rev W. Anderson, ‘Agnosticism’, *Leisure Hour* (May 1881), 276.

³⁸ Charles Upton, ‘Fervent Atheism’, *Modern Review* 1 (January 1880), 98.

³⁹ Anonymous, ‘The Popular View of Atheism’, *Saturday Review* 49.1287 (1880), 819.

early Christians eighteen centuries ago by their Pagan persecutors, and re-echoed by the Jews, though it practically meant that they refused to worship idols; and the same charge had been brought five centuries before against Socrates by the Athenians ... It is clear that for above two thousand years 'atheist' has been found a convenient label to attach to any class of religionists, or irreligionists – if the term may be allowed – who had specially outraged the national sentiment and thus incurred popular odium.⁴⁰

However, if 'agnosticism' prompted some to wonder if popular aversion to 'atheism' emanated more from its connotative aura than its strict denotation, the new word could also arouse fears that a more generalised linguistic scepticism would infest the subject of religious belief. In 1884, Agnes Lambert characterised agnosticism as a 'false coin' debasing the linguistic currency. Pointing out that 'agnosticism' was used so promiscuously by advocates of science that a man's belief in the 'law of gravity will save him from the odium of atheism', she asserted that defending the integrity of words was essential to defending faith.⁴¹

Now these words nature, God, religion, in their old signification, it is most necessary to hold fast ... Otherwise it will be impossible, in the maze in which we shall find ourselves, to appreciate fully the danger by which language is threatened and the subtle process by which its subversion is being effected: a process that Renan prepared for us when he patronisingly spoke of God, Providence, soul and immortality as 'good old words; a little heavy perhaps, but which philosophy will interpret in senses more and more refined'.⁴²

As can be felt here, 'agnosticism' aroused suspicion not only about the nature of a person's beliefs but about the sincerity of a person's intentions. In this respect, many late Victorian proclamations and laments about the decline of Christianity or the spread of atheism can be understood in part as reactions not to an obvious triumph of secularism but to a widespread cultural hermeneutics of suspicion toward religious belief. A common theme in the Victorian periodical press in the 1870s and 1880s is that where once the distinction between belief and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 820.

⁴¹ Agnes Lambert, 'False Coin', *Nineteenth Century* 15.88 (1884), 955.

⁴² Ibid., 952.

unbelief was transparent, now it is contaminated by all manner of intellectual dissimulations, rhetorical refinements, and undeclared agendas. Debates about whether ‘agnosticism’ was parasitic upon theology or atheism-in-the-raw and about the extent to which ‘agnostics’ should be counted as friends or enemies of Christianity meant that the term fed into an epistemological dilemma: how could one tell if a given avowal of religious belief or unbelief was really a covert or unwitting form of its opposite?⁴³ Heather Morton, reflecting on Browning’s dramatic monologue ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’ (1855), observes that the controversies surrounding Catholic conversion in the 1840s and 1850s persistently provoked questions about the distinctions between formal and inward beliefs and between theological reasoning and scepticism, with the effect of endowing public religious identity with a fascinating indeterminacy:

The mystery of religious persuasion in the nineteenth century (like the mystery of sexual orientation in the twentieth) is what we want to know about the inner life of a public figure; what we think we can know through verbal testimony; but what, in the process of going public, shapes itself into the conventional form needed to register its authenticity. Gay or straight? Protestant or Catholic? The poverty of choices necessarily flattens the rich experience that constitutes sexual desire or religious conviction.⁴⁴

‘Agnosticism’ occupied a similar structural position in the debates of the late Victorian period to that occupied by Anglo-Catholicism within the Catholic controversies of the 1840s and 1850s: as a *tertium quid* that destabilised binaries of religious identity, ‘agnosticism’ seemed to call into play other binaries, particularly those of sincerity versus insincerity and surface versus depth.

In 1884, the Catholic writer Wilfrid Ward argued that the tendency of positivist and agnostic writers to expropriate religious language and forms of feeling was producing a far-reaching cultural confusion of surface with depth. Using a clothes/body distinction as his organising metaphor, Ward condemned

⁴³ On the subject of whether the professed agnostic may be expected to maintain observance, see for example J. H. Clapperton, ‘The Agnostic at Church’, *Nineteenth Century* 11.62 (1882), 653-656.

⁴⁴ Heather Morton, “‘A Church of Himself’: Liberal Scepticism and Consistent Character in Bishop Blougram’s Apology”, *Victorian Poetry* 45.1 (2007), 30.

what he saw as the tendency of agnostics and secularists to adopt the accoutrements of religion for rhetorical effect while denying religion's 'essence' or 'substance'.⁴⁵ He claimed that such superficial fetishisation of religion was more despicable than simply declaring religion dead: 'if, indeed, [secularists] think they have killed [religion], it would be more becoming in them to bury it clothes and all ... than to keep its clothes as perquisites wherewith to array their own children'.⁴⁶ Although Ward's vitriol is directed at agnostics and positivists rather than aesthetes, his argument resonates with contemporary complaints against Pater's work and aestheticism more broadly, both of which were also perceived as disingenuous attempts to enjoy the aesthetic and emotional perks of religion while forsaking its real essence or 'body'.⁴⁷ It is not surprising that Ward, loyal son and biographer of William Ward, who was a prominent figure in the Oxford Movement and eventually a Catholic convert, should be acutely sensitive to the appropriative energies of agnostics and secularists. As Fraser, Hanson and Maureen Moran have variously argued, late Victorian debates about the proper relation between aesthetics and faith often re-stage the drama of the Oxford Movement and of the Catholic conversion controversies which marked the early to mid Victorian decades. The felt antagonisms between institutional authority and individual conscience, aesthetic or ritual performance and sincere inward conviction, that the Oxford movement and the Catholic conversion controversies made so inflammatory, also played into the 'crises of faith' that gripped young men at Oxford and Cambridge in the same period. Early and mid-Victorian controversies over the distinctions between Protestantism and Catholicism and between religion and art were rhetorically overdetermined because both sides often imagined that 'atheism' was their real, if shadowy, opponent, and the terms

⁴⁵ Wilfrid Ward, 'Clothes of Religion', *National Review* 3.16 (1884), 560-562.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 571-572.

⁴⁷ See for example Earle, 'Agnostic Poetry', 106-108.

of such controversies thus easily extended into late Victorian debates about aesthetics and the secular/religious divide.⁴⁸

The logical extension of Victorian anxieties about the sincerity and propriety of the professed beliefs of others is the question of whether one can know and control one's own beliefs. The clothes/body distinction pursued by Ward – he re-published his essay as a book called *The Clothes of Religion* in 1886 – everywhere insists that it is easy to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and rigorously distinguish all that is secular and rhetorical from all that is authentic and religious. Yet other, equally devout thinkers were alert to problematic slippages. Giving the same clothes/body distinction more complicated play (as well as a certain homoerotic quality), Mansel had warned in 1858 that sincere believers could stray into atheism entirely unawares, since the distinction between the forms and language of belief and the real thing could be subtle to the point of imperceptibility:

A religious association may sometimes serve to disguise the real character of a line of thought which, without that association, would have little power to mislead. Speculations which end in unbelief are often commenced in a believing spirit. It is painful, but at the same time instructive, to trace the gradual process by which an unstable disciple often tears off strip by strip the wedding garment of his faith – scarce conscious the while of his own increasing nakedness – and to mark how the language of Christian belief may remain almost untouched, when the substance and the life have departed from it.⁴⁹

By the late Victorian period, the once reassuring commonplace that posited art as the 'mistress' or 'handmaiden' of religion could seem to produce a comparable crisis of distinctions for religious believers. In 1888, the painter and writer Wyke Bayliss sought to reassert the harmonious relationship between religion and art by pointing out the elusiveness of the distinction between the two as they are experienced by the seriously committed: 'Does the curate of a parish

⁴⁸ See Fraser, *Beauty and Belief*, 7-66 and 183-228; Hanson, *Decadence*; and Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 233-276.

⁴⁹ Mansel, *Religious Thought*, 70-71.

church quite know, in arranging the services, how far he is acting a priest, and how far an artist? Does the painter in the studio, dreaming of Art as the regenerator of the world, quite realise that Art has never accomplished anything great, except under religious inspiration of some kind?⁵⁰ Yet Bayliss soon spies the dangers of such logic and abruptly re-establishes a distinction:

[Religion and art] should walk together, but not in masks. The objection to a mask, like the advantage of a mask, is that we cannot tell what face is behind it. But when we meet with religious Art, or aesthetic Religion, that is precisely the thing we most desire to know – what face is behind it? Is there anything behind it? Or are we, after all, face to face only with a simulacrum? Let us distinguish clearly between Art and Religion, and give to each its proper place in the economy of life.⁵¹

Like agnosticism, aestheticism (or ‘aesthetic religion’) flattens distinctions and threatens to make mere surface of everything. When Bayliss laments that an improper conflation of religion with art deprives us of ‘what we most desire to know – what face is behind it?’, he is ostensibly referring to a loss of faith in the religious sincerity of the artist, yet his metaphor, with its faint Biblical echo (‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known [Corinthians 13:12]), seems to conflate the insincere artist with an unknowable or vanished God, and to hint that belief in God is linked to one’s capacity to believe in the meaningful religious interiority of artists, a capacity now under threat.

In the context of this late Victorian crisis over what counts as religious faith, the elaborately calibrated indeterminacy of Pater’s *Marius* reads less like a cryptic autobiographical confession and more like an incisive analysis of a cultural moment, and the futility (and, of course, the inevitability) of seeking to decipher its ultimate stance toward Christianity becomes clear. Likewise, Pater’s claim that Euripides’s late religious style is constituted by a desire to out-sophisticate the accusations of irony or insincerity that will inevitably greet it has

⁵⁰ Wyke Bayliss, ‘Art, *Contra* the World, the Flesh, and the Devil’, *National Review* 11.64 (1888), 532-533.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 536.

a quality of luminous insight when placed in the context of a pervasive late Victorian hermeneutics of suspicion toward religious belief. The fact that ‘agnosticism’ rose so swiftly to cultural prominence and was so often felt to be in need of ingenious exegesis or demystification is best explained not simply by the term’s quasi-religious aura, but rather by the disorienting chiasmatic effect it could have on the cultural valences of belief and scepticism. The agnostic’s profession of ‘learned ignorance’ in the face of religious questions could, on the one hand, grant the sceptic some of the venerable mystique of the theologian; on the other, it could grant the orthodox believer some of the ‘modern’ mystique of the sceptic.⁵² *Marius* everywhere plays with this chiasmus effect, which partly accounts for the novel’s capacity to produce radically divergent critical readings. Pater persistently characterises Marius’s Epicureanism in terms of mysticism or religion – Marius is said to be ‘a materialist, and with something of the humour of a devotee’; the narrator calls his Epicureanism a ‘rival *religion*, a rival *religious* service’ (Pater’s italics); Marius’s effort to ‘live days “lovely and pleasant” in themselves, here and now ... independently of any faith, or hope that might be entertained, as to their ultimate tendency’ is said to be ‘a kind of religion – an inward, visionary, mystic piety or religion’.⁵³ Later in the novel, Marius’s theistic epiphany (which, although transient, seems to prepare the ground for his later receptivity to Christianity) is the product of scrupulous, even dry, ratiocination:

It was easier to conceive of the material fabric of the world around him as but an element in a world of thought – as thought in a mind – than of mind as an element, or accident, or passing condition, in a material order; because mind was really nearer to himself; it was an explanation of what was less known by what was known better ... he felt a quiet hope and joy in the dawning of this doctrine upon him as an actually credible opinion ...⁵⁴

Critics often find ‘actually credible opinion’ a tepid and hedging description of religious belief; for instance, Rosenberg writes that ‘Pater’s prose is

⁵² For a discussion of the agnostic valorisation of ‘learned ignorance’, see Shaw, *Lucid Veil*, 142.

⁵³ Pater, *Marius*, 84, 32 and, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

hobbled because he cannot in conscience carry Marius further along the path to conversion than he himself could go'.⁵⁵ Yet the suggestion that Marius's rather cerebral epiphany just reflects Pater's bad faith underestimates the extent to which figures like Mansel – whom Pater regarded as an 'acute philosophical writer' and an exquisite stylist – had succeeded in making philosophical scepticism available as a language of religious affirmation.⁵⁶ By the end of the century, the historian Alfred William Benn could observe that, 'In England, scepticism has become, under a modified form, the chief official weapon of Christianity'.⁵⁷ Pater's late writings everywhere attest to his fascination with the literary possibilities of the double cultural duty that 'scepticism' had begun to perform.

One reason it is difficult to read *Marius* simply as a palinode to the *Renaissance* is that the secularist orientation of Pater's early aestheticism is laid bare with more cogent polemical force in *Marius* than anywhere in Pater's early work. Marius's Epicureanism is constructed as an attempt to evolve an ideal of self-perfection from within a closed immanent frame, and Pater repeatedly suggests that such a conception of the good is the prerequisite to a joyous aesthetic vision:

From that theory of *Life as the end of life*, followed, as a practical consequence, the desirableness of refining all the instruments of inward and outward intuition, of developing all their capacities, of testing and exercising oneself in them, till one's whole nature should become a complex medium of reception, towards the vision – the beatific vision, if one really cared to make it such – of our actual experience in the world.⁵⁸

Pater enlarges on the same theme in the following chapter:

Such a manner of life might itself even come to seem a kind of religion – an inward, visionary, mystic piety or religion – by virtue of its effort to live days "lovely and pleasant" in themselves, here and now, and with an all-sufficiency of well-being in the immediate sense of the object contemplated, independently of any

⁵⁵ Rosenberg, *Elegy*, 213.

⁵⁶ Pater, *Appreciations*, 18.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Lightman, *Agnosticism*, 54.

