

DISCIPLINING THE SENSES: AESTHETICISM, ATTENTION, AND MODERNITY

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KAREN L. SHAUP

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Student: Karen L. Shaup

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of English by:

Dr. Forest Pyle	Chair
Dr. Sangita Gopal	Member
Dr. Linda Kintz	Member
Dr. Kenneth Calhoon	Outside Member

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research & Innovation/Dean of the Graduate School
-----------------------	--

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Karen L. Shaup

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Approved: _____
Dr. Forest Pyle

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Aesthetic Movement in England coalesced literary and visual arts in unprecedented ways. While the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement reflected on visual art through the exercise of criticism, their encounters with painting, portraiture, and sculpture also led to the articulation of a problem. That problem centers on the fascination with the attentive look, or the physical act of seeing in a specialized way for an extended period of time that can result in a transformation in the mind of the observer. In this dissertation, I consider how Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde utilize the attentive look in their poetry, fiction, and drama, respectively. As I argue in this dissertation, the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement approach and treat attention as a new tool for self-creation and self-development. As these writers generally attempt to transcend both the dullness and repetitiveness associated with modern forms of industrialized labor as well as to create an antidote for the endless distractions affiliated with the modern urban environment, they also develop or interrogate systems for training and regulating the senses. What these writers present as a seemingly spontaneous attentive engagement with

art and beauty they also sell to the public as a specialized form of perception and experience that can only be achieved through training or, more specifically, through an attentive reading of their works. While these writers attempt to subvert institutional authority, whether in the form of the Royal Academy or the Oxford University system, they also generate new forms of authority and knowledge. Even though the Aesthetic Movement is not a homogeneous set of texts and art works, the Aesthetic Movement can be characterized in terms of its utilization of attentiveness as a way to both understand and create modern subjectivity.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Karen L. Shaup

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, English, 2011, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, English and Philosophy, 1998, Hartwick College

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Nineteenth Century
Critical Theory

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, English, University of Oregon, 2003-2010

PUBLICATIONS:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Aesthetic Movement in England coalesced literary and visual arts in unprecedented ways. Writers responded to visual art not only through the composition and publication of art reviews, but writers also promoted public and private art galleries and formed friendships with artists. Oscar Wilde and Henry James, for instance, both attended and wrote about the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877. While the Grosvenor Gallery exhibited works produced by the visual artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement, such as Edward Burne-Jones, the Grosvenor Gallery more importantly developed innovative ways to hang artworks that enhanced the viewing experience by organizing works according to artists, by putting more space between individual pieces, and by refusing to hang pieces out of a comfortable line of sight. The Grosvenor Gallery sought to provide a new way of viewing art works in London. As Lord Henry in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* states to his friend Basil, "[t]he Grosvenor is really the only place" to exhibit a work (18). Lord Henry explains that the traditional venue for viewing art, the Royal Academy, "is too large and too vulgar. Whenever I have gone there, there have been either so many people that I have not been able to see the pictures, which was dreadful, or so many pictures that I have not been able to see the people, which was worse" (18).

Although the popularity and proliferation of art reviews by the literati inspired some painters, such as James McNeill Whistler, to express frustration with the intrusion of literary arts into the field of fine arts, writers, like Matthew Arnold, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde, defended the use of criticism and argued for its creative potential.

Famously, Oscar Wilde declared criticism to be an even more creative act than the production of art itself. More importantly, the engagement with visual art shaped, informed, and even inspired the development of literary aestheticism. As Richard Stein has shown, “the literary response” to the fine arts engendered “a new aesthetic movement” in the nineteenth century that in turn informed the emergence of literary modernism in the twentieth century (1).

While the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement reflect on visual art in the public arena through the exercise of criticism, their encounters with painting, portraiture, and sculpture also led to the articulation of a problem. That problem centers on the fascination with the attentive look, or the physical act of seeing in a specialized way for an extended period of time that can result in a transformation in the mind of the observer. In this dissertation, I consider how Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde utilize the attentive look in their poetry, fiction, and drama. By featuring, investigating, and displaying the attentive look, these writers confront the process of modernization and the effects of modernization on subjectivity and representation.

As Marshall Berman suggests, nineteenth century writers and critics respond to modernity with an ambivalent attitude and with “self-ironies and inner tensions” that become “a primary source of their creative power” (24). While modernity can be characterized by “rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth; the proliferation of new technologies and transportations; the saturation of advanced capitalism; [and] the explosion of mass consumer culture,” Berman proposes an approach to modernity that emphasizes the psychological experience of being conscious of being modern (Singer 72). Berman finds that “[t]o be modern is to find ourselves in an

environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (15). Exploring the dialectical quality of modern existence, Berman reveals the psychological experience of the difficulty of finding a firm footing in the modern world; as the future promises endlessly new experiences, the past continuously slips away. For Rossetti, James, and Wilde, the process of engaging and preserving the present moment emerges as a central creative occupation.

One type of experience undergoing constant transformation and being reflected upon at the end of the nineteenth century is sensory perception of the world. As Ben Singer elucidates, social theorists like George Simmel and Walter Benjamin “insisted that modernity must also be understood in terms of a fundamentally different register of subjective experience, characterized by the physical and perceptual shocks of the modern urban environment” (72). More recently, Jonathan Crary illustrates how attention – as a special kind of perceptual mode of interacting with the world – in particular defines modernity: “It is possible to see one crucial aspect of modernity as a continual crisis of attentiveness, to see the changing configurations of capitalism pushing attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with unending introduction of new products, new sources of stimulation, and streams of information, and then responding with new methods of managing and regulating perception” (13-4). Like Berman, Crary underscores that the underlying dynamic of modernity is perpetual change. Crary shows that “modernization was not a one-time set of changes but an ongoing and perpetually modulating process that would never pause for individual subjectivity to accommodate and ‘catch up’ with it” (30). While “individual subjectivity” has trouble maintaining pace

with the persistently shifting ground of modernity, Cary stresses how technologies of power adapt more quickly to the changing perceptual conditions engendered by the logic of modernization. As modern conditions afford new opportunities for sensory experiences and for the possibility of multiplying opportunities for distraction, modern institutions respond by developing new recommendations not only for attentiveness itself but also recommendations for appropriate objects of attention.

Attention, as a state of being or as a perceptual position, functions a lot like breathing. Similar to breathing in and out, being attentive or paying attention is an action that can occur without conscious choice; however, also like breathing, it is something that can be consciously controlled, willed into being, and affected by external factors.

Attention is both an intellectual exercise as well as a physical one. Because attention can be subject to control, it has history. Even though attention as a function of the body is not unique to any century or community, the value and meaning of attention has changed and transformed over time. Today we take for granted the generally positive associations with maintaining an attentive posture toward a subject and the role attention plays in the production of intellectual and creative achievements, but in the nineteenth century attention was not an obvious tool to be used for academic or worldly success. As Stephen Arata conveys, “The idea that paying attention is at once a virtue in itself and the fount of other virtues is so deeply ingrained in our thought that it is difficult to see the connection as anything but natural” (195-6). Arata points out that “from, roughly, the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth – attention was a *problem*, or rather it was a site of a series of problems that cut across intellectual disciplines” (196). A broad spectrum of thinkers, writers, and scientists, as Arata describes, “devoted at least part of their intellectual life to

the myriad of problems surrounding attention” and asked a variety of questions about attention: “What *is* attention, anyway? How is it produced? In what contexts is it needed, and why? How might it be prolonged? How is it related to will? To discipline? To education? To temperament? To physiology? To environment?” (196). How and what we think about attention has a history, and part of the purpose of this dissertation is to show that the Aesthetic Movement is part of the history of how attention emerged as a value today.

In their accounts, Crary and Arata stress that the emergence of attention as an object of intellectual inquiry is coincident with the development of new methods of production in the nineteenth century. Crary points out that “attention became a problem alongside the specific systematic organization of labor and production by industrial capitalism” (30). Crary notes, “[i]nattention, especially within the context of new forms of large-scale industrialized production, began to be treated as a danger and a serious problem, even though it was often the very modernized arrangements of labor that produced inattention” (13). Arata echoes Crary when he states that in regard to “industrial workers, paying attention was essential but often nearly impossible to do. For their own safety, mill-hands needed to concentrate as they interacted with ever larger, ever more complex machines. Yet the very nature of their tasks fostered *inattention*, since those tasks were often literally mind-numbing in their tedium and repetitiveness” (196). As Arata argues, William Morris, who was affiliated with the Aesthetic Movement, found industrial labor to necessitate a form of “[c]oncentration” that failed to inspire any other of the “faculties of mind” (196). Morris perceived labor “under these conditions” as “the epitome of useless toil” (196). Morris sought to foster a means of production that would

engage multiple levels of the worker's mental engagement and to create art that could be enjoyed and even created throughout a worker's daily routine. Arata contends that Morris does not hold a primary place in the literary canon precisely because his poems by design do not require the kind of sustained attentiveness that is today associated with literary toil. As Arata points out, Morris was against the formation of the academic discipline of literary studies exactly because it would require a person to put his or her attention solely toward the activity of reading and to approach reading as work.