⁵⁸ Pater, *Marius*, 95.

faith, or hope, that might be entertained as to their ultimate tendency. In this way, the true “aesthetic culture” would be realisable as a new form of the “contemplative life”, founding its claim on the essential “blessedness” of vision. One’s human nature, indeed, would fain reckon on an assured, unending future – on the vision of a final home, to be attained at some still distant date, yet with a conscious, delightful home-coming at last, as depicted in many an old poetic Elysium. But then, on the other hand, the world of perfected sensation, emotion, intelligence, is so close to us, that the most visionary can but paint that other distant home in colours really borrowed from it.⁵⁹

The words ‘actual’ and ‘actually’ appear a total of eighty-eight times in *Marius*, and acquire a complex polemical weight. Pater frequently uses these words as a means of conveying Marius’s aestheticised empiricism – that is, his hyper-receptivity to the vividness of the phenomenal world, coupled with his commitment to testing the philosophies he encounters against the ‘bar of an actual experience’.⁶⁰ Clearly, however, Marius’s initial, purely immanent perspective is presented as a ‘religious’ attitude or kind of ‘mystic piety’ – a paradox captured when Pater later refers to Epicureanism as an ‘anti-metaphysical metaphysic’.⁶¹ Invoking Pater in passing, Eagleton remarks that the *fin de siècle* is characterised by ‘a kind of mystical positivism, for which, after the endless lucubrations of high Victorian reason, that which simply, brutally, self-identically is, is the most alluring mystery of all. There is much of Whitman in this reverent espousal of the actual, but also a more general neurotic hankering for the very pith and texture of things ...’⁶² Eagleton implies that the ‘mysticism’ of *fin de siècle* secularism is guilty and inadvertent, a return of the religious repressed; but Pater is both self-conscious and untroubled about the extent to which his ‘reverent espousal of the actual’ is imbricated in religious language and modes of feeling. Pater carefully justifies his choice of ‘beatific vision’ – a phrase which specifically refers to the ‘sight of the glories of heaven, *esp.* that first granted to a disembodied spirit’

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶² Eagleton, ‘The Flight to the Real’, in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, eds. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15.

(OED) – as a means of conveying the rewards of a secular philosophy which treats ‘life as the end of life’. Pater asserts that the visionary ‘borrows’ its ‘colours’ from sensation – in other words, invoking ‘beatific vision’ in relation to Marius’s philosophy only returns such apparently transcendent ideals to their home in the ‘actual’, that is, to their origin in embodied human experience. Paradoxically, a wholly secular perception of the material world has equal or even more legitimate claim on the language of the sacred than religious conceptions of the otherworldly or unseen. From the beginning of his career, Pater rejected the idea that secularism entailed an ascetic purging of the cultural and linguistic heritage associated with notions of the sacred: ‘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 ... harshly cut off from the spirits of life in the past. But what is this spiritual element? It is the passion for inward perfection with its sorrows, its aspirations, its joys’.⁶³

The fact that Pater devotes so much of *Marius* to celebrating the ‘religious’ profundity of Epicureanism while only affirming Christianity in sceptical terms can create the impression that the novel really vindicates the premises of the ‘Conclusion’ and has only a vague investment in Christianity. For instance, George Moore could without qualification compare *Marius* to Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) and claim that it was suffused with the same ‘glad worship of the visible world, and the same incurable belief that the beauty of material things is sufficient for all the needs of life’.⁶⁴ Similarly, William Sharp, an acquaintance of Pater’s who reviewed *Marius* for *The Athenaeum*, construed it as an apology for Epicureanism, though he captured something of the novel’s elusiveness in his labour to make this point.⁶⁵ In response Sharp’s review, which was probably solicited, Pater wrote: ‘I *did* mean [*Marius*] to be more anti-Epicurean than it has struck you as being. In one way however I am glad that you have mistaken me a little on this point, as I had some fears that I might seem to be

⁶³ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, 126.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Seiler, *Critical Heritage*, 153.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 115.

pleading for a formal thesis, or ‘partis pris’.⁶⁶ It is significant that Pater’s corrects Sharp not for failing to perceive the extent to which the novel solicits a Christian reading, but for supposing that the novel is *partis pris*. *Marius* is an aestheticist novel not simply because of its preoccupation with the beauty of the visible world, but in its aspiration toward a pure impartiality on the question of religious belief and unbelief, and in its effort to keep the ‘personal opinions of the author’ inscrutable.

‘Only the Thorough Sceptic Can Be the Perfect Saint’: Altruism and Epicureanism in *Marius* and *Romola*

Pater had at least one prestigious contemporary model for his construction of a narratorial voice at once so sceptical and so sympathetic toward religion as to be opaque to the reading public. George Eliot died in December 1880, a few months before Pater began research for *Marius*. In his study of the obituaries of Eliot in the London religious press, K. K. Collins demonstrates the extent to which Eliot generated cultural confusion about what it meant to be a sceptic. Perhaps predictably, the desire of critics from range of denominational perspectives to honour Eliot as a moral sage and a *de facto* religious leader persistently culminated in the judgment, in Collins’ summation, that ‘since a non-believer cannot be a great moral teacher, either she must have been a believer after all or (what amounts to same thing) we need to re-examine what counts as belief’.⁶⁷ The fact that Eliot carefully guarded her privacy, coupled with the fact that her novels often seemed to endorse religious traditions and feelings – so much so that her pseudonym was widely believed to belong to a clergyman before her true identity was revealed – left wide scope for uncertainty and wishful projection. Yet Collins shows that even critics who engaged with Eliot’s beliefs in a self-resisting manner were confounded. Aside from the protean nomenclature that plagues all attempts to affix an identity to someone who is apparently outside the Christian fold in the

⁶⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁷ K. K. Collins, *Identifying the Remains: George Eliot’s Death in the London Religious Press* (Victoria BC: ELS Editions, 2006), 6.

period (Eliot is an ‘agnostic’, an ‘atheist’, a ‘positivist’, a ‘pagan’, a ‘humanist’, a ‘materialist’, a ‘doubter’, an ‘unbeliever’), critics found it difficult to reconcile the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach with the author of *Adam Bede* (1859) and to distinguish Eliot’s moral insights from their (presumably) irreligious frameworks. There was also the problem that Eliot’s irreligion seemed present in the novels less as positive content than as a sin of omission; Eliot is – in the words of a journalist writing for the Anglican *Church Quarterly Review* – ‘neither an adherent nor an antagonist’ of Christianity.⁶⁸ Although Collins does not comment upon this, another striking continuity across the sources he assembles is that while many critics were uncertain about the precise complexion of Eliot’s scepticism, most agreed it was a bleak creed: critics write of her ‘religion of despair’, her ‘desolating negations’, her ‘speculative melancholy’ and the ‘shadowy abysses of philosophical thought’.⁶⁹ While it is unsurprising to find the melancholy scepticism *topos* in the religious press, it is worth noting how often it is invoked in relation to Eliot, presumably as a means of compensating for the fact that the other traditional charge against atheism – its immorality – becomes unserviceable if Eliot is to be revered as a moral sage. In many of the obituaries there remains a tension between the desire to celebrate Eliot for her moral wisdom and the desire to condemn the nihilism implicit in her rejection of Christianity.

Romola was Pater’s favourite among Eliot’s novels, and we know that he must have read it either when it was being serialised in the *Cornhill* in 1862 or soon after it was published in 1863, since he quotes from it in ‘Diaphaneité’ (1864).⁷⁰ That *Romola* should appeal to Pater is unsurprising: aside from the fact that it takes one of Pater’s touchstone periods and places for its setting, the densely erudite *Romola* fulfills perhaps more than any of Eliot’s novels Pater’s dictum that ‘the literary artist is of necessity a scholar, and in what he proposes to do will have in mind, first of all, the scholar and the scholarly conscience’.⁷¹ As

⁶⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 22, 50, 72, 51.

⁷⁰ Thomas Wright, *The Life of Walter Pater*, vol. II (London: Everett & Co., 1907), 179. Pater, *Renaissance*, 137.

⁷¹ Pater, *Appreciations*, 8.

Nancy Henry observes, ‘Not only was [*Romola*] [Eliot’s] first major departure from works that drew on her recollections of rural English life, it was the first in which she seemed less interested in appealing to a broad audience than in communicating to a smaller group of readers educated enough to appreciate her aesthetic and scholarly accomplishments’.⁷² David DeLaura has argued that the influence of *Romola* on Pater’s career is extensive, shaping his references to Savonarola in *The Renaissance* and supplying Pater with a model for an ‘agnostic conversion’ novel in *Marius*.⁷³ DeLaura helpfully outlines the similarities between the two novels: both *Romola* and *Marius* fall under the sway of a succession of philosophical and religious teachers and test the value of each new creed against their experience until they discover its inadequacies; both novels dramatise the intersections of paganism or secular humanism with Christianity at a pivotal historical juncture, and both novels allegorise the tensions between secular and religious ideologies in Victorian England.⁷⁴ According to DeLaura, both *Marius* and *Romola* ultimately embrace a ‘creedless Christianity’; they endorse the ‘self-transcending ethic’ of Christianity but their quests remain ‘resolutely secular in content’.⁷⁵ He suggests that Pater found in Eliot’s ethic of altruism a means of adding a ‘self-transcending note of universal sympathy’ to *Marius*’s quest without having to affirm a fully-fledged Christianity; to his mind, the magpie borrowing from Christian morality in both novels reflects a ‘tragic personal inconsistency and lack of conviction’ on the part of their authors.⁷⁶ DeLaura notes that the premium Eliot places on self-renouncing altruism is only discernible in muted form in *Marius*, but he does not suggest that this amounts to a revealing difference between Eliot and Pater’s conceptions of the distinction between secular and Christian morality.

⁷² Nancy Henry, ‘The *Romola* Code: “Men of Appetites” in George Eliot’s Historical Novel’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39.2 (2011): 238.

⁷³ David DeLaura, ‘*Romola* and the Origin of the Paterian View of Life’, *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 21.3 (1966), 233.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 230-31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 231 and 233.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

The fact that Marius and Romola, both of whom are presented as religious sceptics for a considerable part of their respective narratives, are both ultimately celebrated as exemplary Christians, even saints, by a Christian community – Marius’s death is deemed a martyrdom; Romola is increasingly received as a Madonna figure in Florence and taken for the actual Madonna in a plague-stricken village toward the novel’s end – could be thought to encode redemption fantasies on the part of authors whose reputations had been tarnished by their religious scepticism. (In Eliot’s case, this stigma was compounded the fact that she was known to be living in sin with a married man; it is hard to gauge how far homophobia contributed to the scandal over Pater’s *Renaissance*.)⁷⁷ However, in both *Romola* and *Marius*, the construction of a protagonist who is celebrated as a paragon of Christian virtue but whose degree of belief is rendered nebulous by the narrator is more than an attempt to retain the uplift of Christian ethics while jettisoning transcendent faith. The fact that both Pater and Eliot create an ironic discrepancy between the interior lives of their protagonists, both of whom are perpetually self-questioning and vacillate between different belief systems, and the simplicity with which they are hailed as Christians by Christian communities, enables both writers to raise questions what it means to identify a person, a belief, or an act as Christian.

In the proem to *Romola*, Eliot’s narrator reflects on the complexities of representing a remote historical epoch, chief among which is the task of disentangling belief from unbelief, official religion from the heterogeneity of individual experience. Eliot dramatises through the figure of an ordinary fifteenth-century Florentine the extent to which the elusiveness of faith hampers her effort to conjure the world of the Renaissance, though her narrator intervenes abruptly to assert that her own perplexity only mirrors the Renaissance itself:

Lucretius might be right – he was an ancient, and a great poet;
Luigi Pulci, too, who was suspected of not believing anything from
the roof upward ... had very much the air of being right over the

⁷⁷ As Court points out, W. H. Mallock’s satirical *The New Republic* (1878) depicted Pater as a languid homosexual, though Mallock actually seems more preoccupied with lampooning Pater’s aestheticised unbelief. See Court, *Pater and His Critics*, 22.

supper-table, when the wine and jests were circulating fast, though he was only a poet in the vulgar tongue. There were even learned personages who maintained that Aristotle, wisest of men ... was a thoroughly irreligious philosopher; and a liberal scholar must entertain all speculations. But the negatives might, after all, prove false; nay, seemed manifestly false, as the circling hours swept past him ... For had not the world become Christian? Had he not been baptized in San Giovanni ...? Our resuscitated Spirit was not a pagan philosopher, nor a philosophising pagan poet, but a man of the fifteenth century, inheriting its strange web of belief and unbelief; of Epicurean levity and fetischistic dread; of pedantic impossible ethics uttered by rote, and crude passions acted out with childish impulsiveness; of inclination toward a self-indulgent paganism, and inevitable subjection to that human conscience which ... was filling the air with strange prophecies and presentiments.⁷⁸

Romola only partially makes good on the insight of its proem: while Eliot provides a complex gallery of Renaissance belief systems, the novel's allegorical schema means that we have little difficulty identifying which thread of the 'strange web of belief and unbelief' the characters are meant to represent. Tito, Romola's treacherous, part-Greek husband, is persistently figured as Bacchus, and clearly incarnates 'Epicurean levity' and 'self-indulgent paganism'; Bardo, Romola's father, embodies the more stern, Stoic, and Roman branch of the classical legacy; Baldassarre, Tito's nemesis, embodies a primitive pagan revenge ethic; the (historical) artist, Piero di Cosimo, embodies an earthy, sensuous humanism; Savonarola and Romola's brother Dino represent the fanatical extremes of Christian asceticism and mysticism, though Savonarola is also portrayed more positively, as an exemplar of Christianity's humanitarian ethic; and Tessa, the young peasant girl whom Tito seduces and Romola eventually saves, symbolises the 'fetischistic dread' and idolatry of a folk Catholicism. It is only Romola, who moves between pagan and Christian belief systems and eventually evolves a personal synthesis between them (a kind of Comtean religion

⁷⁸ George Eliot, *Romola* (London: Penguin, 1996), 5-6.

of humanity), who comprehends within herself the multifariousness of Renaissance Florence.⁷⁹

Marius fully takes up the burden of historical complexity outlined in Eliot's proem insofar as it is much more difficult to provide an accurate summary of the philosophical and religious formations encountered by Marius. Like Romola, Marius is a kind of *bricoleur*, evolving a fresh synthesis out of diverse influences; but in *Marius*, Christian and pagan beliefs are systematically drained of their particularity and discreteness. This is not simply an effect of the polished monotony of Pater's prose in *Marius*, but part of the novel's design. The reader hesitates to call Marius a Christian not simply because, as in the case of Romola, the degree of his belief in a Christian deity is uncertain, but because in *Marius* Christianity shades into various pagan religions and philosophies. While this is partly because *Marius* is a portrait of an inchoate Christian church where *Romola* is a portrait of an emergent secular humanism and a proto-Reformation movement against the backdrop of the papacy, it also reflects a difference in Eliot and Pater's understandings of the relationship between Christianity and secularism in the Victorian age. For Pater, the supreme virtue of the early church lies in its hospitality toward pagan culture, which adumbrates the syncretic inclusiveness of Renaissance humanism: 'that church ... had adopted many of the beauties of pagan feeling and pagan custom; ... taking up, transforming, and accommodating still more closely to the human heart, what of right belonged to it ... As if in anticipation of the sixteenth century, the church was becoming *humanistic*, in a best and earliest *Renaissance*' (Pater's italic).⁸⁰ Here pagan wisdom is posited as humanity's inalienable 'right', which the early church embraced and only rendered more congenial to sentiment or to the human 'heart'. This seems an assertion of the primacy of the pagan, but the image of Christianity as an extraordinarily creative and fluid tradition, able to harmonise apparently dissonant elements within itself like a work of art, also seems to encode a perception that

⁷⁹ For discussion of positivism in relation to *Romola*, see J. B. Bullen, 'George Eliot's *Romola* as a Positivist Allegory', *Review of English Studies* 26.104 (1975): 425-435.

⁸⁰ Pater, *Marius*, 240.

the late Victorian church had absorbed into itself the challenges which had once seemed to threaten it.

Although it is often remarked that Pater emphasises the continuities between pagan rituals and aesthetics and the early Christian church, it is less often noticed that Christianity does not represent a radical break with pagan morality in *Marius*.⁸¹ In Christianity, Marius finds not so much a new moral dispensation as a ‘renewal’ of what he ‘had valued most in the old world’.⁸² And Marius’s ‘Christian’ moral sensibility seems fully formed before he comes into contact with Christianity – while in his exclusively Epicurean phase, he is willing to risk his life to minister to a plague-stricken friend (Flavian) and recoils from the cruelty of gladiatorial games. While such details may be read typologically, as signs of Marius’s incipient Christianity, they also underscore that Christianity only synthesises moral feelings that were available to him before he encountered it. Pater repeatedly suggests that temperament counts for more than professed creed in determining morality, and emphasises that Marius had attained moral perfection – indeed, was, in a moral sense, wholly Christian – while an Epicurean.⁸³

As Felicia Bonaparte has argued, Romola’s *bildungsroman* is symbolically structured around a contest between Bacchus (represented by Tito) and Christ (represented by Savonarola).⁸⁴ While Eliot’s depiction of this contest is subtly balanced – the worldly Tito is refined, intelligent, and sometimes tender-hearted, while Savonarola’s messianism and desire for worldly power vitiate his capacity to do good – an underlying dichotomy remains stable throughout the novel: paganism is identified with worldly egotism, and Christianity with an otherworldly, other-regarding ethos. Romola eventually transcends the limits of both paradigms by conjoining the worldliness of paganism to the other-regarding ethic of Christianity. As Bonaparte observes, ‘As Bacchus appeals to [Romola’s]

⁸¹ See for example Christine Bolus-Reichert, *The Age of Eclecticism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 241-247.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁸³ See 96.

⁸⁴ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot’s Imagination* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), 72-85.

passion for joy, so Christ finds in her a latent capacity for the moral imagination that was, in Eliot's view, the unique legacy of Christianity'.⁸⁵ *Marius* destabilises the idea that moral imagination is a unique legacy of Christianity, as well as the assumption that there is a necessary antagonism between Christianity and sensuous pleasure. Pater suggests there are in fact submerged affinities between Christianity and Epicureanism (or 'Cyrenaicism'):

... it may be thought that the saint, and the Cyrenaic lover of beauty, would at least understand each other better than either would understand the mere man of the world. Stretch them one point further, shift the terms a little, and they might actually touch.⁸⁶

Marius is a dizzying exercise in 'shift[ing] the terms a little'. It is often noted that Pater seeks to 'reconcile' the pagan and the Christian in *Marius*, but the idea of a 'reconciliation' does not do justice to the sleight-of-hand by which Pater makes Epicureanism and Christianity 'touch'. Pater effectively represents Epicureanism and Christianity twice each: once, in terms of a noble, life-affirming aestheticism, and again, in terms of decadent aestheticism. The overall effect is to imply that both Epicureanism and Christianity, as philosophies which make life beautiful in spite of the fact of mortality, can both just as easily be construed as life-affirming or morbid, as optimistic or pessimistic – the distinction is a trick of perspective, and aesthetics.

One reason readers sometimes feel that Pater privileges the pagan and the secular over Christianity in *Marius* is the fact that his prose displays a marked allegiance to the 'euphuistic' literary style cultivated by Flavian, Marius's Epicurean friend, who is said to incarnate 'the spirit of unbelief' and who writes a long 'mystic' poem, unmistakably akin to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, which celebrates 'the vernal principle of life in things'.⁸⁷ Pater's introduction of the idea of 'euphuism' is typical of the novel's disorienting mixture of anachronism and self-referentiality: while used by Pater to describe the literary ideal of Flavian,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁶ Pater, *Marius*, 171.

⁸⁷ Pater, *Marius*, 37 and 69.

‘euphuism’ was in fact an ornamental style of sixteenth-century English prose (it derives from John Lyly’s novel *Euphues* [1578]), and Pater clearly wants his readers to discern parallels between Flavian’s Lucretian poetry, sixteenth-century euphuism, and Victorian aestheticism, particularly Pater’s own literary style. The historical hall-of-mirrors effect is heightened by the fact that Flavian’s ‘euphuistic’ style is itself characterised by anachronism: it is a self-conscious blend of ‘archaism’ and neology, and while his Lucretian poem is said to be a ‘playful’, irreverent celebration of the life-force, its highly-wrought language anticipates the ‘sonorous organ-music of the medieval Latin, and therewithal something of its unction and mysticity of spirit’.⁸⁸ In other words, Pater uses the figure of Flavian to define aestheticism not simply as the privileging of form over content or surface over depth, but more precisely as a literary style which has the power to cast an aura of religious solemnity over irreligious subject matter.

The ‘Euphuism’ chapter reads like Pater’s manifesto for aesthetic style, not least because many of the stylistic principles developed by Flavian are close to those Pater propounded in his essay, ‘Style’ (1889) – for example, the open fetishisation of ‘words for their own sake’, the endorsement of linguistic eclecticism, and the suggestion that the author’s secret investments in the subject matter are what make for compelling prose.⁸⁹ There is an argumentative force to the ‘Euphuism’ chapter as a whole; Pater pre-empts conventional objections to *belle-lettrism* – its affectation, self-consciousness, and lack of originality – and recasts these as complex virtues. Yet even as Pater vindicates Flavian’s euphuism, he casts doubt on Flavian’s goodness. Where Marius’s Epicureanism is presented in idealising terms, Flavian’s Epicureanism is said to signify his ‘corruption’.⁹⁰ In effect, Flavian plays decadent twin to Marius; the moral stigma that attaches to Epicureanism is displaced onto Flavian, so that Marius’s Epicureanism may be ennobled with few qualifications. In this respect, the Flavian/Marius dyad seems like a conventional example of the ‘compensatory double-plot mechanism’ endemic to the Victorian novel, whereby two characters respectively symbolise

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁹ Pater, *Appreciations*, 17, 13 and 22.

⁹⁰ Pater, *Marius*, 38.

‘good’ and ‘bad’ instantiations of a similar transgression or threatening ideology, and are in turn rewarded and punished.⁹¹ Yet Pater deploys this convention subversively insofar as the differences between Marius and Flavian remain enigmatic.

Just as Flavian’s literary style elevates form over content, Flavian’s physical beauty, or ‘perfection of form’, is said to conceal his ‘corruption’.⁹² Yet this inner ‘corruption’ is without determinate content, and seems itself an effect of his charismatic beauty. Flavian does not commit any immoral act, and his only vice seems to be the minor one of desiring literary fame; if his Epicureanism differs substantively from Marius’s, we never learn how. It is likely that the nature of Flavian’s ‘corruption’ is kept obscure partly because this allows Pater to hint at the fact that Flavian and Marius are lovers; yet this does not explain why homosexual love corrupts Flavian but not Marius. Within the network of analogies Pater establishes between Antonine Rome and the Victorian age, Flavian seems to embody the nebulous atmosphere of moral corruption that surrounded both aestheticism and materialism in the Victorian imaginary. In the figure of Flavian, Pater seems to reinforce these imaginative links between immorality, aestheticism and materialism even as he plays with their tendency to slide between the metaphorical and the literal.

At first, Flavian’s immorality seems, if not just an effect of his charisma, then an entirely literary affair – a suspect emanation of his literary tastes and style. Pater underscores the literariness of Flavian’s ‘corruption’ when he portrays Flavian and Marius’s ‘fascination’ with Apuleius:

But the merely marvellous, a delight in which is one of the really serious parts in most boys ... passed at times, those young readers still feeling the fascination of it, into what French writers call the *macabre* – that species of almost insane preoccupation with the

⁹¹ I borrow this phrase from Marsh, who analyses the strategy in relation to Ward’s efforts to distinguish between good and bad secularism in *Robert Elsmere*. See Marsh, *Word Crimes*, 279-280.

⁹² Pater, *Marius*, 38.

materialities of the mouldering flesh, that luxury of disgust in gazing on corruption ...⁹³

Pater links Flavian and Marius's reading habits to aestheticism when he goes on to liken the macabre moments in Apuleius's work to those in Gautier's.⁹⁴ What is striking is how Pater limns the slippages between aesthetic pleasure, moral corruption, and the corruption of the body. Such slippages are also inscribed within the novel's plot: Flavian dies slowly of plague while composing a Lucretian ode, and thus on a symbolic level, he seems actually to die of his aestheticised materialism. It is the sight of Flavian's 'perished body' (as well as the act of transcribing Flavian's poem) that makes Marius a decided 'materialist', and in this respect, Flavian's corrupting influence is quite literal: he instills in Marius the belief that he is wholly constituted by corruptible matter.⁹⁵ By the same logic that Flavian's opulent literary style and physical perfection reify the beauty of materialism, his death by plague reifies the corruption of that same philosophy, its reduction of selfhood to 'mouldering flesh'.

That Flavian's poem is made to sound very like Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* is crucial to his unexplained aura of corruption. It is often noted that the 'fatal book' – that is, a book with quasi-supernatural power to seduce and corrupt a reader – is a common *topos* in the literature of aestheticism and decadence.⁹⁶ Through the homoerotic poet-amanuensis relationship between Flavian and Marius, Pater reminds us that *De Rerum Natura* is perhaps Western culture's original 'fatal book'. Natania Meeker observes that, throughout its reception history, *De Rerum Natura* has been imagined as an irresistibly seductive proselytic work, capable of converting readers to Epicureanism through its appeals to a 'voluptuous' reader – that is, a fully embodied reader who seeks aesthetic pleasure from the text. Meeker writes that the poem has persistently been imagined 'as a kind of "philtre", mixing madness and reason to advance a

⁹³ Pater, *Marius*, 42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁶ See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 163-4.

process of seduction that betrays the reader into materialist belief ... From this perspective, Lucretian poetry is written to engage a bodily response, and in doing so seeks to transform the fundamental conditions governing its readers' knowledge of the world'.⁹⁷ Pater uses the figure of Flavian not simply to equate Epicurean materialism with decadent morality, but to unravel the imaginative logic by which they are conventionally conflated. As Meeker explains, Epicureanism has been susceptible to a kind of semantic contagion at least since ancient Rome:

... the centrality of pleasure (*hêdonê* in Greek, *voluptas* in Latin) to Epicurean philosophy has conventionally represented the aspect of the doctrine most vulnerable to critical misreading. For Cicero, the use of the word *voluptas* was alone enough to render the philosophy suspect and 'notorious'. This process of contamination was often understood as transitively infectious, so that eighteenth-century rehabilitations of *volupté*, for instance, customarily start by addressing the related problem of Epicurus's sullied reputation as a piggish hedonist.⁹⁸

Pater was acutely aware of the fact Epicureanism trailed vague yet besmirching implications; as he complained to Gosse in 1876, 'I wish they wouldn't call me a "hedonist"; it produces such a bad effect on the minds of people who don't know Greek'.⁹⁹ Pater's suspicion that the scandal of *The Renaissance* arose not because of the book's actual content but from a kind of connotative hex activated by any apparently sympathetic consideration of 'hedonism' is a theory that *Marius* sets out to test. Pater shows via the figure of Flavian that Epicureanism may be imagined in terms of decadent aesthetics – but he also shows that it might just as easily be imagined as wholesome and noble if associated with Christianity.

Marius is organised around the proposition that Christianity could be received – at least by a man of fine temperament who had perfected his aesthetic capacities – as a more or less frictionless extension of Epicureanism. In one of the

⁹⁷ Natania Meeker, *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 32.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Evangelista, *Aestheticism*, 53.

novel's philosophical digressions, Pater's narrator asserts that 'anti-mundane' puritanism was a later heresy, a toxic interpolation of Montanus's; early Christianity was a radically incarnate religion that celebrated 'the earth and the body ... [and] the dignity of man's whole nature'.¹⁰⁰ The continuity between Marius's Epicureanism and his attraction to Christianity is also underscored by the fact that his conversion to each system (or in the case of Christianity, his near-conversion) is triggered by the physical beauty of one of its adherents – first Flavian, then Cornelius, who possesses a 'charm, rather physical than moral' for Marius.¹⁰¹ Critics sometimes suggest that Marius harkens to Christianity because it represents a higher morality than any he finds in pagan religion or philosophy, but Pater in fact goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid any simple privileging of Christian over pagan morality.¹⁰² Pater's critique of pagan morality is focused not on Epicureanism but on Marcus Aurelius's Stoicism. In the 'Manly Amusements' chapter, Marius grows disillusioned with Aurelius because the emperor maintains *apathaeia* in front of the gladiatorial games, and Pater emphasises that it is Marius's Epicureanism that makes him sensitive to the horror of the spectacle.¹⁰³ Monsman suggests that this episode reflects Pater's sense of the moral inferiority of paganism to Christianity *tout court*, but in fact Pater is sinuously altering the terms of that traditional contrast and elevating both Epicureanism and Christianity over Stoicism.¹⁰⁴ Where Marius's Epicureanism is aligned with the 'right side' in the struggle against evil that Christianity will take up, Stoicism is identified with a cold, renunciatory attitude which does not value life adequately and so cannot apprehend the nature of evil. Pater associates Marcus Aurelius's indifference to evil with a contempt for the earthly and bodily; unlike Marius, Aurelius can 'tolera[te]' the pain of others because he strives to suppress his own capacity for pain, and he can condone horror because he has not properly cultivated his sense

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 237 and 238.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰² See for example Vogeler, 'Religious Meaning', 292; and Russell Perkin, *Theology*, 216 and 221-223.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 157-8.