While Rossetti, James, and Wilde concentrate their literary efforts toward a depiction of the leisured class, rather than toward a direct examination of the lives of industrial laborers, they cultivate an interest in the relationship between attention and creative production. As I argue in this dissertation, the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement approach and treat attention as a new tool for self-creation and self-development. As these writers generally attempt to transcend both the dullness and repetitiveness associated with modern forms of industrialized labor as well as to create an antidote for the endless distractions affiliated with the modern urban environment, they also develop or interrogate systems for training and regulating the senses. What these writers present as a seemingly spontaneous attentive engagement with art and beauty they also sell to the public as a specialized form of perception and experience that can only be achieved through training, or, more specifically, through an attentive reading of their works. While these writers attempt to defy institutional authority, whether in the form of the Royal Academy or the Oxford University system, they also generate new forms of authority and knowledge. Even though the Aesthetic Movement is not a homogeneous set of texts and art works, the literary aestheticism can be characterized in terms of its

utilization of attentiveness as a way to create and foster a new way to experience and to be in the lived world.

In the title of this project, I use the phrase “Disciplining the Senses” in order to place literary aestheticism within the context of the formation of new academic disciplines and new cultural institutions in the nineteenth century. As Michel Foucault has illustrated throughout his work, the nineteenth century can be characterized by the emergence of institutions that transformed the nature and arrangement of power and authority. As he explains at the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, starting in the nineteenth century, “the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used” (147). The terms of these “mechanisms of power” are “norm, knowledge, life, meaning, the disciplines, and regulations” (148). Rather than power being centralized in the figure of a ruler or in the symbols of the ruler’s family, power is dispersed and distributed throughout a network of institutions and regulations that direct expert advice directly concerning the health of the individual body and the species. William James exemplifies the terms behind this new arrangement of power when he reviews the burgeoning discipline of psychology and the importance of an evaluation of attention to an understanding of psychology. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James puts the exploration of attentiveness in these terms: “The practical and theoretical life of whole species, as well as individual beings, results from the selection which the habitual direction of their attention involves” (13). Attention matters, in other words, because it relates directly to the health of the species. Fostering

good attentive habits through pedagogical strategies, as James will go on to argue, therefore, can lead to sustaining the health and welfare of specific communities.

One problem with the modern arrangement of power that begins to dominate in the nineteenth century is its exclusion of certain types of experiences and identities. By promoting models of normalcy and encouraging self-regulation of behavior, this type of organization of power new to the nineteenth century depends upon exclusion. In other words, institutions tend to identify some thing or some behavior as normal by pointing to what it is not and by pushing out to the margins what it deems abnormal or disruptive. I chose the word “Disciplining” rather than “Discipline” for the title of this dissertation in order to emphasize a conflict within literary aestheticism. For many of the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement, a disassociation with institutional or established cultural authority was an underlying motivation for many of their works and public statements. Rossetti, for instance, started his career as a poet-painter by rejecting the course of study at the Royal Academy. Wilde got into trouble at Oxford by failing to conform to the school’s academic schedule. As much as the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement either positioned themselves as outsiders to or became unwilling outcasts from institutions of cultural authority, they also sought to establish their own version of cultural authority.

If, on one hand, literary aestheticism can be seen as a process of making a claim for itself as a form of cultural authority, then, on the other hand, it also undermines that goal to a certain extent by its focus on and its treatment of sensory experiences. In the famous Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Walter Pater claims that most people do not achieve “success in life” and that “it might even be said that our failure is to form habits”

(152). He advises opening up to “any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend” (152).

Pater’s advice to allow habits to be jarred or broken through an acute or intense awareness of sensory experience underlies literary aestheticism. By paying attention to sensory experience or by allowing the senses to direct attention, Pater and other writers associated with aestheticism attempted to break habits, make discoveries, and transcend routine and mundane reality. What is at stake for Pater is not only the achievement of aesthetic pleasure, but it is also about the relationship of the self to the world, and the ability of the self to have agency and freedom. What I am suggesting by the phrase “Disciplining the Senses” is the complicated relationship literary aestheticism has with power in the late nineteenth century; on one hand, literary aestheticism seeks to establish itself as type of discipline, or even style, while at the same time, the movement’s commitment to interrupting routine through the exploration of sensory experience creates disruption and interruption to any systematic course of study. It is this combination of a desire to function as a kind of cultural institution while at the same time inviting disruption, interruption, and spontaneity through the activity of the senses that characterizes literary aestheticism.

This combination of working toward a formation of a discipline of aestheticism and the simultaneous promotion of sensory experiences that would jolt one out of routines, habits, or states of mind bears on how the texts interpreted in this dissertation invite readers to read. As I mentioned above, the writers associated with aestheticism invoke a specialized form of perception that can be achieved through an attentive reading and re-reading of their works. Reading emerges as a form of aesthetic training, but that

training is disrupted or interrupted by the text itself as the text jolts the reader or attempts to play upon sensory experience. The readings that I conduct in this dissertation illustrate this dynamic, a dynamic that becomes most pronounced within the decadent works of Oscar Wilde. What I hope to show in this dissertation is that literary aestheticism's relationship to power is complex, and that literary aestheticism invites the reader to read as part of a training in aestheticism; the text's interruptions to that training program, however, reveal how the writers associated with literary aestheticism remain concerned about freedom and agency in an increasingly regulated cultural environment in which responses to art and literature, as I hope to suggest below, are offered as predetermined.

What I was unable to do in the context of this dissertation was to look at other writers loosely affiliated with the Aesthetic Movement in England that could have offered new points of departure for the role attentiveness played. For instance, the aunt-niece poetic duo known as Michael Field would have afforded an opportunity to examine attentiveness in a situation where the aesthetic value of direct perception of the world was rooted in collaboration. However, I chose Rossetti, James, and Wilde for this study in order to illustrate the commitment to individualism that they each express in different ways. The interest in individualism that links these writers indicates the concern they shared for how the changes wrought by modernization influenced and transformed the individual's sensory experience of the world. While Walter Benjamin celebrates the possibilities film presents for a collective aesthetic experience, the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement identified the possibility for agency and freedom in the individual and individualized response to art. The Aesthetic Movement is fundamentally transitional; it marks a very short but very important transition from Victorian

sensibilities to modernist ones. The commitment to individualism shared by these writers is part of the transitional quality of the Aesthetic Movement.

In the remainder of this introduction, I flesh out some of the historical trends that inform the development of notions of attentiveness in the cultural sphere in the nineteenth century. In particular, I wish to stress the relationship between attending to art and forging a national identity that emerges as a recurring concern for nineteenth century cultural authorities. This project attempts to show that the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement did not take a passing interest in art as part of a broader cultural awareness or fulfillment of aesthetic taste; instead, the development of practices of attentiveness that evolve out of discussions about what attentiveness toward art could do or not do bear directly on how these writers develop and invest in theories of the self.

Contributing to the formation of the Aesthetic Movement, John Ruskin dwells on attentiveness as a specialized and important way of seeing. In his address to the Cambridge School of Art at the institution's inaugural ceremony in October of 1858, Ruskin argues that "sight" is "the most important thing to be taught" and that "to be taught to see is to gain word and thought at once, and both true" (95). Advising the newly formed school to develop its practices around helping students "see natural objects clearly and truly," Ruskin urges his audience to approach sight as more than a simple metaphor for knowledge and enlightenment. For Ruskin, to see clearly refers to the physical act of looking in a specialized way for an extended period of time that results in a transformation in the mind of the observer.

Although Ruskin does not explain the precise mechanics of this transformation, he does shed some light onto the process he advocates later in the speech when he recalls

spending six weeks studying Paolo Veronese's painting *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* in Turin. While Ruskin encourages students of art to pay attention to "natural objects," he analyzes viewing habits by loosely and informally collecting data on popular reactions to the Veronese painting. As Ruskin describes, the Veronese painting he intended to study was placed above a door, and he subsequently "had a stage erected" for his work. From his elevated position, Ruskin realizes that he "could observe, without being observed" himself the reaction other visitors had to the artwork (99). He predicts that the Veronese, despite the challenge of its location, would not only catch, but hold, the attention of the other spectators. He believes that "if ever a work of Art caught popular attention, this ought to do so" (99). However, he

found that on average, the English traveller who was doing Italy conscientiously, and seeing everything as he thought he ought, gave about half or three-quarters of a minute; but the flying or fashionable traveller, who came to do as much as he could in a given time, never gave more than a single glance, most of such people turning aside instantly to a bad landscape hung on the right, containing a vigorously painted white wall, and an opaque green moat. (99)

Ruskin compares his slow and methodical study of the painting to the accelerated speed at which English tourists – even the "conscientious" ones – view the piece. In expressing these observations to the Cambridge School of Art, Ruskin aims to persuade his audience that art will not thrive in England until the English start to "care for pictures," but in doing so he reveals the centrality of notions of attention and attentiveness to his ideas about how the public should respond to art. The educational, moral, and spiritual benefits

that accompany an appreciation of art cannot be achieved, Ruskin suggests here, without the cultivation of proper attentive habits. In this speech, “attention” functions not only as a synonym for “interest,” but it is also something that can be measured, quantified, and compared. As Ruskin observes others “without being observed” himself, he situates himself in a position of power in order to assert and establish his expertise. While Ruskin complains that the “fashionable traveller” consistently turns away from the good Veronese painting to gaze at the “bad landscape,” he suggests that a lack of attentiveness can affect and impair judgment. Ruskin illustrates this point further for his audience by registering his surprise that female visitors in particular fail to notice how the beauty of the dresses in the Veronese painting exceeds the beauty of contemporary fabrics and designs available in shops.