¹⁰⁴ Monsman, *Pater*, 91.

of beauty.¹⁰⁵ Through his representation of Aurelius, Pater also critiques Christian asceticism, and distinguishes between an ideal, early Christianity, compatible with Epicureanism, and ‘heretical’ later developments in Christianity, which revive Stoicism’s *contemptus mundi*.

Pater suggests that Christianity ‘complement[s]’ Epicureanism because each creed addresses itself to one pole of life’s ambivalence, its admixture of pleasure and suffering.¹⁰⁶ In the ‘Second Thoughts’ chapter, Pater argues that Epicureanism is a philosophy that honours the truths of youthful optimism; it appeals to the ‘the strong young man in all the freshness of his thought and feeling, fascinated by the notion of at least lifting his life to the level of some bold, adventurous theory; while, in the first genial heat of existence, physical objects, also fair and strong, beat potently upon his unwearied and widely opened senses’.¹⁰⁷ Pater is careful to avoid representing Christianity simply as a mature advancement on Epicureanism. Instead, Christianity is equally one-sided, and honours the truths of illness and age. Marius becomes receptive to Christianity as he comes to feel that ‘we are constructed for suffering! What proofs of it does but one day afford, if we care to note them, as we go – a whole long chaplet of sorrowful mysteries!’¹⁰⁸ We are meant to catch the strain of hyperbole here, and indeed, Pater often insinuates that Christianity’s allure for Marius has a morbid aspect which aligns it with the characteristics of decadent aestheticism. In an allusion to Baudelaire, Marius comes to perceive the ‘whole world’ as a ‘hospital of sick persons’, and his movement toward Christianity is sometimes figured as a fall into a pathological pessimism which, within the novel’s imaginative economy, is problematically close to Marcus Aurelius’s Stoicism.¹⁰⁹ Pater also suggests that Christianity is decadent insofar as it is a coercive and limiting creed, an idea he reinforces when he startlingly compares it to the Medusa: ‘Might this

¹⁰⁵ Pater, *Marius*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁰⁹ As Monsman comments, Pater is alluding to Baudelaire’s *Petits Poèmes en Prose* XLVIII: 1 (‘Anywhere Out of the World’): ‘This life is a hospital in which each patient is possessed by the desire to change beds’. See editor’s notes, Pater, *Marius*, 270.

new vision, like the malignant beauty of that old pagan Medusa, be exclusive of all admiring gaze on anything save itself?’¹¹⁰ There is an irony at work here: the exclusivity of Christianity threatens to petrify the very ethic of receptivity to experience which opened Marius to the possibility of Christianity in the first place. Yet Pater does not characterise Christianity in terms of decadent aestheticism in order to register tensions between Marius’s attraction to Christian faith and his Epicureanism. Rather, Pater seeks to demonstrate that Christianity is just as vulnerable to charges of decadence as Epicureanism, since like Epicureanism, it is a profound confrontation with the problem of mortality, and as such, is likely to be contaminated by the nature of the problem it strives to address. Marius finds Christianity akin to Epicureanism because both creeds are ‘something of a *meditatio mortis*, ever facing toward the final act of detachment’.¹¹¹ Pater balances his representations of Christianity as judiciously as he does his representations of Epicureanism, deploying both his Hellenising idiom of radiance, gaiety, and sensuousness, and his decadent idiom of exhaustion and morbidity. Thus, while Christianity is frequently constructed in Pater’s sunny Hellenic vocabulary – it is ‘amiable’, ‘comely’, ‘full of reasonable gaiety’ – it also constitutes a decadent ‘infection’.¹¹² In an apparent reversal of a conventional Christian conversion novel, Marius’s movement toward conversion is frequently characterised not as a movement toward repentance and enlightenment, but as the progress of a disease which somehow at once blinds him and makes him the material world seem leprous.¹¹³ Just as Flavian’s illness and death seem to literalise the truth of his materialism, Marius’s physical and emotional decline seems to literalise the idea that a Christian conversion involves a *necrosis* or ‘dying into life’ (i.e. the self must metaphorically die so that may be born again in Christ).¹¹⁴ In other words, Pater’s application of decadent poetics to Christianity

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 290.

¹¹² Ibid., 236, 238 and 242.

¹¹³ Ibid., 242.

¹¹⁴ Arnold thought that the metaphor of necrosis as one of the most crucial tenets of Christianity. See Livingston, *Arnold*, 158-170.

allows him to face two directions at once: such decadent poetics seem both to affirm and to pathologise conventional Christian sentiments.

Both Romola and Marius are receptive to Christianity by virtue of a paradoxical, agnostic logic, though Pater and Eliot justify this logic on different grounds. After Romola undergoes a ‘baptism’ in the gospel of practical altruism (she tends the sick in a plague-stricken village and thus overcomes the anguish of her disillusionment with both Tito’s Epicureanism and Savonarola’s Christianity), she reflects: ‘If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer’.¹¹⁵ In other words, if there is no God, commitment to Christianity is only the more warranted, since its message of hope and compassion is more necessary to humanity. In his dying moments, Marius reflects:

Even then, just ere his eyes were to be shut for ever, the things they had seen seemed a veritable possession in hand; the persons, the places, above all, the touching image of Jesus, apprehended dimly through the expressive places, the crying of children, in that mysterious drama, with a sudden sense of peace and satisfaction now, which he could not explain to himself. For still, in a shadowy world, his deeper wisdom had ever been ... to use life, not as the means to some problematic end, but, as far as might be, from dying hour to dying hour, an end in itself – a kind of music, all-sufficing to the duly trained ear, even as it died out on the air.¹¹⁶

Just as Marius’s thoughts are circling ever more around the possibility of Christian transcendence and the reader expects a final conversion, Pater recapitulates the same life-for-life’s sake logic that characterised Marius’s earlier Epicureanism (as well as Pater’s own ‘Conclusion’). Far from simply undercutting Marius’s receptivity to Christianity, however, the reassertion of Epicureanism only emphasises its paradoxical character: Marius is open to the possibility of Christian transcendence because such openness represents an enhancement of the here and now and is thus an end in itself. Marius does not seem invested in whether such transcendence comes to pass; he entertains the

¹¹⁵ Eliot, *Romola*, 560.

¹¹⁶ Pater, *Marius*, 296-7.

possibility of it because entertaining it gives, in the words of the ‘Conclusion’, ‘the highest quality to [his] moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’.

The fact that Eliot’s secular-Christianity paradox resolves itself into an inspiring moral dictum while Pater embeds his own ambiguously in the impressionistic flux of Marius’s consciousness is itself revealing. One reason many readers find it hard to conceive of *Marius* as a retraction of the aestheticism of *The Renaissance* is that the novel seems to affirm even more explicitly and in much greater detail than the earlier book the pleasures of cultivating one’s individual subjectivity. It is unsurprising that Eliot, so dedicated in her own work to demonstrating that a secular morality could be as stringent as Christianity in demanding self-renunciation for the sake of others, considered *The Renaissance* a ‘poisonous’ book.¹¹⁷ Eliot’s romance of self-renunciation made her secularism palatable to many religious readers, as the Catholic critic Richard Simpson observed mordantly in 1863: ‘We ... tolerate pantheism, and atheism itself, if it comes to us in the garb of self-sacrifice, renunciation and universal charity’.¹¹⁸ By contrast, Pater’s aestheticism, even when it is contemplating the merits of *askêsis*, places a premium on subjective happiness, and is forever enjoining us to regard experience as a kind of cornucopia which we should sample widely; the ideal is not absolute dedication to any one aim, but a quest for ‘fullness of life’.¹¹⁹ For this reason, Pater tends to be sceptical toward the idealisation of self-sacrifice, which he associates with dogmatic, totalising ideologies: ‘The theory, the idea, or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract morality we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim on us’.¹²⁰ The Bishop of Oxford, John Mackarness, seized on these sentences from

¹¹⁷ George Eliot, letter to John Blackwood, 5 November 1873. Quoted in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 92.

¹¹⁸ [Richard Simpson], ‘George Eliot’s Novels’, *Home and Foreign Review* (October 1863), 522-549. Reprinted in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge, 1996), 249.

¹¹⁹ Pater, *Marius*, 101.

¹²⁰ Pater, *Renaissance*, 120.

the ‘Conclusion’ and decried the anti-Christian implications of such a rejection of self-sacrifice: ‘Learners in the school of unbelief have been taught that it is folly to disturb themselves for the sake of others: they have lost all motive for serious action: self-restraint and self-sacrifice are discovered to be mere moral babble; it is, at the best, an amiable weakness to do good’.¹²¹

As *Marius* makes clear, Pater’s aestheticism has its roots in a reaction not simply against Christian orthodoxy, but against the highly moralistic codes of unbelief and agnosticism that became conspicuous in Victorian culture from the 1860s onwards. As Thomas Dixon has shown, the popularisation of the Comtean coinage, ‘altruism’, significantly enhanced the credibility of the idea of an exclusively secular morality in the late Victorian period. As a term with secularist overtones, ‘altruism’ was frequently subject to critique by the devout who perceived it as an attempt, in Nietzsche’s phrase, to ‘out-Christian Christianity’; such critics often argued that the doctrine of ‘altruism’ actually demanded a degree of self-abnegation in excess of Christian ideals of agape and charity.¹²² ‘Altruism’ was also often conflated with ‘agnosticism’, since both neologisms were often considered disingenuous pieces of secularist code which, when cracked, simply amounted – in Frances Power Cobbe’s withering assessment – to ‘magnanimous atheism’. In 1877, Cobbe mocked the transvaluation of Christian values by which the ‘agnostic’ arrogated claims to a higher morality:

If we are to accept his own statement of the case, the Agnostic has completely turned the front of the theological battle. It is now the Pagans who have seized and hold aloft the sacred Labarum of Duty and Self-sacrifice, and in *hoc signo* are destined to victory ... Only the thorough sceptic, we are assured, can be the perfect saint.¹²³

Although Eliot rarely used the term herself, she was often celebrated and attacked as the age’s most illustrious proponent of the secularist creed of

¹²¹ John Mackarness, ‘Scepticism’, in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 96.

¹²² Quoted in Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 372; for Christian critiques of ‘altruism’, see 90-121.

¹²³ Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Magnanimous Atheism’, *Theological Review* 14.59 (1877), 447.

‘altruism’, and the thesis that Christian morality can perfect itself in a secular altruism is elaborated more boldly and explicitly in *Romola* than in any of her novels.¹²⁴ Romola’s rebellion against Savonarola’s authority seems to necessitate that she subsequently surpass Savonarola in Christian duty and self-sacrifice, though for the sake of a secular humanitarianism rather than Christianity. Eliot makes it clear that it is Romola’s secular orientation that enables her to accomplish so much practical good in the world, while Savonarola’s mysticism warps his moral judgment and renders him profoundly dangerous. Romola’s principled rejection of Savonarola’s command that she ‘bow before a divine law’ and honour her marriage vows is paralleled with Savonarola’s own rebellion against the papacy, thus establishing a link between Romola’s secular heresy and Savonarola’s proto-Protestant one.¹²⁵

The law was sacred. Yes, but rebellion might be sacred too. It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola – the problem where the sacredness of obedience began, and where the sacredness of rebellion ended.¹²⁶

As can be felt here, Eliot strives to construct Romola’s secular rebellion as a form of righteous Protestant individualism. We are encouraged to think that Romola’s secular orientation only places her one redemptive step further away from the corrupting legalism of the papacy than the proto-Protestant Savonarola manages to be – a difference that proves crucial when, in the novel’s final book, Savonarola reverts all too symptomatically to a corrupt, ‘Catholic’ legalism, and sentences Romola’s uncle to death for the sake of political expediency.

Given the extent to which ‘Epicureanism’ functioned as a shibboleth in Victorian culture that enabled the devout to equate the possibility of an exclusively secular morality with grossness and sexual license, it is unsurprising that Eliot distinguishes so rigorously between secular morality and Epicureanism

¹²⁴ Ibid., 101-113.

¹²⁵ Eliot, *Romola*, 360.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 468.

in *Romola*.¹²⁷ After Romola's rebellion against Savonarola, she briefly succumbs to a Tito-like Epicureanism: 'she longed for that repose in mere sensation which she had sometimes dreamed of in the sultry afternoons of her early girlhood, when she had fancied herself floating naiad-like in the waters'.¹²⁸ Tellingly, Eliot identifies Romola's desire for pleasure here with suicidal despair; Romola drifts away in a boat in the hope that she will die, and we are meant to notice the parallel between Romola's sensual nihilism at this moment and Tito's Epicureanism, which entangled him in the very web of deception and callousness that has brought Romola to this crisis. Sleep has a negative moral valence throughout *Romola* and often stands in for sexual self-loss; in the opening chapter, Eliot first hints at Tito's sexual deviance by depicting him as a languorous 'dreamer' napping in the streets of Florence, and his fall into adultery is rendered as a part of his appetite for siestas and his *flâneur*-like propensity to 'loungue and gaze' during carnival time.¹²⁹ When Romola is overcome by a Tito-like urge to daydream and sleep, it similarly marks a drift into a moral slumber, and while in her case the temptation is suicide, not sex, Eliot's sensuous imagery encourages us to confuse the two. Given that the longing for death here bears such strong connotations of sexuality and Epicureanism, it comes as no surprise that Romola's moment of despair is later condemned as if it were a sexual fall: 'She had felt herself without bonds, without motive; sinking in mere egoistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling a right to say, "I am tired of life, I want to die"''.¹³⁰

Like Marius, Romola apprehends the value of Christianity when she becomes conscious of the tears in things: 'Romola had lost her belief in the happiness she had once thirsted for: it was a hateful, smiling, soft-handed thing, with a narrow, selfish heart'.¹³¹ Romola's revulsion at Tito's Epicureanism – which by this point in the novel signifies only a form of suave immorality –

¹²⁷ Dawson, *Darwin*, 92-97.