Ruskin’s attention to the attentiveness of the tourists in Turin provokes a question: how long would an individual need to look at a work of art in order to really gain a full appreciation of it and to apprehend its value? Ruskin fails to address this question straightforwardly. The only answer implied in his speech would be any duration of time longer than “three-quarters of a minute.” As Ruskin indicates, he himself divides his attention between the observation of the work of art and the observation of other visitors without impairing his own appreciation for the work of art. However, Ruskin stresses that his expertise derives from his own habits of attentiveness, and these habits can be taught through repetition and practice. In Ruskin’s speech, he establishes a connection between attention toward art and the cultivation of judgment that initiates the issues associated with the formation of the Aesthetic Movement. Attention becomes the way that the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement think about visual art as part of a larger

project of self development and self creation. The interest in and association with visual art, a defining characteristic of the Aesthetic Movement, relates to an overall concern for the development of identity.

For the writers of the Aesthetic Movement, an attentive absorption into a single work of art might lead to the isolation of the individual. After all, Ruskin conducts his experiment perched on a loft high above the other visitors. Additionally, at the same time as modernization sets into motion the conditions for constant change, it also engenders a historically specific model of subjectivity distinguished by alienation, isolation, and fragmentation. In the French decadent novel *A Rebours* (1884) by J.K. Huysmans, for instance, the narrative focuses on the eccentric aesthete Des Esseintes who moves to rural seclusion in order to minimize contact with other people. Des Esseintes surrounds himself with objects, including paintings, that would attract and heighten his sensory experience. Des Esseintes organizes his entire life around the intensification of his senses. Des Esseintes' withdrawal from society represents an extreme example of the cultivation of the senses and of aesthetic taste through the rejection of community with others; even though Des Esseintes elects to live in isolation, his retreat from social relationships indicates how modern conditions have led to his alienation. Des Esseintes seeks to retreat from the present into an aristocratic past as much as he desires to escape the urban landscape. The impact of *A Rebours* on British aestheticism is well known; Des Esseintes' ekphrasis of two of Gustave Moreau's paintings of the *femme fatale* Salome constitutes the most influential source material for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, a work that arguably epitomizes aesthetic ideals in England. Des Esseintes' pursuit of intensified

sensory experience also impacts Wilde's character Dorian Gray who is fascinated with Des Esseintes and falls under his influence.

However, even as the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement portray and exalt in an attitude of attentive absorption directed toward art, they do so generally and seemingly paradoxically in order to interrogate and ultimately strengthen intersubjective relationships and community ties. For Jonathan Freedman, the Aesthetic Movement in England, unlike its European counterpart, was not founded upon the strict division between art and life that became associated with Théophile Gautier's phrase *l'art pour l'art* and was always, from its inception, inflected with broader political and social concerns. Calling upon William Morris's socialism, Rossetti and Swinburne's pro-European nationalist poetry, and Wilde's satirical plays, Freedman demonstrates that aestheticism consistently displays a concern for political matters (12). The aesthetes also exhibit a commitment to thinking through the formation and cultivation of community and friendship. By actively pursuing and depicting experiences that would heighten their senses in order to preserve the present moment, the writers associated with the Aesthetic Movement not only sought to promote individuality and personality, but they also aimed, to a certain extent, to develop community through strengthened individuality. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," Oscar Wilde advocates a form of socialism that would "relieve us from the sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody" (1079). He argues that a just society can only be supported and sustained when conditions allow the individuality of each person to flourish. Because the aesthetes generally contend that an attentive absorption directed toward visual art facilitates the growth and expression of an individual's

personality, the writers affiliated with the Aesthetic Movement find in attentiveness a method for fostering the conditions for ideal relationships between individuals even as modernity began to disintegrate traditional community ties.

Part of the cultural background for the Aesthetic Movement's engagement of attentiveness is the development of cosmopolitan perspectives and positions. Many real and fictional aesthetes are identified as cosmopolites. Amanda Anderson asserts that cosmopolitanism holds together "individualist and intersubjective elements" (31). She describes that "while cosmopolitanism places a value on reciprocal and transformative encounters between strangers variously construed, it simultaneously has strongly individualist elements, in its advocacy of detachment from shared identities, its emphasis on affiliation as voluntary, and its appeal to self-cultivation" (31). Anderson's understanding of cosmopolitanism challenges other accounts of cosmopolitanism that stress cosmopolitanism as a detached or disinterested stance; Anderson shows that cosmopolitanism can be a position that accepts and embraces a sense of community with other individuals while also avoiding or denying affiliation with any single group. As Bruce Robbins argues, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily imply a universalizing attitude either. For Robbins, cosmopolitanism can be "plural and particular" (2). Robbins urges readers to challenge the assumption that the "cosmopolitan is [...] incapable of participating in the making of history, doomed to the mere aesthetic spectatorship that he or she is also held secretly to prefer" (4).

The development of cosmopolitan perspectives within aestheticism is not surprising. After all, the Aesthetic Movement emerges and expands as a result of travel and tourism. Introducing English audiences to the European works of art they observed

and studied while abroad, John Ruskin and Walter Pater expound and advocate their disparate views on the role of art and architecture in modern society. Ruskin and Pater both influenced Oscar Wilde, who promoted his own version of aestheticism while performing a lecture tour in America. The Aesthetic Movement unfolds, in a sense, as a process of importing objects worthy of aesthetic consideration and description and exporting aesthetic style. Henry James, reluctant to be associated with aestheticism, was also a reluctant cosmopolitan. In the essay "Occasional Paris," James declares that "To be a cosmopolite is not, I think, an ideal; the ideal should be to be a concentrated patriot" (213). James' extensive traveling throughout Europe, however, cultivated his ability to make comparisons and in his own view formed his cosmopolitan outlook. He finds that an individual becomes cosmopolitan when he has "formed the habit of comparing, of looking for points of difference and resemblance, for present and absent advantages, for the virtues that go with certain defects and defects that go with certain virtues" (213-214). In other words, to be cosmopolitan requires the ability to be attentive to more than one thing. For James, like the Aesthetic Movement, travel and tourism informed and influenced creative production.

While cosmopolitanism was becoming a viable category of identity in the nineteenth century, there were simultaneously efforts to coalesce a national identity in England through cultural institutions and specifically through the space of the art museum and art gallery. Even though many cosmopolites could be distinguished by a taste for high art, public art exhibitions provided a physical space to attempt to stage the performance of national identity. Visitors to art exhibits participated in a collective cultural activity that reinforced notions of Englishness and that set up expectations, even

if left unfulfilled, for visitors to behave in a uniform way. Art exhibitions celebrated national culture by featuring works of English artists, but they also highlighted England's financial power by showcasing the work of foreign artists. Even when writers, like John Ruskin, reflect on the responses of spectators in art galleries and art museums in Europe, he emphasizes the central characteristic of Englishness. By attending art exhibits, individuals validated the idea of England as a cultural power. Benedict Anderson has defined the nation as "an imagined political community" (6). By watching other visitors at art exhibits as well as by looking at portraits of individuals deemed nationally significant, visitors to art exhibits could see themselves as and also be seen as representatives of a national body. Art exhibitions at public and private galleries facilitated the efforts toward a formation of a national social body. The cultivation of attention to art became an important part of how institutions perceived the formation of a national social body.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, new audiences developed for recreation and mass entertainment in England as a result of the expansion of transportation and communication networks, the restrictions to working hours established by the Early Closing Movement and Bank Holidays Act of 1871, and the development of higher wages for workers due to the successes of trade unions (Maltz 100). By the 1890s, as Diana Maltz has recorded, these trends produced "the first extensive commercialization of leisure" (100). While destinations like the Crystal Palace and the London Zoo attracted scores of visitors annually, other venues, such as national and independent museums, attempted to draw in new spectators by hosting evening hours and eventually by opening on Sundays as well. As the Sunday League and the Sunday

Society led campaigns to make cultural institutions and events available to more people, they argued for the benefits of such experiences in terms of “spiritual renewal” (Maltz 99). In presenting the case for high art as an alternative to church services, J. Allanson Picton, a member of the Sunday Society, claimed “that they who in the National Gallery to-day gaze upon the works of Raphael, Michael Angelo, or Turner are likewise breathing a purer air and recreating their souls by an unfolding of the divine side of fact” (Maltz 124). The members of the Sunday Society not only encouraged individuals to approach the viewing of art as an acceptable substitute for organized religion, but they also insisted that the appreciation of high art could be superior to conventional religious rituals.

At the same time as the rhetoric utilized by the Sunday Society invoked spirituality and spiritual transformation, the space of the museum and art gallery functioned as sites for the exercise of citizenship. For instance, middle class social reformers called upon high art to assuage the discomfort of poverty. As Maltz conveys, the Victorian reformer Henrietta Barnett’s memoir reveals “an implicit facet of [...] philanthropic experience: the fantasy of remedying slum chaos and slum brutality through communal aesthetic revelation” (1). Maltz finds that a “desire to teach the poor an appreciation of beauty pervades the literature of even the most practical late Victorian programs for the social reform of the working classes” (2). These efforts reflect Pierre Bourdieu’s theories about the relationship between class and taste in the twentieth century; Bourdieu argues that taste emerges as a stronger indicator of class and social position than income. As Victorian reformers sought to impose middle class values on the working poor, they revealed that an appreciation of art and beauty is a condition not only

for obtaining middle class status but also for participating in society as a responsible citizen.

Judith Stoddart explains how visitors to art exhibits had been incorporated into notions of a national social body since at least the 1830s. In Stoddart's account, "[d]escriptions of the crowds at public exhibitions, echoing the rhetoric of contemporary political debates about Chartism, frequently figured viewers as a national audience, a homogeneous body with an easily summarized set of reactions" (198). Even as the government began to imagine crowds as a national body, Stoddart reveals how in "the 1830s ad hoc parliamentary committees on the arts devised schemes for turning out more deliberate and uniform consumers of visual culture" because "[p]aintings in particular – which through public exhibitions and reproductions could reach even a nonreading audience – seemed the most promising means of centering the attention of a restless populace" (197). In other words, visual culture became an object of interest to government bodies as a way to appease and control the restlessness of the populace.

In particular, these government committees advocated a particular way of observing and viewing art that would create an orderly and predictable populace. Promoting attentiveness toward art became a method of regulation and control. In 1835, Charles Eastlake, a painter at the Royal Academy, wrote an essay entitled "How to Observe" in which he described an "ideal, abstract, and orderly observer" (Stoddart 198). Stoddart argues, however, that despite Eastlake's efforts to prescribe the appropriate attitude and bodily posture toward art, "individual viewers [...] brought a new power to the exhibition space. Painting did not appear to transfix the attention of a wandering audience. Instead, the art world was itself set in turmoil by the perception that it was

under the surveillance of countless eyes” (199). As Stoddart elucidates, the “very movement of the visitors through the galleries and exhibitions of the next decade becomes, in the descriptions of contemporaries, a reminder of emerging theories of subjectivity that locate taste, perception, and aesthetic value within specific bodies” (198-9). Stoddart maintains that in the early nineteenth century “the emphasis on an embodied spectator implied a new intimacy in the exchange between art and its audience. Even as spectatorship became more visible in the new public spaces devoted to it, it was being imagined as a fundamental private activity, contained in and constrained by individual bodies” (199). She concludes, however, that “if the act of seeing was in essence a bodily function, dependent on the makeup of physical organs and not on spiritual or ideal patterns or types, then the fascination of the eye might be, not a condition to be avoided or corrected, but simply an apt characterization of the way looking works” (199).

In 1877, when Henry James recorded his impressions of a diverse range of art exhibits in London in the essay “Picture Season in London,” he links nationality to practices of artistic consumption. In reviewing the “great multiplicity of exhibitions” open during the London social season, James discovers what he deems a uniquely English passion for the acquisition of art (136). He claims, “the taste for art in England is at bottom a fashion, a need for luxury, a tribute even, as my friend says, to propriety; not an outgush of productive power” (136). James adds, “How these people have always needed, in a certain way, to be entertained; what handsome things they have collected about them; in the absence of production, on what a scale consumption has always gone on!” (136). Through the essay, James celebrates the appetite of the English consumer for art: “English gentleman have bought – with English bank notes – profusely,

unremittingly, splendidly” (137). Although some artistic “treasures” had been stored privately and kept from public view, James claims that they have been becoming more “accessible” and represent a collective, national “wealth” (137). He concludes, “whether or no the English people have painted, the rest of the world has painted for them. They have needed pictures; it is ungracious to look too narrowly at the grounds of the need. Formerly it was supplied almost exclusively by the lordly operation of purchase; now it is gratified by the simpler process of paying a shilling to an extremely civil person in a front shop” (137). James emphatically states that viewing art is part of the English national character. His account surveys the shift in the cultural landscape; while the upper classes were alone in their ability to purchase and reflect on art, now that opportunity is open to all to consume visual art.

In chapters three and four, I refer to one particular genre of art that assists in the development of how the Aesthetic Movement coalesced attention, modernity, and self-development: portraiture. For Richard Brilliant, portraiture appeals to our collective reliance on the face as “the most important key to identification based on appearance” as well as “the primary field of expressive action, replete with a variety of ‘looks’ whose meaning is subject to interpretation, if not always correctly” (10). While today the popularity of social media sites (think facebook) and the pervasiveness of camera phones assist in making the face integral to the process of identity creation and formation, late Victorian culture was possibly even more obsessed with the revelatory possibilities of the face and called upon the field of science in order to catalogue and classify facial characteristics. As Margaret Steltz elucidates, by the second half of the nineteenth century “the face had usurped both the hand and the voice as the core marker of being”

(7). Investing in the belief that the face could reveal an individual's true and unchanging nature, Victorian culture in general promoted depictions of the face. With a rising middle class and with the growing use of photography, more people than ever before were paying for original painted or photographic portraits of themselves and also for reproductions of images of notable individuals. Steltz describes how a "multitude of faces looked out at the spectator every day from the pages of the periodical press" (11). Not only did these images of faces function as a form of information, they were also used to sell literature and art. Explaining that "[o]ften, these images accompanied articles about writers or about artists, too, as well as conversation with such figures," Steltz concludes that the "late Victorian industry known as the new Journalism had discovered the marketability of personality" (11).

While the portrayal of faces within the pages of popular magazines and journals aided in the commercial success of print media, the production of portraits was in itself a profitable enterprise. Dennis Denisoff characterizes portraiture in the nineteenth century as "a popular, conservative, and potentially lucrative art form" (20). Because the desire to convey the achievement of middle and upper class status drove the demand for portraiture, the genre did not find many opportunities for stylistic or thematic experimentation. As a result, the representation of gender and sexuality within portraiture remained for the most part traditional, conventional, and static. Claiming that literary aestheticism and portraiture "make odd bedfellows," Denisoff argues that the "interrogation of heterosexual models of identity" at the core of aestheticism is in opposition with the "reinforcements of the historical and biological status quo" within the production of portraiture (251). Denisoff proposes that portraiture "lacked the creative

flexibility necessary to accommodate” aestheticism’s exploration of identity (251). Even as Denisoff elucidates that some writers loosely associated with the Aesthetic Movement, such as Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf, did transform portraiture’s “rigidity into a means of contesting the very ideals that the genre had conventionally enforced,” he overlooks the ways that portraiture itself was undergoing a representational crisis in confrontation with modernity throughout the second half of the nineteenth century (251). While the conventions associated with portraiture may have remained relatively stable and conservative throughout most of the nineteenth century, the expectations viewers brought to portraiture shifted and evolved in significant ways.

That the experience of viewing portraits emerged as a matter of social interest and at times institutional and pedagogical concern in the nineteenth century can be ascribed to at least two factors. First, the sheer number of people consuming portraiture made the experience of viewing a portrait an easily observable and quantifiable phenomenon; it was an activity that could be evaluated, scrutinized, and refined. Second, the advent of photography effectively reduced the demand for painted portraiture while simultaneously engendering theories about the painter’s ability to see the subject with special insight. For Heather McPherson, “the painted portrait was forced to realign (and redefine) itself in relation to the new medium, either as analogous to, or more important, in reaction against photography” (15-16). In Henry James’s assessment of the portrait painter John Singer Sargent, he utilizes language that suggests Sargent’s ability to function like a camera, but, as James implies, Sargent’s perception and production are better because he infuses the process with human feeling: “in Sargent’s case the process by which the subject seen resolves itself into the object pictured is extraordinarily immediate. It is as if painting

were pure tact of vision, a simple manner of feeling” (*PE* 217). Like a camera, Sargent is capable of transforming a real thing into a representation with a sense of immediacy; for James, Sargent successfully captures or freezes something that is otherwise fleeting and temporary. Unlike a camera, however, Sargent does not operate mechanically. Instead, his ability to portray a sense of immediacy develops out of a “manner of feeling.” James’ reflection on Sargent’s artistic process conforms to the evolution of an idea in the nineteenth century that a portrait painter brought something special to the representation of a subject that photography lacked. As Christine Lindey attests, “the individual response of the artist in the encounter with the sitter was deemed to play a vital part in portraiture” and followed a Romantic sensibility characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century (181). As critics, museum directors, writers, and artists themselves gradually shifted attention away from the subject of the portrait to the artist’s unique insight, portraiture gradually served less as an indicator of social status or as a source of biographical information and became an opportunity for a viewer to recover or re-play the artist’s initial visual encounter with the subject.