¹²⁸ Eliot, *Romola*, 502.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 161 and 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 560.

¹³¹ Eliot, *Romola*, 316.

renders her sympathetic to Savonarola's ascetic Christianity: 'she understood now how men could be prompted to rush away for ever from earthly delights, how they could be prompted to dwell on images of sorrow rather than of beauty and joy'.¹³² Although Romola eventually rebels against Savonarola's Christianity, she never recovers belief in personal happiness, which, within the novel's moral economy, is wholly contaminated by its association with Tito's Epicureanism. (This logic of contamination applies to Epicureanism only: Savonarola's ethic of self-renunciation is not similarly ruined by its association with his messianism, but can be recuperated by Romola in a properly secular form.) The novel concludes with Romola as a positivist Madonna figure, inculcating the doctrine of altruism into Lillo, Tito's illegitimate little boy:

'It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can have only the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else ...'¹³³

The reader is here in the position of schoolchild or catechumen; we receive the novel's final message as Lillo receives Romola's positivist lesson. However, this lesson seems superfluous, since the consequences of Epicureanism have already been writ mythically large by the Pentheus-like fate visited upon Tito: he narrowly escapes being rent to pieces by a vengeful mob only to encounter the equally frenzied Baldassarre, who strangles him. Tito the Epicurean is of course also a symbolic scapegoat in terms of Eliot's construction of the 'strange web of belief and unbelief': his pleasure-seeking unbelief – and its violent expulsion from the narrative – works to clarify the rectitude of Romola's self-renouncing form of secularism. Like *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Romola* draws upon hagiographic discourses in order to highlight the sublimity of its heroine's self-renunciation, and calls to mind Stefan

¹³² Ibid., 319.

¹³³ Ibid., 582.

Collini's much-quoted observation that Victorian culture was characterised 'by an obsessive antipathy to selfishness' and 'structured by a sharp and sometimes exhaustive polarity between egoism and altruism'.¹³⁴ In Romola's case, the renunciation of 'narrow pleasures' has an unmistakably penitential flavour; she only achieves a state of humanist grace after she has atoned for her apostasies against the authority of both her husband and Savonarola.

Throughout *Marius*, Pater lingers over the satisfaction that his hero takes in sleeping and daydreaming. Even at the point of his death, which is 'of the nature of a martyrdom', Marius luxuriates in the way that death comes upon him like sleep.¹³⁵ Although Marius is an exemplary Christian insofar as he forfeits his life for the sake of a friend, he never forfeits his Epicurean faith in pleasure. Even as he is honoured as a 'martyr', Marius resists the idea of martyrdom:

To him, in truth, a death such as the recent death of those saintly brothers, 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 would spring no miraculous, poetic flowers; no eternal aroma would indicate the place of his burial; no plenary grace, overflowing forever upon those who might stand around it.¹³⁶

Pater encourages us to feel that Marius's martyrdom is meaningful precisely because he sacrifices a life whose pleasures he appreciates fully and because he anticipates no 'miraculous, poetic' reward; he is truly a Christian martyr *because* he is an Epicurean. (The obverse logic is explored in Pater's 'Sebastian van Storck' [1886], in which the self-sacrificing gesture of the tale's hero – he dies rescuing a child from a flood – seems merely to consummate his desire for oblivion. As Giles Whiteley notes, we left with the suspicion that the nihilistic Sebastian made no sacrifice at all, since he surrendered a life he did not

¹³⁴ See Paul Yeoh's 'Saint's Everlasting Rest: The Martyrdom of Maggie Tulliver', *Studies in the Novel* 41.1 (2009); and Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 65.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

value.)¹³⁷ There is a further irony: Marius saves Cornelius's life by falsely claiming that he, rather than Cornelius, is a committed Christian. In so doing, Marius assumes a role that is more legitimately Cornelius's. Marius effectively deprives Cornelius of the opportunity to be a martyr because he (that is, Marius) perceives nothing 'glorious' in it and thinks it better that Cornelius marry and enjoy life.¹³⁸

Pater distinguishes the Antonine phase of Christianity he celebrates in *Marius* from an earlier one, 'when men became Christians under some sudden and overpowering impression, and with all the disturbing results of such a crisis'.¹³⁹ As Shuter observes, this reflects Pater's distrust of conversion narratives: 'the religious temperament he admired was undisturbed by such crises ... unlike his critics, Pater did not assume that to be converted *to* a new belief it was necessary to be converted *from* an old'.¹⁴⁰ Read allegorically, the fact that Marius's movement toward Christianity is not a conversion but a more ambiguous drift also encodes Pater's sense of distance from an earlier phase of Victorian doubt; where a previous generation of young Oxford men such as Froude and Clough experienced tumultuous crises of faith, Pater preferred to represent his scepticism as a more subtle and belated affair. Equally, the conclusion of *Marius*, which reaffirms the Epicureanism of the hero even as he dies a Christian martyr, complicates the sense of teleological closure apparently secured by the fact that Christianity is the last creed encountered by Marius in his quest. The fact that the novel ends not with Marius's conversion but with a Christian community ascribing a Christian meaning to his death – a meaning Marius rejects in his last moments – aims to alert the reader to the extent to which such designations of religious identity often belie the fluid and equivocal quality of experience. The novel's 'agnostic' non-conclusion also gestures at the difficulty of sifting belief from unbelief in the 1880s, when sceptical arguments were wielded by both

¹³⁷ Giles Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), 93.

¹³⁸ In this, Pater is in accordance with Mill's utilitarian critique of the Christian conception of self-sacrifice. See *Utilitarianism*, 147.

¹³⁹ Pater, *Marius*, 235.

¹⁴⁰ Shuter, *Pater*, 50.

fideistic theologians and crusading men of science. The question of what to call Marius – and the question of what may be bracketed as ‘Christian’ – is shifted onto the reader, who is placed in a quandary similar to that faced by Eliot’s obituarists. In this respect, *Marius* should be read a meditation on the ironies which attended late Victorian efforts to decide who may be interpreted as a religious writer; more broadly, it reflects upon the extent to which a cultural preoccupation with the legibility and sincerity of the beliefs of others has the ironic effect of displacing a religious perception of the mysteries of the sacred onto an (at least apparently) secular fascination with the mysterious depths of literary characters and of the writers who invent them.

In *Marius*, Pater argues that aestheticism has a naturally privileged role within a self-consciously agnostic zeitgeist. At one point, Marius muses that a sense of the limits of human knowledge liberates us to view religion as one of the ‘observable, perhaps amiable appearances – among the rest’.¹⁴¹ In other words, once the premises of agnosticism are accepted, one is left to choose on the basis of what seems most attractive. One of the rare occasions on which Pater actually uses the word ‘agnostic’ is also an attempt to assert the philosophical dignity of aestheticism: in an essay he wrote for the *Guardian*, he observes that the eighteenth century was an ‘age of negative, or agnostic philosophy ... in which men’s minds must needs be limited to the superficialities of things, with a kind of narrowness amounting to a positive gift’.¹⁴² This is another iteration of Pater’s secular *felix culpa* trope, but here the prize won by the loss of positive religious belief is explicitly aesthetic. An agnostic restriction of knowledge to the phenomenal world means literary style comes into its inheritance at last: it need no longer lament its Platonic secondariness or its failure to capture things-in-themselves, but may be pleased with its ambiguous limitations.

In the *New Republic* (1877), his satirical *roman à clef*, W. H. Mallock travestied Pater as a vampiric decadent who drew sustenance from the decline of Christianity. As his caricatural avatar Mr Rose, Pater opines that religion ‘never

¹⁴¹ Pater, *Marius*, 173.

¹⁴² Pater, ‘English Literature’, *Essays*, 9.

lights our lives so beautifully as when it is leaving them like the evening sun'.¹⁴³ Mallock accurately captures a central theme in Pater's aestheticism, which often suggests that the apparently liminal character of the age – that is, Christianity is losing its privileged status, yet still retains an ambiguous influence – is to be relished rather than lamented. He first makes this point in his 'Coleridge's Writings', where he remarks that 'religious belief, the craving for objects of belief, may be refined out of our hearts, but they must leave their sacred perfume, their spiritual sweetness, behind'.¹⁴⁴ He echoes it twenty four years later in 'Prosper Mérimée' (1890):

Fundamental belief gone, in almost all of us, at least some relics of it remain – queries, echoes, reactions, after-thoughts; and they help to make an atmosphere, a mental atmosphere, hazy perhaps, yet with many secrets of soothing light and shade, associating more definite objects with each other by a perspective pleasant to the inward eye against a hopefully receding background of remoter and ever remoter possibilities.¹⁴⁵

Here the fading of faith strangely seems to carry on the work of faith without hiatus; the idea of a departing Christianity seems to soothe, haunt and enchant just as Christianity itself presumably did.

What Mallock's travesty misses is that Pater often problematises the age's decline-of-Christianity platitude even as his work takes inspiration from it. In particular, Pater often questions whether there ever was in fact 'an age of faith', or a seamlessly Christian culture prior to a fall into 'modern' scepticism, and such logic often works to destabilise the concept of the secular as much as it does the concept of the religious. Early in his career, Pater persistently suggests that much religious art and culture contains, in a veiled or sublimated form, a primordial enchantment with the secular, or at least traces of the heretical intentions of its creator, both of which it is the special task of the aesthetic critic to decipher. The unverifiable and counter-intuitive conviction that religious subject matter in the

¹⁴³ W. H. Mallock, *The New Republic: or, Culture, Faith and Philosophy in an English Country House* (New York: Scribner, Welford & Armstrong, 1878), 276-277.

¹⁴⁴ Pater, 'Coleridge', 126-127.

¹⁴⁵ Pater, 'Prosper Mérimée', *Fortnightly Review* 48.288 (1890), 853-854.

greatest Western art and literature is really an alibi for other, profane preoccupations is what stimulates the elaborate hermeneutic flights of Pater's early aestheticism, which participate ironically in the logic of veiled secularism in the very act of attempting to unveil the same hidden intention in works of art or in fragments of the past. As Williams has noted, the most audacious of these veiled unveilings of the secular is Pater's ekphrasis of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper', in which he discovers a narrative of secularisation inscribed within an image of Christ's face:

Five years afterwards, the young Raffaello, at Florence, painted [the last supper] with sweet and solemn effect ... but still with all the mystical unreality of the school of Perugino. Vasari pretends that the central head was never finished; but finished or unfinished, or owing part of its effect to a mellowing decay, his central head does but consummate the sentiment of the whole company – ghosts through which you see the wall, faint as the shadows of the leaves upon the wall on autumn afternoons, this figure is but the faintest, most spectral of them all. It is the image of what the history it symbolises has been more and more ever since, paler and paler as it recedes from us. Criticism came with its appeal from mystical unrealities to originals, and restored no life-like reality but these transparent shadows, spirits which have not flesh and bones.¹⁴⁶

Williams offers a bravura reading of this passage:

... the loss of spirituality has been figured as the loss of aesthetic form, which paradoxically creates the sense of greater spirituality – but this time as an aesthetic and historical effect. Images of human "nature" and aesthetic colour avail only partially to represent spirituality, and, always ironically, this particular Renaissance attempt to turn Christian imagery to a more natural and sensual reality has produced instead the denatured effect of ghosts, spectres, shadows, and transparencies.¹⁴⁷

Yet Williams's logic only partly registers the complexity of ghostliness as a metaphor for secularisation. In this ekphrasis as throughout *Marius*, Pater uses chiasmus to blur the distinction between the Christian and the secular, but here the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴⁷ Williams, *Transfigured World*, 100.

play of terms conflates a real, 'original' Christianity with its 'pale', apparently secularised afterlife. Since medieval Christianity is also characterised as 'pale', the fact that Christianity has become 'paler and paler' in the period extending from the Renaissance to modernity ironically makes the concept of secularisation itself seem spectral: is there a radical difference between the medieval world, preoccupied by 'pale' Christian images and 'mystical unrealities', and the supposedly secular present, haunted by spectres of a 'reced[ing]' Christianity? The way Pater's metaphors hesitate between the natural and the supernatural – one generally assumes that ghosts are not subject to autumnal decay – reflects a difficulty in his effort to allegorise the process of secularisation. While Williams aptly characterises this ekphrasis as an 'allegory of the remorseless irony of secularisation', she misses the fact that Pater does not immunise himself against this irony, for he registers the extent to which the concept of 'secularisation' becomes spectral as soon as it is imagined from a purely secular perspective. It simply turns into a crude tautology: the spiritual is not *there*; it 'has not flesh and bones'.¹⁴⁸ Since it is impossible to describe the fading of the unseen and impalpable without recourse to metaphors that endow it with the very qualities it both intrinsically lacks and is apparently losing, or to register a decline in a sense of spirituality without at least partly entering into the imaginative logic that once endowed it with a 'life-like reality', it is impossible to evoke the apparent fading of faith without also granting it fresh imaginative life.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 100.

Coda: ‘Magic’s Own Last Word’, or, Pater and Swinburne at the *Fin de Siècle*

1.

The imaginative traffic between Swinburne and Pater is usually presumed to flow in one direction only, with Swinburne thought to exert a powerful influence upon Pater’s early essays and his own aestheticism to have reached full development before Pater published *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. To my knowledge, no critic has speculated about how Pater might have influenced Swinburne’s later work. As I have noted, Swinburne’s later poetry, while remaining faithful to his earlier vision of life as a compound of indivisible contraries – pleasure and pain, desire and loss, and so on – nevertheless draws more redemptive lessons from the same core principle: where the early poetry certainly emphasises that pleasure and beauty can be wrested from even the bleakest insights, the later poetry much more explicitly pushes this logic toward holistic affirmations of life. If Swinburne’s early poems often seem to take a masochistic satisfaction in the way ideals such as a romantic love are corroded from within by time, or bestow pleasure only by way of pain, his later poetry often suggests that there is a consoling grandeur in the ways that things are internally bound to their opposites. And where the early poetry sometimes adopts a rather cool, Olympian view of the interplay between suffering and pleasure, or advocates a libertine’s irony or a manly stoicism in the face of fate, the later poetry tends to advocate receptivity to experience more insistently, sometimes in terms akin to those of Pater’s ‘Conclusion’.