The emphasis placed on the individual’s quality of attentiveness toward portraiture led to the articulation of contradictory perspectives on the viewing process. On one hand, reading a portrait seemed to require specialized knowledge or expertise in order to interpret correctly the quasi-scientific meaning behind facial characteristics and also to uncover the artist’s recognition and expression of the subject’s authentic personality. Yet, on the other hand, in both photography and painting, the individual’s personal response to a portrait became increasingly more important.

In the mid-nineteenth century, debates about how to view and read portraits were initiated and formulated around at least two phenomena: the invention of the carte-de-visite photograph in Paris in 1854 and the establishment of the National Portrait Gallery in England in 1856. These two phenomena engaged portraiture in strikingly different ways. While the carte-de-visite was globally popular, portable, reproducible, and concerned with contemporary life, the National Portrait Gallery was institutional, reluctantly elitist, confined to a specific location, and oriented toward the preservation of the past. However, both the popularity of the carte-de-visite photograph and the development of the National Portrait Gallery demonstrate how the expectations associated with the genre of portraiture transformed with modernity. The portrait, either as a reproducible and exchangeable social currency or as a manifestation of high culture, emerged as a particular product of modernity and as a means of reacting against modernity. Both the carte-de-visite and the National Portrait Gallery ushered in new ways of thinking about, viewing, and interpreting portraits.

The carte-de-visite was a small photographic portrait, typically two and half inches by four inches, and mounted on a type of cardboard (American Museum of Photography). Popular demand for cartes-de-visite in Europe, America, and England throughout the second half of the nineteenth century remained steady because, as Geoffrey Batchen has illustrated, the “success” of these photographs was spurred on “by their relative cheapness and clarity as photographs, by the prevailing fashion for democratic rhetoric and conspicuous consumption, [...] and by an era in which the representation of one’s self and family was regarded as a sign not only of financial and social success but of moral and intellectual character” (64). While people exchanged

cartes in a variety of ways and under a range of circumstances, the carte-de-visite had its start as a variation on the traditional visiting card. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Mrs Touchet expresses a real passion for these types of cards. The narrator describes, “For what is usually called social intercourse she had very little relish; but nothing pleased her more than to find her hall-table whitened with oblong morsels of symbolic pasteboard” (69). As the narrator elucidates, Mrs. Touchett’s preference for the “symbolic pasteboard” over “social intercourse” illustrates the power of the carte-de-visite to appeal to an inclination toward the symbol as a viable substitute for the real thing.

While the carte-de-visite grew in popularity, it maintained a limited range of style and distinctly lacked variety. As Batchen describes, the “typical carte-de-visite photograph” features a “self-consciously bourgeois subject leaning on a fake column or pretending to read at a small table”(63). Regardless of degrees of difference within social position or economic status, subjects of the carte-de-visite tended to strike the same pose and convey the same manner. Even Queen Victoria had “arranged for herself to be portrayed in cartes as an ordinary wife and mother,” thus, as Batchen argues, “[c]ollapsing the distinction between ruler and ruled” (65). Often these cards would also “repeat the iconography of high art (the tumbling curtain, the classical column, the receding landscape), but always as emptied signs, hollow signifiers of a cultural economy now dead and gone, or at least safely commodified” (67). Batchen contends that “[i]n both subject matter and form, then, the cart-de-visite embodies the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and its systems of social and economic life” (67).

While the pervasiveness of and the conventions associated with the carte-de-visite have solidified its role in the consolidation of middle class values in the nineteenth

century, the way the *carte-de-visite* was used by individuals resists the same conclusion. Instead, the handling of these cartes exceeded their function as a class and social marker and provoked the problem of how individuals read them and integrated them into their daily lives. Batchen argues that as a result of the conformity of style in the production of the *carte-de-visite*, “the burden of imaginative thought” “shifts...from the artist to the viewer” (74). He claims that the general “banal[ity]” of the cartes fostered “an open invitation to see more than meets the eye” (74). People collected cartes of political figures, writers, actors, and actresses as well as family members and friends and put these cartes in albums. Batchen reports that these albums were often at the center of social and family gatherings; the albums were “shared and flaunted, perused and discussed at gatherings” (72). Batchen contends that the ritual of creating and reflecting on these albums “allowed people to recreate kinship structures in visual terms, and to form imaginary worlds that overcame time and space, class and gender” (72). While the *carte-de-visite* allowed individuals to organize their relationships with others visually at a time when travel and technology could physically separate families, it also created an opportunity for individuals to forge personal attachments to a diverse range of celebrity figures on the basis of facial recognition.

While the *carte-de-visite* assisted in the cultivation of an enlarged sense of community, it also staged the problem its own treatment by consumers. After the initial popularity of the *carte-de-visite*, photographers created “pictures show[ing] people holding open photograph albums or simply feature people looking at another *carte*” (72). For Batchen, that the *carte-de-visite* industry took as a theme the reception of its own product “underlines the psychological or emotional experience that the viewing entails”

and also serves as “a reminder that cartes were scaled to be viewed in the hand rather than on the wall; they were meant to be touched as well as seen” (72). At the same time, this type of carte-de-visite also reveals a collective fascination with the act of reading or interpreting photographic portraits and suggests that while the carte-de-visite served many purposes, both socially and emotionally, the viewer’s experience remained at least partially inscrutable and indescribable. The carte-de-visite’s ability to capture a viewer’s attention or to absorb the viewer in a silent reverie became a matter of interest not only to other consumers of the carte-de-visite but also to the artists behind the production. This interest demonstrates that while the carte-de-visite played a role in portraying and creating middle class values, it also had the power to unsettle those values by provoking states of inactivity. While the most popular cartes show individuals or families involved in activities reading or writing, the cartes that showcase individuals viewing cartes seem to oppose the central middle class value of industriousness.

As the carte-de-visite made it possible for more individuals and families to afford portraits, the production of traditional oil portraits decreased. Even before the innovation of the carte-de-visite, the daguerreotype began to replace oil portraits. According to Christine Lindey, the “first daguerreotypes were portraits and an industry of photographic portraiture developed almost immediately” (182). The demand for portraits stemmed from the association of portraiture with the aristocracy. Lindey points out that portraiture “ranked second in the hierarchy of subject matter of the Academie des Beaux-Arts” and “reflected the high social status of its predominantly aristocratic sitters in the seventeenth century, when the pecking order was first formulated” (179). In England, in the first half of the nineteenth century, portraiture was “the most widely practiced single category of

subject matter” in painting and “about half of the works exhibited at the Academy in London from 1823-1833 were portraits” (179-80). As Lindey demonstrates, the emergence of photographic portraiture impacted the number of oil portraits produced. At the Royal Academy in 1830, three hundred miniature portraits were displayed; in 1860, sixty-four were exhibited (182). It is possible to see the development of the National Portrait Gallery as a response to the growing popularity of photographic portraiture and as an effort to maintain portraiture’s status as a high art form.

In the founding of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), there were competing views about what portraits could or should do. The earliest plans for what the portraits selected for the collection should represent were mixed. As Paul Barlow reports, “Prince Albert’s original proposal was an attempt to humanise modernity; to see the new machine age in terms of people” (Barlow 221). Prince Albert wanted to emphasize the common humanity of individuals who influenced the development of technology and he desired to counteract the influence of machines on people’s lives. Prince Albert approached portraiture as a genre capable of fostering equality and commonality. Underlying his support of the NPG was a belief that portraiture could create human, rather than divine, connections. For Barlow, however, Prince Albert’s project was fundamentally “ambivalent” because the plan “implied that the urban mass society emerging with industrialism was potentially dehumanising, that social relationships were increasingly experienced in a mechanistic, alienated form” (221) According to Barlow’s argument, a government-sponsored “portrait gallery of great technologists would paradoxically celebrate and counteract this process” (221). As Barlow signals, the paradox at the core of Prince Albert’s proposal for the NPG illuminates to what extent interest in portraiture

in the nineteenth century was a result of the paradox of modernity itself. Portraiture was used not only to communicate success in an industrialized society, but it was also called upon to express a desire for a simpler, pre-industrial time when human connection seemed easier to cultivate and more immediate. The activity of reading and responding to portraits evolved as a matter of public interest in the second half of the nineteenth century because it captured the double-sidedness of modernity itself.

If Prince Albert planned for a gallery to alleviate the alienation of industrialization on daily life on one hand, on the other hand Thomas Carlyle envisioned the NPG as a hall of heroes and as a national pedagogical tool. For Carlyle, the NPG would be a “Pantheon, or home of all the National Divinities, for these our historical Heroes are” (quoted in Barlow 221). Comparing images of national heroic figures to gods, Carlyle proposes the creation of a visual national narrative while also suggesting that nationality, cultivated through an appreciation of visual art, could function as a companion or even substitute for religion. Carlyle supported the ubiquitous view that the purpose of portraiture was the preservation and celebration of history. For Carlyle and other founding members of the NPG, the most important feature of a portrait was not its style, but its authenticity. The verification of the subject’s identity had to be absolute in order for the portrait to be accepted as part of the museum’s collection. A portrait’s authenticity would guarantee that the NPG fulfilled its mission of promoting a cohesive national identity based on a rich history of transformative and influential individuals. Yet, as Paul Barlow illuminates, the NPG depended on the visitor’s capacity to imagine as well; Barlow explains that the NPG was organized around “the suggestion that the viewer could in imagination stand in the place of the original artist as he had once looked at the sitter, and travel back in time

to the moment when the sitter lived” (221). The founders of the NPG, intentionally or not, placed the imagination at the center of their mission’s effectiveness. Although descriptions of the subject would accompany the portrait and provide a narrative of the subject’s life and accomplishments, the NPG relied upon the imagination of the visitor to enact the final necessary historical leap. The visitor’s imagination, moreover, unfolded as a visual transaction; the NPG desired visitors to see as the artist did and to attend to the subject as the artist did. However, as Margaret Stetz reveals, visitors to the NPG were not left to their own imaginative abilities, but they were instead instructed in how “to distinguish” the “admirable qualities in a face” (12). She explains that “the late Victorians believed in becoming portrait-literate” “[j]ust as we take for granted now the importance of being computer-literate” (12). While the Victorians believed that facial features could indicate an individual’s genius or “degeneracy,” they also adhered to the notion that only a specialized knowledge could unveil those telling characteristics. In the nineteenth century, reading portraits was an acquired skill.

It is against this background of debates about attentiveness toward visual art and about how to read portraiture that Rossetti, James, and Wilde engage attentiveness as part of the project of self-development. In this dissertation, I wish to illustrate that literary aestheticism develops in reaction against cultural authorities, but it also desires itself to emerge as a cultural authority. It is through this process that literary aestheticism invites the reader to read as part of a program of aesthetic training; however, the sensory experiences described and enacted in the works of literary aestheticism jolt or jar the reader in a way that disrupts that training and that illustrates the aestheticism’s commitment to freedom and agency in a modern cultural environment.

CHAPTER II

FIXING THE EYE:

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ATTENTION

Because mine eyes can never have their fill

Of looking at my lady's lovely face

I will so fix my gaze

That I may become bless'd, beholding her.

Dante Alighieri,

Translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of Dante Alighieri's poem "He Will Gaze Upon Beatrice" illustrates a thematic link between the two poets. In the first stanza of Dante's poem, included as an epigraph to this chapter, the speaker refers to two events. First, the speaker describes being in a state of perpetual desire; his "eyes" are never satisfied, and he never tires of looking at his "lady's lovely face." In the second instance, he points to the future. By "fix[ing]" his "gaze" upon her face, he not only proposes a way to alleviate his desire (by indulging in it), but he also contends that doing so will gain him access to a spiritual state. Concentrated looking at a female figure, in this poem, leads to a form of blessedness. In Rossetti's poetry, as well as paintings, readers have identified a similar dynamic to be at work. Specifically, in the sonnet sequence *The House of Life* (1881), Rossetti's multiple speakers fix their eyes on a beloved. For the speaker in the sonnet "Life-in-Love," for instance, the act of fixing the eye emerges as the crucial difference between merely existing and truly living. The speaker advises his listener to gaze upon the listener's beloved: "Not in thy body is thy life at all / But in this

lady's lips and hands and eyes" (XXXVI.1-2). The speaker contends that "life" refers not to a physical state of breathing and being, but it is instead a spiritual one that becomes evident and accessible in the visible characteristics of a beautiful woman and that is made possible by the experience of love. For Dante and Rossetti, attentive looking at a female figure seems to produce a kind of spiritual transcendence.

If Rossetti revitalizes a Dantean ideal of the artist/poet as someone in a constant state of desire and in the perpetual act of attentive looking, then the representation of women in his paintings and poems do serve, in part, as manifestations of the soul. However, as the male artist/poet looks attentively, the female object of his gaze simultaneously looks in an absorbed manner. Nearly every Rossetti painting produced after 1859 features at least one female figure looking with a kind of "fixed" eye; unlike the figure of the male artist/poet, however, the object of her look is unspecified. Readers most often describe her manner of looking as dreaminess or spiritual enthrallment that denotes an absence of presence and puts her at a remove from her material surroundings. The Delaware Art Museum recently entitled its permanent exhibit on Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites *Waking Dreams* in order to highlight the female subject's apparent transcendence of the physical environment. At the same time, in the paintings, while the female subject's eyes are fastened, the paintings fail to reveal on what her eyes gaze. In *The House of Life*, the multiple speakers of the sonnet sequence too allude to the power, ambiguity, and mystery of the female's perceiving eyes. In the poem "Soul-Light," for example, the speaker tells his beloved that "there comes to view / Far in your eyes a yet more hungering thrill" (XXVIII.5-6). In "Heart's Compass," the speaker declares to his beloved that "Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone, / But as the meaning of all

things that are” and in “Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul un-bar, / Being of its furthest fires oracular” (XXVII. 1-2, 6-7). In “Cloud and Wind,” the female beloved’s “eyes dreamed against a distant goal” (XLV. 3-4). The speaker in “Bridal Birth” describes that “my Lady stood at gaze and smiled / When her soul knew at length the Love it nurs’d” (II. 3-4). In each instance, the speaker of the poem exhibits a fascination with the infinite depth and absorbed activity of his beloved’s eyes.

In this chapter, I argue that the position of the fixed eye taken up by the male artist/poet and his fascination with the position of the fixed eye occupied by his feminine ideal work together as a *performative* response to the changes to perceptual experiences that were initiated by the process of modernization. The fixed eye is an example of a performative because it refers to behaviors that are repeated over and over again and that bring into being, or constitute, knowledge. In Rossetti’s case, *The House of Life* attempts to create knowledge about idealized perceptual experience. In Rossetti’s double works of art and *The House of Life*, the presence or activity of the fixed eye is the condition that makes the sonnet possible and that engenders the sonnet. The sonnets themselves do not describe moments of time or even experiences; instead, the sonnets are performative events that construct an idealized perceptual moment and that show instead of describe attentiveness in action. It is possible to read *The House of Life* as an exercise or experiment in attentiveness. Reading *The House of Life* as an exercise in attentiveness illuminates the connection between these sonnets and Rossetti’s paintings. *The House of Life* does not reflect on attentiveness or represent attentiveness; instead, the sonnet sequence performs attentiveness. As a result, as I hope to show below, *The House of Life* builds into its structure a demand for reading and re-reading; it requires attention from a

reader if that reader desires to attain an elevated perceptual experience. While Rossetti seeks to counter the dulling effects of certain aspects of modernization, he also exhibits an attraction to certain technologies associated with modernization, such as photography, that may contribute to the heightening the senses.

Written in 1880, the introductory sonnet on a sonnet in *The House of Life* indicates that the sonnet can be approached as primarily a performative rather than a mimetic form. Although in this instance the poem itself is descriptive, it suggests that sonnets generally deal with performance in some way. In particular, the speaker introduces two metaphors for the sonnet: “A sonnet is a moment’s monument” and “A sonnet is a coin” (1,9). Both monuments and coins are objects that stand in for something else and gain meaning and value only when they are approached or used in specific ways. While a monument serves as a marker of something that has passed, it is different from the original thing it points back to. A monument is not a copy of something that has been, but it is instead a visible reminder. Likewise, a coin is not identical to the value it represents. Only when a coin is used in particular ways does it show its value, and it only remains valuable as long as it is authorized. While monuments and coins function as substitutes for an absent original, they also only become meaningful when they are used in a prescribed manner and when they provoke predetermined behaviors.

As Rossetti’s introductory sonnet designates sonnets as monuments and as coins, it opens up the possibility for exploring the relationship of the sonnet to performance, and that is in fact what this sonnet on a sonnet proceeds to do. In the octave, the speaker introduces two contradictions in the first three lines of the poem. He juxtaposes “a moment” with “monument,” and he calls upon “one dead deathless hour” (1,2,3).

However, in the remainder of the octave, the speaker splits open opposites and presents them as choices: “lustral rite or dire portent,” “in ivory or in ebony,” and “Day or Night” (4, 6, 7). The transition within the octave from a pairing of opposites to the presentation of choices suggests that while a sonnet may hold together conflicting forces, it also participates in the creation of objects (itself) and in the execution of ceremonies. In other words, a sonnet is something you do something with. The speaker’s utilization of the imperative voice in the octave underscores that a sonnet can be used to do something: the phrases “Look that it be,” “Carve it in ivory,” and “let Time see” indicate that the sonnet does not merely describe something that has been, but it is also something that can command or dictate action. In addition, the final line of the octave presents sonnets as constantly in process. The sonnet’s “flowering crest” shows the speaker’s belief in the idea that a sonnet is not a static or descriptive form, but it is instead a performance.

In the sestet, the speaker continues to explore the relationship of the sonnet to performance. While on one hand the sestet implies that sonnets undertake a revelatory or expressive function (“its face reveals / The Soul”), on the other hand the sestet declares that sonnets perform a duty to Life, Love, or Death (10). Specifically, the speaker declares that the sonnet must pay “to what Power ‘tis due” (10). In the final couplet of the poem, the speaker declares the sonnet “ ‘mid the dark wharf’s cavernous breath, / In Charon’s palm it pay the toll to death” (8-9). As the speaker proposes that a sonnet owes something to death, he also shows that the payment of that debt is a performance and has been carried out by many souls in mythology waiting to or trying to cross the river Styx. Like the octave of the poem, the sestet shows that sonnets invoke and provoke performance. While I hope to illustrate in this chapter that the sonnets of *The House of*

Life perform an idealized perceptual experience, this introductory sonnet on a sonnet announces that sonnets are related in important ways to performance.