It is possible hear echoes of the ‘Conclusion’ in one of the finest of Swinburne’s late poems, ‘A Nympholept’ (1891). Here the speaker seems to have internalised all the injunctions of Pater’s essay: he is an apparently insomniac lover of the momentary who ‘dare not sleep for delight of the perfect hour’ (9), and though he tries to fix his ‘steadfast eyes’ (224) on the teeming flux of experience, he can register only fleeting impressions: ‘a form, a face, a wonder to

sense and sight' (215), 'light that flickers or spray that flies' (221).¹ Thus Swinburne's speaker has learnt to luxuriate in transience itself: 'And here is my sense fulfilled of the joys of earth,/Light, silence, bloom, shade, murmur of leaves that meet' (237). By the end of the poem, the speaker has absorbed the lesson so fully that he cannot imagine how one could desire anything other than finite, earthly life; indeed, he comes to perceive that joy and desire are predicated on transience:

I lean my face to the heather, and drink the sun
Whose flame-lit odour satiates the flowers: mine eyes
Close, and the goal of delight and of life is one:
No more I crave of earth or kindred skies.
No more? But the joy that springs from them smiles and flies:
The sweet work wrought of them surely, the good work done,
If the mind and the face of the season be loveless, dies.
(246-250)

Yet this does not amount to calm contentment, nor to a wise acceptance of the nature of things; like Pater's 'Conclusion', 'A Nympholept' underscores that such moments of bliss are produced by a hyperawareness of mortality:

Is it rapture or terror that circles me round, and invades
Each vein of my life with hope – if it be not fear?
Each pulse that awakens my blood into rapture fades,
Each pulse that subsides into dread of a strange thing near
Requickness with sense of a terror less dread than dear.
(57-61)

The poem's figure for such a 'quickened' apprehension of life is nympholepsy: in ancient Greek poetry and cult, this refers to the frenzy induced when one is possessed by a nymph, and it often serves as a metaphor for poetic inspiration. The poem as a whole is a paean to the wild god of nature, Pan, and Swinburne wrote it to refute the 'folly and the falsehood of the cry that "Pan is dead" which was uttered on a certain occasion not necessary to specify, and over which premature cry the old wood-god chuckles satirically' (he is perhaps referring to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, 'The Dead Pan' [1844], which follows a long tradition of interpreting a story related in Plutarch as a herald of the

¹ Swinburne, *CPWII*, 965-978.

death of paganism and the triumph of Christianity).² Like the ‘Conclusion’, then, ‘A Nympholept’ was written to vindicate the continuing vitality of ‘pagan fables’, but it seems to do so in order to prescribe a radically affirmative stance toward secular materialism: his speaker exults in the fact that he is ‘an earth-born dreamer, constrained by the bonds of birth,/Held fast by the flesh, compelled by the veins that beat’ (231-233), and who ‘may hear not surely the fall of immortal feet’ (235). Swinburne is so eager to spell out the fact that the rapture he celebrates is achieved by waiving hopes for immortality or any conventional concept of a deity that he undercuts the poem’s mythological apparatus, casting doubt on whether his speaker can in fact hear ‘immortal feet’ even as he invokes the ‘one God, Pan’ (14). Similarly, Swinburne insists that if Pan is truly a god of nature, then he ought to be a mortal god: ‘Gods too but endure for a season’ (156), and Pan is glorious because he is ‘the God who has change to wife’ (181). In this, the speaker articulates in less truculent terms the position of Swinburne’s Sappho, who also holds that a mortal god would be the only kind tolerable to her imagination (she longs to ‘pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,/And mix his immortality with death’ [183-184]).³ Yet where in ‘Anactoria’ sadomasochism is a form of Promethean defiance, a means of extorting pleasure from a cruel God, the same apprehension of the reciprocity of pleasure and pain is redemptive in ‘A Nympholept’. While Swinburne duly emphasises that Pan is not only ‘Lord God of life and of light and of all things fair’ but also of ‘ravin and ruin and all things dim’ (148-149), the energy of the poem is overwhelmingly celebratory; just as in Pater’s ‘Conclusion’, darker apprehensions only subserve a higher love of earthly experience. There is a kind of secular theodicy latent in such poems: they seek to reassure us that all is for the best, not despite but *because* of mortality and the panic and all the ‘ravin and ruin’. As the whole, the poem plays on the dual meaning of the word ‘pan’, which is the etymological root of the concept of panic, but also suggests all-inclusiveness, particularly the wholeness of nature. From this doubleness, Swinburne strives to show that the

² Quoted in McGann and Sligh’s notes to *Major Poems*, 486. Swinburne is perhaps also thinking of Arthur Machen’s recently published novella, *The Great God Pan* (1890).

³ Swinburne, *CPWI*, 63.

panic induced by our apprehension of mortality is the origin of all ecstasy and poetic inspiration, and can be integrated into a sense of a natural whole. The poem is also typical of Swinburne's aestheticism in that it strives to offer enchantment in secular terms: on the one hand, there is the desire for the wild ecstasies of Pan, and an attraction to a sense of the unknowable; on the other, there is resistance to the concept of God, even in a pagan guise, and thus the need to make so many rationalising specifications: Pan is a purely 'immanent presence', one of the 'gods hard by' rather than a transcendent deity (105, 43); he is mortal; he is indifferent to prayer (40-42); and the heavenly rapture he offers is an entirely earthly experience ('Heaven is as earth, and as heaven to me/Earth' [271-272]). Every bid at secular re-enchantment inspires further demystification.

2.

After *Marius*, aestheticism no longer seemed to Pater a viable means of critiquing and advancing beyond the terms of Victorian debates about religion and secularism. In *Gaston de Latour* (1893) his unfinished novel, aestheticism itself produces a stalemate. This is conspicuous in the 'Modernity' chapter of the novel, which focuses on Gaston's impressions of Ronsard and the Pleiade school (the novel is set in sixteenth-century France; Gaston is Pater's invention).⁴ I noted in my discussion of Swinburne's *carpe diem* poems that Pater uses the Pleiade school to tender a theory of aestheticist poetics in his 'Joachim du Bellay' essay. As if allegorising his need to return to his original ideas and exorcise them, *Gaston* rehearses the same gesture, but where 'Joachim du Bellay' is an apology for such poetics, the 'Modernity' chapter begins by conceding the allure of aestheticism and ends in a strong condemnation of it. Ronsard inspires these reflections in Gaston:

The worship of physical beauty – a religion, the proper faculty of
which would be the bodily eye! Looked at in this way, some of the

⁴ Pater published the first five chapters of *Gaston* in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1888 and one chapter (in the form of an essay on Giordano Bruno) in the *Fortnightly* in 1889. The unfinished novel, edited by Shadwell, was published posthumously by Macmillan in 1896.

well-marked characteristics of the poetry of the Pleiad assumed a hieratic, almost an ecclesiastical air. That rigid correctness; that gracious unction, as of the medieval Latin psalmody; that aspiring fervor; that jealousy of the profane “vulgar”; the sense, flattering to one who is in the secret, that this thing, even in its utmost triumph – could never really be popular: - why were these so welcome to him but from the continuity of early mental habit? He might renew the over-grown tonsure, and wait, devoutly, rapturously, in this goodly sanctuary of earth and sky about him, for the manifestation ... of flawless humanity, in some undreamed-of depth and perfection of the loveliness of bodily form.

And therewith came the consciousness ... of incompatibility between two rival claimants upon him, of two ideals. Might that new religion, so to term it, be a religion not altogether of goodness, a *profane* religion, in spite of its poetic fervours? There were “flowers of evil”, among the rest. It came in part, avowedly, as kind of consecration of evil, seeming to lend it the beauty of holiness.⁵

Scholars often note that Pater’s portrait of Ronsard is a veiled portrait of Baudelaire, though Lene Østermark-Johansen points out that Swinburne also seems implicated in the critique.⁶ Pater’s jaundiced view of aestheticism in this period is partly a defensive reaction to Wilde’s appropriations of his work.⁷ Yet what is most striking here is that Pater critiques aestheticism by characterising it not as a form of secularism but as perverse *religion*, ‘so to term it’ – thereby effectively echoing the complaints of his early detractors. Arguably, Pater is trying to dramatise the fact that Gaston assimilates everything he encounters into the terms of his childhood faith, no matter how much a given element appears to oppose the logic of that faith; certainly the chapter ends with Gaston lamenting the ineluctability of the Christian imaginary and wishing he could simply enjoy his new, profane religion without ambivalence if the conflict between the worldly and the Christian is in fact intractable. Yet the passage also seems to allegorise Pater’s own imaginative impasse. As Monsman suggests, the ‘agonisingly slow pace’ of the composition of *Gaston* indicates that there was a ‘basic thematic or

⁵ Pater, *Gaston*, 36-37.

⁶ Østermark-Johansen, *Language of Sculpture*, 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

structural problem in the novel'.⁸ *Gaston* was intended to follow *Marius* as the second installment of a trilogy of *bildungsromans*, and surely part of the problem was that Gaston has no obvious philosophical or religious destination: the religious wars the novel takes as its backdrop seem to preclude the sort of ambiguous idealisation of Christianity Pater had recourse to in *Marius*, and Gaston has already recoiled from aestheticism as a profane religion.⁹ (He also recoils in turn from the philosophies of Montaigne and Giordano Bruno, detecting a sinister moral relativism submerged in each.)¹⁰ Where in *Marius* Pater celebrated the concurrences between aestheticism and religion, here the two ways of looking at the world seem mutually contaminating: the desire to affirm the beauty of the 'earth and sky about him', always strong in Pater, now seems problematic whether it is construed as a Christian impulse or a 'devoutly' aesthetic one. Everything is 'profane religion' because the distinctions between the religious and the irreligious have been effaced; Gaston is only tempted by an apparently secular aestheticism because it reminds him of Christianity, and even he does not seem to know if the 'manifestation' he awaits 'rapturously' is Christ or a beautiful lover. In other words, Gaston is troubled by the 'rival claimants' because they are somehow radically opposed and yet impossible to distinguish; he does not know if he loves the world because the divine is immanent within it or purely for its own sake.¹¹

Yet Pater cannot let go of aestheticism. Every critique of it inspires another apology for the seriousness of its original task. Thus, in the following chapter, the title of Pater's first book enables him to imply a connection between Gaston's predicament and his own early work, which aimed at nothing less than a reinterpretation of 'human nature' in the light of a new recognition of its

⁸ Monsman, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, xviii.

⁹ Pater, *Gaston*, 58-59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59 and 82-83.

¹¹ Lesley Higgins gives a useful account of Pater's attitude to Christianity in this period. Drawing upon his unpublished, fragmentary manuscripts, she shows how he oscillates between undercutting the 'absolute truth claims' of Christianity and recuperating the 'imaginative and idealistic potential' of religious discourses. See 'Doubting Pater: Religious Discourse and "the conditions of modern life"', *English Literature in Transition* 38.3 (1995), 287.

capacities for purely secular fulfillment, though Pater is now anxious about the propriety of such a reimagining:

In those earlier days of the Renaissance, a whole generation had been exactly in the position in which Gaston now found himself. An older ideal, moral and religious, certain theories of man and nature actually in possession, still haunted humanity, at the very moment when it was called, through a full knowledge of the past, to enjoy the present with unrestricted expansion of its own capacities. – Might one enjoy? Might one eat of all the trees? – There were those who had already eaten and needed, retrospectively, a theoretical justification, a sanction of their actual liberties, in some new reading of human nature itself and its relation to the world around it. – Explain to us the propriety, on the full view of things, of this bold course we have taken, or know we shall take.¹²

Perhaps *Gaston* would have found a balance between vindicating and critiquing aestheticism if Pater had managed to complete it, but the imaginative impasse seems profound. We gain an insight into this impasse in Pater's elegiac portrait of the Pleiade school. At the level of allegory, the fate of the Pleiade seems to encode Pater's perception that aestheticism has become the victim of its own success – it has permeated Victorian culture and shaped the zeitgeist so decisively that it has lost all its distinctiveness and gone into a dramatic decline:

It was a manner, a habit of thought, which would invade ordinary life, and mould that to its intention. In truth, all the world was already aware, and delighted. The “school” was soon to pay the penalty of that immediate acceptance, that intimate fitness to the mind of its own time, by sudden and profound neglect, as a thing preternaturally tarnished and tame, like magic youth, or magic beauty, turned in a moment by magic's own last word into withered age.¹³

Yet if Pater lost faith in the capacity of aestheticism to enchant in either secular or religious terms, news of the decline of aestheticism did not trouble

¹² Pater, *Gaston*, 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

Swinburne in Putney. He kept writing poems which affirmed that Pan is both dead and alive.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. 'Vie de Jesus'. *London Quarterly Review* 21.42 (1864): 235-300.
- Anonymous. 'Standards of Heresy'. *Saturday Review* 31.800 (1871): 234-235.
- Anonymous. 'Mr. Voysey and Mr. Purchas'. *Fraser's Magazine* 3.16 (1871): 457-468.
- Anonymous. 'The Unitarians and Mr. Voysey'. *The Sphinx* 4.149 (1871): 190.
- Anonymous. 'Christianity Between Two Foes'. *Saturday Review* 41.1063 (1876): 325-326.
- Anonymous. 'The Popular View of Atheism'. *Saturday Review* 49.1287 (1880): 819-820.
- Adams, James Eli. *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1995.
- 'Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin'. *Tennyson: Longman Critical Studies*. Ed. Rebecca Stott. London and New York: Longman, 1996.
- Addington Symonds, John. Review of the *Renaissance* (1873). *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. R. M. Seiler. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1980. 57-61.
- Anderson, Rev. W. 'Agnosticism'. *Leisure Hour* (May 1881): 276-278.
- Andrews, Kit. 'Walter Pater and Walter Benjamin: The Diaphanous Collector and the Angel of History', in *Transparencies of Desire*. Eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams. Greensboro, N.C.: ELT Press, 2002.
- apRoberts, Ruth. *Arnold and God*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Arnold, Matthew. 'The Bishop and the Philosopher', *Macmillan's Magazine* 7.39 (1863): 241-256.
- 'Dr. Stanley's Lectures on the Jewish Church'. *Macmillan's Magazine* 7.40 (1863): 327-336.
- *Letters of Matthew Arnold 1848-1888*. Ed. George W. E. Russell. London: Macmillan, 1895.