In emphasizing the performative aspects of the sonnets in *The House of Life*, I depart from readings of Rossetti's work that privilege the representative quality of his poems as the key to interpretation. For instance, in *A Moment's Monument*, Jennifer Wagner argues that Rossetti's sonnets exhibit a desire to portray the presence of a moment or experience, but instead succeed in documenting only the absence of that moment or experience. Specifically, upon reflecting on the introductory sonnet to *The House of Life*, Wagner contends that in Rossetti's case the sonnet "becomes a space that, in attempting to represent the immediacy of a moment of experience, can do no more than record its absence" (19). Explaining that the "implications of this disjunction between experience and vision are certainly visible in his mixed-media sonnet/paintings," Wagner argues that "the uncanniness" of these works are "generated less by a sensation of life than by a vision of death" (19). While I agree with Wagner that "a vision of death" haunts Rossetti's sonnets as well as his double works of art, I disagree that Rossetti's sonnets primarily attempt to represent a moment's immediacy.

In my reading of *The House of Life*, Rossetti's poems perform an idealized perceptual experience. While the sonnets reveal the impossibility of sustaining an idealized perceptual experience, the sonnets, by bringing an instantiation of idealized perceptual experience into being, emerge as a form of knowledge about perceptual experience. By elucidating the performative quality of these poems, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how Rossetti's sonnets do not attempt to represent or describe experiences

from his lived life, but instead they attempt to create a perfected perceptual experience on their own terms.

In general, a theory of performativity is appropriate for an analysis of lyric poetry because lyric poems feature a speaker addressing an imagined or implied audience. In the nineteenth century, Robert Browning's popularization of the dramatic monologue made the lyric poem's intrinsic relationship to performance more evident. Although the consumption of lyric poetry in the nineteenth century primarily took place privately, lyric poems were initially composed as songs to be shared in a group. Recently, Anne Hartman and E. Warwick Slinn have argued that theories of performativity can help us to develop stronger critical responses to Victorian poetry. In making the case for why a performative theory of poetry is needed, Hartman points out that "Victorian poetry has often appeared in search of a theory to call its own" (481) while Slinn notices that "poetry appears to be an increasingly marginalized genre" (57). For Slinn, reading practices have focused too much on the relationship between a poem's themes and historical context at the expense of an examination of the poem's form. Not suggesting a return to the singular focus on the formal aspects of a text that would be characteristic of New Criticism, Slinn nevertheless urges critics to attend more to what poems can do with their formal qualities: "The meaning of a poetic text often involves the uniqueness of a phrase or figure which will not easily allow any variant or version to replace it, so that poetry may thus evoke the presence of what exists in no other form" (57). Because in the tradition of linguistics performatives are expressions that "do not describe an act" but "produce it," a performative theory of poetry can elucidate the poem's distinctive production of meaning through "the uniqueness of a phrase or figure" (Slinn 61). As importantly, a performative

theory of poetry can balance formal concerns with contextual ones. Slinn describes: “The performative has become an increasingly diverse term, developing the sense, since and through Austin, of a language act which does something with words, uniting text and social context on the one hand, while separating speaker from speech on the other” (61). In other words, a performative theory of poetry invites the critic to examine a poem’s engagement with social or political trends without sacrificing an account of the formal aspects of the poem.

For Rossetti’s *The House of Life*, the repetition of the position of the fixed eye brings into existence an idealized perceptual experience as a form of knowledge. Early in his career, Rossetti demonstrated a concern for and interest in the capacity of the senses, and vision in particular, to capture and sustain truth. As one of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti was a painter/poet who developed his work around the intention of exercising faithfulness to the experiences of his senses rather than around a commitment to adhering to academic principles. In opposition to the academic training for art offered in England in the mid-nineteenth century, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed initially around a call for “truth to nature” in art. In 1848, William Michael Rossetti recorded that the chief objectives of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood would be to “study nature attentively” in order to “express” “genuine ideas.” Within the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, an orientation toward nature developed into a style of hyperrealism that became easily identifiable with the detailed depiction of plants and flowers. Unlike the other painters associated with the movement, however, Rossetti disliked *plein-air* painting and applied the principle of “truth to nature” to his work in his own way. According to the critic Jerome McGann, “truth to nature” was an “idea” that

meant different things to different people, and in Rossetti's case it had almost nothing to do with, say, Wordsworthian thought. Rossetti was an urban artist all his life and had virtually no interest in "nature" as such. "Truth to Nature" for Rossetti results when artists translate what they see with absolute fidelity. Measure comes not from any standard laws of either earth or heaven but from the desire of the eyes. Teaching at the Working Men's College, Rossetti (like Ruskin) urged his pupils to "Get rid of ...academic fribble! draw only what you see." His own procedures seemed "inscrutable" to some, but to others they were a revelation of pictorial sincerity, as if his drawing and coloring were culminant acts in a passion of vision. (4)

McGann's remarks clarify Rossetti's understanding of nature as linked inextricably to the operation of the senses, and they underscore Rossetti's investment in the function of the eye specifically. Rossetti's adamant advice to "draw only what you see" says as much about Rossetti's oppositional stance to the curriculum offered by the Royal Academy as it does about his belief in the uncorrupted nature of the eye. As McGann implies through the phrases "desire of the eyes" and "in a passion of vision," Rossetti's advice for an appropriate artistic compass seems intensely personal and private.

In this chapter, however, I wish to suggest that Rossetti's faith in the integrity of vision can be viewed less as an exceptional aspect of his personality and more as a response to the changes to the urban landscape induced by the process of modernization. As Jonathan Crary details, the "economic system" of modernization was "based on the continual production of novelty and on continual perceptual change" (SOP 327). Writers

and critics, like John Ruskin, “tried to salvage a subject mode of apprehending novelty that was external to the imperatives of modernization” (327). As Crary notes, Ruskin, like the Pre-Raphaelite artists he championed, gave prominence to art from the medieval period because, in Ruskin’s words, it afforded “perpetual novelty” and “admitted of millions of variations” (*The Stones of Venice* 167-168). In Rossetti’s case, the attraction of turning away from the nineteenth century and toward the medieval period did not necessarily involve the variety of patterns Ruskin alludes to, but, more importantly for Rossetti, it followed a Dantean form of concentration on a single thing: a beautiful woman. For his sister Christina Rossetti, Rossetti’s paintings exhibited an unhealthy obsession with a single idea of female beauty. In her unpublished sonnet “In an Artist’s Studio,” the speaker asserts that “One face looks out from all his canvasses / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans” (1-2). While Ruskin finds in the medieval period a better version of variety than the kind of constant change and novel thing offered by the new markets created by modernization, Rossetti discovers instead a way to harness attention through the repetition of a fixed eye directed toward a beautiful woman.

Rossetti’s depiction of women in painting and in poetry does reflect a trend in the nineteenth century to employ femininity as a symbol for art. For Kathy Psomiades, “When aestheticism represents art as a beautiful feminine figure, it refers to an entire apparatus that characterizes femininity as private and domestic, spiritual yet sexualized, the irresistible object of desire and a certain kind of contemplative subject” (4). Psomiades reveals that femininity functioned as an abstract ideal in the nineteenth century capable of holding together opposing ideas and values, and it also enabled writers and artists to put privacy at the center of artistic exploration. By calling upon femininity

to serve as a symbol of art, male writers and artists began to explore privacy, intimacy, and even sexuality in their works for a rapidly growing body of new readers and viewers produced by modern processes of publication and distribution. For Psomiades, the depiction of art “as a beautiful feminine figure” allowed writers and artists associated with the Aesthetic Movement to navigate successfully the new economy of cultural distribution by making privacy public. As a savvy promoter of his own work, Rossetti made a cult out of privacy; by not showing his paintings in the annual exhibitions and by publishing his poems only occasionally, Rossetti established himself as one of the most private, and thus one of the most financially successful, painters and poets of his day.

While Rossetti certainly connects femininity to the artistic process in his visual and written work and certainly does promote the image of women as symbols of privacy, the repetition of the figure of the beautiful woman also serves another purpose. By directing the eye of the male artist/poet toward a beautiful woman, the artist/poet also illuminates the attentive absorption of the female subject. Through the repetition of the male fixed eye, the looking eye of the female emerges as a concurring instance of idealized perceptual activity. In Rossetti’s world of texts and images, the female fixed eye is more perfect than the male fixed eye, and that is what attracts his attention. Her attentiveness is more absolute. Rossetti’s texts and images take advantage of the association in the nineteenth century of femininity with both the body and soul in order to elucidate that attentiveness is a physical state that can lead to a spiritual or transcendent experience. As I hope to demonstrate below, however, the attentiveness associated with femininity and the attention performed by the male fixed eye toward the female fixed eye is sometimes cast as dangerous or fatal. Even though the figure of feminine beauty

performs an idealized perceptual moment, or an exercise in attentiveness, that is most often celebrated, Rossetti's texts and images underscore the possibility for danger in an attentiveness that is too absolute. While the attentiveness associated with the beautiful feminine figure is idealized, the fixed eye of the male artist/poet emerges as more balanced, safer, and, at times, more rational.

In this chapter, while the notion of the fixed eye obviously points primarily to visual experience, it also encompasses other senses because it engages the entire body in an attentive pose. To be attentive requires one's whole sensory apparatus to focus on a single object. While throughout Rossetti's body of work the eye remains the clearest indicator of attentive absorption, Rossetti's speakers also point to the attentive potential of the entire body. In the sonnet "Her Gifts," written in 1871 and published in *The House of Life*, for instance, the speaker calls attention to the female figure's mouth "whose passionate forms imply / All music and all silence held thereby" (XXXI.6-7). Like the speakers' accounts of the eyes of the female beloveds throughout *The House of Life*, the woman's mouth in this poem holds together a totality. In this case, the totality is of sound and of the absence of sound: "All music and all silence." The choice and repetition of the word "all" in this line underscores the speaker's belief in the power of femininity to transcend the limitations of the material world and to approach infinity. The word "held" to describe the action of the woman's mouth suggests that the mouth, like the eye, relates to attentiveness, or the physical act of holding an object with the senses. The woman's mouth behaves attentively toward the abstract ideal of sound while her beloved, the speaker, attends to the sounds, or lack of sounds, her mouth produces.

Sounds, even more than attractive objects, are capable of capturing and sustaining a person's attention. In just the last three years, a few noteworthy critics have emphasized and illuminated the importance of sound and music to Rossetti's work. This new approach to Rossetti's sonnets attempts to address both the formal aspects of Rossetti's poetry and the relationship of those formal aspects to the larger social and cultural trends of Victorian England. For instance, Angela Leighton argues that the sonnet's form appeals to Rossetti because of its inherent musicality. She observes, "A sonnet, from the Italian, *sonnetto*, means little sound, the diminutive of 'suono.' A sonnet is a little noise or note. To bilingual ears, like the Rossettis', the sonnet's very form conjures up the idea of a sound to the ears" (506). For Elizabeth Helsinger, although Rossetti "showed little interest in the concerts of classical music or art songs to which Victorian audiences were learning to listen with newly silent attention," "[s]cenes of attentive listening and imagined hearing haunt his early poems and pictures and gesture toward song as poetry's – and perhaps painting's – distant horizon" (409). In Helsinger's account, music "rendered ideas of sense and sensation intensely perceptible through the body, heard and felt in the vibrations of breath from throat, the touch of the hand or body moving to music, the peculiar penetrating power of music-borne language" (409). Helsinger contends that music allowed Rossetti to explore lyric poetry's potential to awaken and play on the senses, and this dynamic between music and the body offered a way to revitalize poetry. As both a poet and a painter, Rossetti, as Helsinger describes, "sought to use his observations of that perplexing transit from page through sound and touch to music heard in the ear of the mind to expand the conception of what lyric poetry and

painting might do. Song's figures, in multiple senses, inform Pre-Raphaelite efforts to renew the poetry and art of mid-century Victorian Britain" (410).

Like Helsinger, Karen Yuen, in the essay "Bound by Sound: Music, Victorian Masculinity, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti," evaluates the role of music in the production of art and poetry in the nineteenth century. She reports that England "experienced an explosion of musical activity that no individual could have avoided in his or her day-to-day life" (79). As a result, music emerged as an "aesthetic ideal" that "began to gain popularity around the 1860s" (82). Music was viewed as "the ideal art-form" because "it could be beautiful without purpose, it could express without material reference" (82). Yuen names James McNeill Whistler as the painter who entertained the idea of music as an "aesthetic ideal" most explicitly; Whistler "attempted to create in such works as *At the Piano* (1858-1859) and *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl* (1862), a musicality through colour and structural arrangement of lines and objects" (82). Yuen explains that Whistler approached music as "an ideal model for painting because it was capable through formal relationships, of expressing experiences that may not stem from emotions or preconceived ideas" (82). Despite Whistler's very public exploration of the relationship between painting and musicality, music in Victorian Britain maintained the status of "a 'feminine' art" (83). While Yuen's main purpose in the article is to illustrate how the evolution of Rossetti's attitude toward music reveals his gradual movement toward more conventional participation within "a larger community of men" (87) and provides the key to the question "'how manly was Rossetti'" (79), the article also shows more generally the attraction of music as a vehicle for artists and poets to vocalize what art and poetry could do. While, as Yuen makes clear, Rossetti's views on music did not

remain static throughout his career, music's association with femininity as well as its appropriation by other art forms offered Rossetti's speakers another way to perform and promote an idealized perceptual experience and to perform attentiveness.

While Helsinger and Yuen insist upon the importance of music for a complete assessment of Rossetti's work, Isobel Armstrong makes a similar case for photography. Armstrong shows that the similarities between sonnets and photographs can help us to better understand Rossetti's "reputation as a 'fleshly poet'" in the nineteenth century (464). More to the point, Armstrong argues that Rossetti "exploited the news technologies of seeing to write some of the few mature sonnets of fulfillment in the Victorian age and to meditate on the gap between the reflected body and the body itself" (472). Though the "presence of the camera and its technology is not, of course, a literal presence" in Rossetti's poems, Armstrong clarifies that it is instead "an ontological one" (462). She explains that the "suggestiveness" of photographic technology "created an imaginative aesthetic charge that released new meanings into the culture – of the image, of time, of light and shadow" (462). Although the impact of new technologies, such as photography, on Victorian literature is not necessarily a new topic, Armstrong contends that the photograph as a form of mechanical reproduction in the nineteenth century does something unexpected. Rather than promoting a sense of alienation or stirring anxiety about the image's unpredictable and uncontrollable circulation through society, a trend often noted by critics, the photographic process reinforces the Aristotelian idea of seeing as "a form of touching" and of seeing as belonging "in a continuum with the world touched" (463).

For Armstrong, the idea of a type of seeing that is also a form of touching aligns the sonnet with the photograph. Armstrong informs us that, for Victorian audiences, the photograph and the sonnet were “meant to be repeatedly read” (463). She explains further that in the mind of “the Victorian poet the ‘photographic’ nature of the sonnet meant that instantaneity and evolution, the single moment and the experience of process, combined in the scrutiny of a small fragment of thought and feeling” (463). In the process of reading and re-reading a sonnet, the eye “touches” the words on the page more than superficially; Armstrong describes, “The language of the sonnet is embodied to the extent that it demands the intense commitment of the interpretative eye as it figures the patterns of print” (463). More exactly, in Armstrong’s phrasing, “Discovering through these patterns the appeal to the body in the rhythm and rhyme, the eye releases the full plenitude of sensory experience in the interpretative act – visual, tactile, oral, aural” (463). Armstrong suggests that this process brings new meaning to bear on the linguistic root of the word “sonnet”: “Sound, for the meaning of the sonnet is a ‘little song,’ follows from the visual as the cadences of a soundscape become apparent in the linguistic landscape greeted by the eye. The visual becomes vocal” (463). By elucidating the relationship between touch and the operation of the reading eye, Armstrong intends to bring notice to “the sensory intensity” of Rossetti’s poems (464). She insists that as much as a photograph is silent in a way that “its soundlessness constantly reminds one of absent speech” so does “a printed poem” embody the same self-proclaiming silence: in reading “a printed poem” the reader participates in the continuous process of “feeling for the convergence of sight and sound” (464).

What Armstrong ultimately and importantly reveals in this essay is that the nineteenth century sonnet provokes a style of reading that leads to and depends upon a conflation of the senses. In suggesting that the “visual becomes vocal” in the process of a reading that is simultaneously a viewing, comparable to the process of interpreting a photograph, the senses engaged do not necessarily become indistinguishable from one another, but they do blend together to a certain degree in the cultivation of sustained attentiveness. What Armstrong describes is, to a certain extent, an exercise in attentiveness on the reader’s part. Indirectly, Armstrong’s account of the “sensory intensity” of Rossetti’s poems underscores the poet/painter’s contemplation of the act of contemplation. Just as the form of the sonnet invites multiple readings, Rossetti’s sonnets rely on the production of speakers who repeat performances of the position of the fixed eye in order not only to captivate the readers’ senses, but also to perform an idealized perceptual experience that can be defined in terms of the near absolute conflation of the senses.

Armstrong’s depiction of Rossetti’s work as embodying “sensory intensity” shares something in common with Walter Pater’s assessment of Rossetti in the nineteenth century. For Walter Pater, the key to understanding Rossetti’s poetry could be found in the way Rossetti approached life as “as a crisis at every moment” (212). In Pater’s view, Rossetti’s appreciation of life as a continual crisis led him to foster a “sustained impressibility towards the mysterious conditions of man’s everyday life” (212). This “sustained impressibility” points indirectly to Rossetti’s exploration of sensory overload. Rossetti sought to focus his senses on experience. With an orientation toward the intensification of sensory experience, Rossetti did not seek pleasure but instead he sought

– and engendered – knowledge about attentiveness. At the same time, both