- *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*. Eds. C.B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950.
- *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. 11 vols. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-1977.
- Bassett, Sharon. ‘Marius and the Varieties of Stoic Will: “Can the Will Itself be an Organ of Knowledge, of Vision?”’. *English Literature in Transition* 27.1 (1984): 52-62.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flowers of Evil*. Trans. James Gowen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Bayliss, Wyke. ‘Art, *Contra* the World, the Flesh, and the Devil’. *National Review* 11.64 (1888): 532-538.
- Bayne, Peter. ‘Mr. Arnold and Mr. Swinburne’. *Contemporary Review* 6 (November 1867): 337-356.
- Beckson, Karl. *The Religion of Art: A Modernist Theme in British Literature, 1885-1925*. New York: AMS Press, 2006.
- Besserman, Lawrence L. ‘Job’. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Ed. David L. Jeffrey. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992. 403-404.
- Birch, Dinah. *Ruskin’s Myths*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Binns, William. ‘Matthew Arnold as Religious Teacher’. *The Theological Review* 15.60 (1878): 88-116.
- Blair, Kirstie. ‘Touching Hearts: Queen Victoria and the Curative Properties of *In Memoriam*’. *Tennyson Research Bulletin* 7.5 (2001): 246-54.
- *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Bolus-Reichert, Christine. *The Age of Eclecticism: Literature and Culture in Britain, 1815-1885*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009.
- Bonaparte, Felicia. *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot’s Imagination*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979.
- Bond, Ronald B. ‘Leprosy’. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Ed. David L. Jeffrey. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992. 443-444.

- Bonney, William. 'Tennyson's Sublunary Grail'. *Philological Quarterly* 72.7 (1993): 237-259.
- Brake, Laurel. 'After *Studies*: Walter Pater's Cancelled Book, or *Dionysus* and Gay Discourse in the 1870s'. *Beauty and the Beast: Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, R. L. Stevenson and Their Contemporaries*. Ed. Peter Liebrechts and Wim Tigges. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 115-126.
- Bredero, Adriaan H. *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Age: The Relation Between Religion, Church, and Society*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994.
- Browning, Robert. *Robert Browning: The Major Works*. Ed. Adam Roberts. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2005.
- Bruce, Steve. *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Buckler, William. 'Introduction'. *Walter Pater: Three Major Texts*. Ed. Donald Hill. New York: New York University Press, 1986.
- Bullen, J. B. 'George Eliot's *Romola* as a Positivist Allegory'. *Review of English Studies* 26.104 (1975): 425-35.
- 'Pater, Mill, Mansel and the Context of the "Conclusion" to the *Renaissance*'. *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 21.1 (1999): 1-15.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *The French Revolution*. London: Everyman's Library, 1980.
- *Sartor Resartus*. Eds. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- *On Heroes, Hero-Worship & the Heroic in History*. Ed. Michael K. Goldberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Carroll, David. Ed. *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Carroll, Joseph. *The Cultural Theory of Matthew Arnold*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Caufield, James Walter. (Unpublished dissertation). 'Arnoldian Renouncements: Ethical Exemplarity and Modern Thought'. University of California, Los Angeles, 2008.

- “‘Poetry is the Reality’: Matthew Arnold Tackles the Athletes of Logic (and Theory)’. *Cambridge Quarterly* 39.3 (2010): 237-259.
- Chai, Leon. *Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Chesterton, J. K. *Heretics*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006.
- Clapperton, J. H. ‘The Agnostic at Church’. *Nineteenth Century* 11.62 (1882): 653-656.
- Coates, John. *The Rhetorical Use of Provocation as a Means of Persuasion in the Writings of Walter Pater (1839-1894), English Essayist and Cultural Critic: – Pater as Controversialist*. New York: Edwin Mellen, 2011.
- Cobbe, Frances Power. ‘Magnanimous Atheism’. *Theological Review* 14.59 (1877): 447-489.
- Coleridge, John Duke. ‘Poems By Matthew Arnold’. *Christian Remembrancer* 27.84 (1854): 310-333.
- Collini, Stefan. *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Collins, K. K. *Identifying the Remains: George Eliot’s Death in the London Religious Press*. Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2006.
- Cook, Daniel. ‘Froude’s Post-Christian Apostate and the Uneven Development of Unbelief’. *Religion & Literature* 38.2 (2006): 49-71.
- Coulling, Sidney. ‘Swinburne and Arnold’. *Philological Quarterly* 49. 2 (1970): 211-238.
- *Matthew Arnold and His Critics: A Study of Arnold’s Controversies*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974.
- Court, Franklin. *Pater and His Early Critics*. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 1980.
- ‘The Critical Reception of Pater’s Marius’. *English Literature in Transition* 27.2 (1984):124-139.
- Crawford, Robert. ‘Pater’s *Renaissance*, Andrew Lang, and Anthropological Romanticism’. *ELH* 53.4 (1986): 876-879

- Cunningham, Valentine. *Figures of Heresy: Radical Theology in English and American Writing 1800-2000*. Brighton: Sussex Press, 2006.
- Curteis, H. G. 'Christian Agnosticism'. *Nineteenth Century* 15.84 (1884): 337-344.
- Dale, Peter Allan. *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History: Carlyle, Arnold, Pater*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Davis, Michael F. 'Walter Pater's "Latent Intelligence" and the Conception of Queer "Theory"', in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams, 261-285. Greensboro, North Carolina: ELT Press, 2002.
- Dawson, Carl and John Pfordresher, eds. *Matthew Arnold's Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Dawson, Gowan. 'Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and the Discourse of Science in *Macmillan's Magazine*: 'A Creature of the Nineteenth Century''. *English Literature in Transition* 48.1 (2005): 38-54.
- *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Dean, Dennis R. "'Through Science to Despair": Geology and the Victorians'. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 360 (1981): 116-136.
- Dell, Katherine Julia. *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991.
- DeLaura, David J. *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater*. Austin: University of Texas, 1969.
- 'Romola and the Origin of the Paterian View of Life'. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 21.3 (1966):225-233.
- Dellamora, Richard. *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Dowling, Linda. *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

- *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Dixon, Thomas. *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Donoghue, Denis. *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. Ignat Avsey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Dowson, Ernest. *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*. Ed. Mark Longaker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962.
- Eagleton, Terry. ‘The Flight to the Real’. In *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 11-21.
- *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2007.
- Earle, John Charles. ‘The Vices of Agnostic Poetry’. *Dublin Review* 8.1 (1882): 104-127.
- Eastham, Andrew. *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity, and the Ends of Beauty*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Ellman, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988.
- Erdozain, Dominic. *The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010.
- Eliot, George. *Romola*. London: Penguin, 2006.
- Eliot, T. S.. *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1941.
- *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. London: Faber, 1934.
- Ellenzweig, Sarah. *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking 1660-1700*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- Evangelista, Stefano. “‘Outward Nature and the Moods of Men’: Romantic Mythology in Pater’s Essays on Dionysius and Demeter”. *Walter Pater:*

- Transparencies of Desire*. Eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams. Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002. 107-118.
- *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Fertel, Randy J. ‘Antipastoral and the Attack on Naturalism in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*’. *Victorian Poetry* 19.4 (1981): 337-350.
- Findlay, Leonard M. ‘Swinburne and Tennyson’. *Victorian Poetry* 9.1/2(1971): 217-36.
- ‘The Art of Apostasy: Swinburne and the Emperor Julian’. *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990): 69-78.
- Fippinger, Andrew. ‘Intimations and Imitations of Immortality: Swinburne’s “By the North Sea” and “Poeta Loquitur”’. *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009): 675-690.
- Fisher, Devon. ‘Spurring an Imitative Will: The Canonisation of Arthur Hallam’. *Christianity and Literature* 55.2 (2006): 221-245.
- *Roman Catholic Saints and Early Victorian Literature: Conservatism, Liberalism, and the Emergence of Secular Culture*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012.
- Franke, Damon. *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883-1924*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008.
- Fraser, Hilary. *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Freemantle, W. H. ‘The New Reformation’. *Fortnightly Review* 41.243 (1887): 442-458.
- Gladstone, W. E. *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age*. London: Macmillan, 1869.
- Garratt, Peter. *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer and George Eliot*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010.
- Gosse, Edmund. *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. London: Macmillan. 1917
- Green, S. J. D. ‘Freemantle, William Henry (1831-1916)’. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman,

- May 2006 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53896> (accessed 18th November, 2011)
- Greg, W. R. 'Truth Versus Edification'. *Westminster Review* 23.2 (1863): 503-516.
- Guy, Jeff. 'Class, Imperialism and Literary Criticism: William Ngidi, John Colenso and Matthew Arnold'. *Journal of South African Studies* 23.2 (1997): 219-241.
- Halliday, R. J. *Political Thinkers: John Stuart Mill*. London: Routledge, 1976.
- Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Harris, Wendell V. 'Arnold, Pater, Wilde, and the Object as in Themselves They See It'. 11.4 (7):733-747.
- Harrison, Anthony H. *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.
- *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990.
- *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology*. Charlottesville: Virginia, 1998.
- Harrison, Frederic. 'Agnostic Metaphysics'. *Nineteenth Century* 16.1 (1884): 353-378.
- Henry, Nancy. 'The *Romola* Code: "Men of Appetites" in George Eliot's Historical Novel'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39.2 (2011): 237-348.
- Herbert, Christopher. *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001.
- Hewlett, Henry. "'The Strayed Reveller", and Other Poems'. *Contemporary Review* 24 (June 1874): 539-567.
- Higgins, Lesley. 'Doubting Pater: Religious Discourse and "the conditions of modern life"'. *English Literature in Transition* 38.3 (1995): 285-303.
- Hodgson, William. 'A Review of Fashionable Thought'. *National Review* 4.21 (1884): 410-422.

- Holmes, John. *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Holt Hutton, Richard. 'Renan's *Life of Jesus*'. *National Review* 34 (1863): 524-563.
- 'The Atheistic View of Life'. *Fraser's Magazine* 605 (May 1880): 652-667.
- Hughes Linda K. "'Frater Ave'?" Tennyson and Swinburne'. *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*. Eds. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Hyder, Clyde K. 'The Medieval Background of Swinburne's "The Leper"'. *PMLA* 46.4. (1931) 1280-1288.
- (Ed.) *Algernon Charles Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1970.
- (Ed.) *Swinburne as Critic*. London: Routledge, 1972
- Ikeler, Abbott A. *Puritan Temper and Transcendental Faith: Carlyle's Literary Vision*. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1972.
- Inman, Billie. "'Sebastian van Storck": Pater's Exploration into Nihilism'. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.4 (1976): 457-476.
- *Walter Pater's Reading: A Bibliography of his Library Borrowings and Literary References 1858-1873*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1981.
- 'The Intellectual Context of Pater's "Conclusion"'. *Walter Pater: An Imaginative Sense of Fact*. Ed. Phillip Dodd. London: Frank Cass and Company, 1981. 39-54.
- 'Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William H. Hardinge'. *Pater in the 1990s*. Eds. Laurel Brake and Ian Small. Greensboro: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. 1-20.
- Ireland, Ken. *Cythera Regained? The Rococo Revival in European Literature and the Arts 1830-1910*. Cranbury NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2006.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*. Trans. David Henry Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Jager, Colin. 'After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism'. *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 302-321.

- ‘Shelley After Atheism’. *Studies in Romanticism* 49.4 (2010): 611-631.
- Jaffrey, David J. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992.
- Jowett, Benjamin. ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’. *Essays and Reviews*. Gregg International: Farnborough, 1970.
- Kaufmann, Michael. ‘The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession’. *New Literary History* 38.4 (2007): 607-628.
- Klaver, J.M.I. *Geology and Religious Sentiment: The Effect of Geological Discoveries on English Society and Literature Between 1820 and 1859*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- Knoepflmacher, U. C. *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965.
- ‘Pater’s Religion of Sanity: “Plato and Platonism” as a Document of Victorian Unbelief’. *Victorian Studies* 6.2 (1962): 152-168.
- Kuduk, Weiner, Stephanie. ‘Knowledge and Sense Experience in Swinburne’s Late Poetry’. *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing Word: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*. Ed. Yisrael Levin. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. 11-27.
- Lambdin, Laura Cooner and Robert Thomas Lambdin. *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century: Arthurian Characters in the Poems of Tennyson, Arnold, Morris and Swinburne*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Lambert, Agnes. ‘False Coin’. *Nineteenth Century* 15.88 (1884): 945-968.
- Landow, George P. ‘Ruskin as Victorian Sage: The Example of “Traffic”’. *New Approaches to Ruskin*. Ed. Robert Hewison. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage From Carlyle to Mailer*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Lane, Christopher. *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- LaPorte, Charles. *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

- Leighton, Angela. 'Aesthetic Conditions'. *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*. Eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams. Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002. 12-23.
- *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Levin, Yisrael. 'The Terror of Divine Revelation and Apollo's Incorporation into Song: Swinburne's Apollonian Myth'. *Victorian Review* 34.2 (2008): 103-129.
- Levine, George. *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- 'Introduction'. *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays For How We Live Now*. Ed. George Levine. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011. 1-23.
- Lightman, Bernard. *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Lily, W. S. 'The New Gospel'. *Time* 1 (May 1879): 169-175.
- Livingston, James. *Matthew Arnold and Christianity: His Religious Prose Writings*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986.
- Loesberg, Jonathan. *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Louis, Margot K. *Swinburne and His Gods: The Roots and Growth of an Agnostic Poetry*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.
- 'Swinburne on Rape'. *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 9.2 (2000): 55-68.
- *Persephone Rises: 1860-1927, Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality*. London and Vermont: Ashgate: 2009.
- 'The Vanishing Knight and the Drift of Butterflies: Erotic Figuration in Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Canto 2'. *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009): 647-654.
- Lorsch, Susan. *Where Nature Ends: Literary Responses to the Designification of Landscape*. New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1983

- Lucretius. *On the Nature of the Universe*. Trans. Ronald Melville. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*. Trans. H. A. J. Munro, 4th edition. Cambridge: Deighton Bell & Co., 1886.
- Lyell, Charles. *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation*. Vol 1. 2nd edition. London: John Murray, 1832.
- Mansel, Henry Longueville. *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures*. 5th edition. London: John Murray, 1870.
- Mallock, W. H. *The New Republic: or, Culture, Faith and Philosophy in an English Country House*. New York: Scribner, Welford & Armstrong, 1878.
- Matz, Jesse. *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Maxwell, Catherine. *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
- *Writers and Their Work: Swinburne*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006.
- Marsh, Jan. *Daniel Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. Orion Books: London, 2005.
- Marsh, Joss. *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture and Literature in the Nineteenth-Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Matthews, Samantha. 'After Tennyson: The Presence of the Poet, 1892-1918'. *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*. Eds. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Mazzeno, Laurence W. *Alfred Tennyson: The Critical Legacy*. New York: Camden House, 2004.
- McGann, Jerome. *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- 'The Three Texts of *Empedocles on Etna*'. *Victorian Connections*. Ed. Jerome McGann. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1989.
- McKelvy, William R. *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.

- McGrath, F. C. *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm*. Tampa: University of Florida Press, 1986.
- McSweeney, Kerry. *Swinburne and Tennyson as Romantic Naturalists*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.
- Meeker, Natania. *Voluptuous Philosophy: Literary Materialism in the French Enlightenment*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.
- Michelet, Jules. *History of France*. vol.1. Trans. G.H. Smith. New York, Appleton & Company, 1847.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*. Introd. F. R. Leavis. London: Chatto & Windus, 1950.
- *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Ed. J. M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.
- *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Ed. John Gray. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Mills, Kevin. *Approaching Apocalypse: Unveiling Revelation in Victorian Writing*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007.
- Monsman, Gerald. *Walter Pater*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.
- *Walter Pater's Art of Autobiography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.
- *Oxford University's Old Mortality Society: A Study in Victorian Romanticism*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998.
- Moran, Maureen. 'Pater's Great Change: *Marius the Epicurean* as Historical Conversion Romance'. *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*. Eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams. Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002. 170-188.
- *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.
- Morgan, Benjamin. 'Aesthetic Freedom: Walter Pater and the Politics of Autonomy'. *ELH* 77.3 (2010): 731-756.
- Morgan, Thaïs. 'Swinburne's Dramatic Monologues: Sex and Ideology'. *Victorian Poetry* 22.2 (1984): 175-195.

- ‘The Sun of Faith, The Shadow of Doubt: Language and Knowledge in Swinburne’s Myth of Apollo’. *The Sun is God: Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. J. B. Bullen. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. 126-58.

- Morley, John. ‘Mr. Swinburne’s New Poems’. *Saturday Review* 22.562 (1866):145-147.

- ‘Mr. Pater’s Essays’. *Fortnightly Review* 13.76 (1873): 469-477.

- *On Compromise*. London: Macmillan, 1923.

- Morton, Heather. “‘A Church of Himself’: Liberal Scepticism and Consistent Character in Bishop Blougram’s Apology’. *Victorian Poetry* 45.1 (2007): 49-47.

- Myers, F.W.H. ‘Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty’. *Cornhill Magazine* 47.278 (1883): 213-224.

- ‘Modern Poets and the Meaning of Life’. *Nineteenth Century* 33.191 (1893): 93-100.

- Navarette, Susan. *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

- Odgers, Blake W. ‘The Law Relating to Heresy and Blasphemy’. *Modern Review* (July 1883): 587-608.

- [Oliphant, Margaret]. ‘New Books’. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 114.697 (1873): 604-609.

- O’Keefe, Robert and Janice A. *Walter Pater and the Gods of Disorder*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988.

- O’Gorman, Francis. “‘The Mightiest Evangel of the Alpine Club’: Masculinity and Agnosticism in the Alpine Writing of John Tyndall’, in *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*, eds. Andrew Bradstock, Sean Gill, Anne Hogan and Sue Morgan. Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 2000. 134-148.

- ‘Swinburne’s Returns: The Endurance of Writing in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*’. *The Cambridge Quarterly* 33.3 (2004): 197-216.

- Østermark-Johansen, Lene. *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011.
- Pater, Walter. 'Coleridge's Writings'. *Westminster Review* 29.1 (1866): 106-132.
- 'Winckelmann'. *Westminster Review* 31.1 (1867): 80-110.
- 'Poems By William Morris'. *Westminster Review* 34.2 (1868): 300-312.
- 'The Bacchanals of Euripides'. *Macmillan's Magazine* 60.355 (1889): 63-72.
- 'Prosper Mérimée'. *Fortnightly Review* 48.288 (1890): 852-864.
- *Plato and Platonism*. London: Macmillan, 1893.
- *Greek Studies*. Ed. Charles Shadwell. London: Macmillan, 1895.
- *Essays From 'The Guardian'*. London: Macmillan, 1906.
- *Miscellaneous Studies*. Ed. Charles Shadwell. London: Macmillan, 1899.
- *Appreciations*. London: Macmillan, 1910.
- *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: the 1893 Text*. Ed. Donald Hill. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- *Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*, ed. Gerald Monsman. Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1993.
- *Marius the Epicurean*. Ed. Gerald Monsman. Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008.
- *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Ed. Matthew Beaumont. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Pecora, Vincent. *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation and Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Perkin, James Russell. *Theology and the Victorian Novel*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.
- Plumptre, E. H. 'The Fields of Conflict Between Faith and Unbelief'. *Contemporary Review* 40 (August 1881): 169-178.
- Pope, Alexander. *Poems of Alexander Pope*. Ed. John Butt. London: Methuen, 1963.

- Priestman, Martin. *Romantic Atheism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Quilter, Harry. 'The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity'. *Macmillan's Magazine* 142.251(1880): 391-400.
- Renan, Ernst. *The Life of Jesus*. Trans. Charles Gore. London: J. M. Dent, 1927.
- Ribeyrol, Charlotte. 'A Channel Passage: Swinburne and France'. *A. C. Swinburne and the Singing Word: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*, ed. Yisrael Levin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010): 107-122.
- Riede, David. G. *Swinburne: A Study of Romantic Mythmaking*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978.
- *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- 'Swinburne and Romantic Authority'. *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*. Eds. Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993. 22-40.
- *Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005.
- Robson, John. 'Textual introduction'. John Stuart Mill. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Ed. J. M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.
- Rooksby, Rikky. 'The Algernonicon, or Thirteen Ways of Looking at *Tristram of Lyonesse*'. *The Whole Music of Passion*. Eds. Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), 73-91.
- *A. C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997).
- Rosenberg, John D. *Carlyle and the Burden of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- 'Stopping For Death: Tennyson's *In Memoriam*'. *Victorian Poetry* 30. 3/4 (1992): 291-330.
- *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature*. London: Anthem Press, 2005.

- Roth, Jean Clark. (Unpublished PhD Thesis). 'Victorian Religious Thought and Necessary Truth: Reactions to the Debate Between Henry Longueville Mansel and John Stuart Mill'. Stanford University, 1997.
- Royle, Edward. *Radicals, Secularists, and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1886-1915*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980.
- Rudy, Jason R. *Electric Metres: Victorian Physiological Poetics*. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2009.
- Ryan, Alan. 'Introduction'. John Stuart Mill. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. Ed. J. M. Robson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.
- Ryan, Robert M. 'The Genealogy of Honest Doubt: F. D. Maurice and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*'. *The Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe: Essays in Nineteenth Century Literature and Religion*. Eds. David Jasper and T. R. Wright. New York: St Martin's Press, 1989. 120-130.
- St. John Butler. *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- Sanday W. 'Professor Huxley as a Theologian'. *Contemporary Review* 62 (September 1892): 336-352.
- Saville, Julia. 'Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne, the Immersive Poet as Public Moralizer'. *Victorian Poetry* 47.4 (2009): 691-713.
- 'Swinburne Contra Whitman: From Cosmopolitan Republican to Parochial Jingo?'. *ELH* 78.2 (2011): 479-505.
- Seiler, R.M.. *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1980.
- Schad, John. 'The Divine Comedy of Language: Tennyson's *In Memoriam*'. *Victorian Poetry* 31.2 (1993): 171-186.
- Shaw, W. David. *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age*. London: Athlone Press, 1987.
- '*In Memoriam* and the Rhetoric of Confession'. *ELH* 38.1 (1971): 80-103.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Major Works*. Eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- Shrimpton, Nicholas. 'Swinburne and the Dramatic Monologue'. *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*. Eds. Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993.52-72.
- 'The Old Aestheticism and the New'. *Literature Compass* 2.1 (2005): 1-16.
- Shuter, William. *Rereading Walter Pater*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Sidgwick, Henry. 'The Prophet of Culture'. *Macmillan's Magazine* 16.94 (1867): 271-280.
- [Simcox, Edith]. 'H. Lawrenny' (Pseudonym). Review of Arnold's *St. Paul and Protestantism*. *Academy* 11 (August 1870): 282-283.
- Snyder, Laura. *Reforming Philosophy: A Victorian Debate on Science and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Staines, David. *Tennyson's Camelot: The Idylls of the King and Its Medieval Sources*. Wilfrid Laurier Press: Waterloo, Canada, 1982.
- Stephen, Leslie. 'The Broad Church'. *Fraser's Magazine* 1.3 (1870): 311-325.
- 'Religion as Fine Art'. *Fraser's Magazine* 5.26 (1872): 156-168.
- 'An Agnostic's Apology'. *Fortnightly Review* 19.114 (1876): 840-860.
- 'The Scepticism of Believers'. *Fortnightly Review* 22.129 (1877): 355-376
- Stevens, Jennifer. *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1920*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010.
- Stevenson, Catherine Bates. 'Swinburne and Tennyson's Tristram'. *Victorian Poetry* 19.2 (1981): 185-189.
- Stone, Donald. *Communications with the Future: Arnold in Dialogue*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Stott, Rebecca. 'The Wetfooted Understory: Darwinian Immersions'. *The Joy of Secularism: 11 Essays for How We Live Now*. Ed. George Levine. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011. 205-224.
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. 'Matthew Arnold's New Poems'. *Fortnightly Review* 2.10 (1867): 414-445.
- *William Blake*. London: James Camden Hotten. 1868

- ‘Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence’. *Fortnightly Review* 4.19 (1868): 16-40.
 - ‘The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, *Fortnightly Review* 7.41 (1870): 551-575.
 - *George Chapman*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1875.
 - ‘Victor Hugo: *Religions et Religion*’. *Fortnightly Review* 27.162 (1880): 761-768.
 - ‘Tennyson and Musset’. *Fortnightly Review* 29.170 (1881): 129-153.
 - ‘Dethroning Tennyson’. *Nineteenth Century* 23.131 (1888): 127-129
 - *A Study of Ben Jonson*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1889.
 - *Complete Poetical Works*. 2 vols. London: Heinemann, 1924.
 - *The Swinburne Letters*. 6 vols. Ed. Cecil Lang. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
 - ‘Under the Microscope’. *Swinburne Replies*. Ed. Clyde K. Hyder. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966. 35-87.
 - ‘Social Verse’ (1891). *Arthur Clough: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Michael Thorpe. London: Routledge, 1996.
 - *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*. Ed. Kenneth Haynes. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.
 - *Major Poems and Selected Prose*. Eds. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
 - *Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. 2 vols. Edited Terry Myers. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005.
- Sutherland, John. *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Tennyson, Lord Alfred. ‘Despair’. *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 10 (1881): 629-640.

- *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks. Harlow: Pearson and Longman, 2007.
- *Idylls of the King*. Ed. J. M. Gray. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Thomas, Donald. *Swinburne: The Poet in His World*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1978.
- Tomko, Michael, ‘Varieties of Geological Experience in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*’. *Victorian Poetry* 42.2 (2004): 113-133.
- Tucker, Herbert, ‘Tennyson and the Measure of Doom’. *PMLA* 98.1 (1983): 8-20.
- ‘The Epic Plight of Troth in *Idylls of the King*’. *ELH* 58.3 (1991): 701-20.
- *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790-1910*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Tucker, Paul. ‘Reanimate Greek: Pater and Ruskin on Botticelli’. *Transparencies of Desire*. Eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams. Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002. 119-132.
- Turner, Frank. ‘The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith was Lost’. *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*. Eds. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990. 9-36.
- *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
- Tyrwhitt, John R. ‘The Greek Spirit in Modern Literature’. *Contemporary Review* 29 (March 1877): 552-566.
- Upton, Charles. ‘Fervent Atheism’. *The Modern Review* 1 (January, 1880): 98-124.
- Vance, Norman. *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997.
- Varty, Anne. ‘The Crystal Man: A Study of Diaphaneité’, in *Pater in the 1990s*. Eds. Laurel Brake and Ian Small. Greensboro NC: ELT Press, 1991. 205-215.

- Vogeler, Martha Salmon. 'The Religious Meaning of *Marius the Epicurean*'. *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19.3 (1964): 287-299.
- Von Arx, Jeffrey. *Progress and Pessimism: Religion, Politics and History in Late Nineteenth Century Britain*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Viswanathan, Gauri. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Wallen, Jeffrey. 'Reflection and Self-Reflection: Narcissistic or Aesthetic Criticism'. *Texas Studies in English Literature and Language* 34.3 (1992): 301-322.
- 'Alive in the Grave: Walter Pater's *Renaissance*', *ELH* 66.4 (1999): 1033-1055.
- Ward, Humphry Mrs. 'Marius the Epicurean'. *Macmillan's Magazine* 52 (June 1885): 132-139.
- *Robert Elsmere*. Edited by Rosemary Ashton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Ward, Wilfrid. 'The Clothes of Religion'. *National Review* 3.16 (1884): 554-573.
- Weiss, Timothy. 'Walter Pater, Aesthetic Utilitarian'. *Victorians Institute Journal* 15 (1987): 105-121.
- Whiteley, Giles. *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism*. Oxford: Legenda, 2010.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Major Works*. Ed. Isobel Murray. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Willey, Basil. *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Williams, Carolyn. *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- 'On Pater's Late Style'. *Nineteenth Century Prose*. 24.2 (1997):143-158.
- Wolff, Robert Lee. *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London: John Murray, 1977).
- Wood, Marcus. *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Wright, Thomas. *The Life of Walter Pater*, vol. II. London, Everett & Co. 1907.

Yeoh, Paul. 'Saint's Everlasting Rest: The Martyrdom of Maggie Tulliver'.
Studies in the Novel 41.1 (2009): 1-19.

Zimmerman, Virginia. *Excavating Victorians*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 2008.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

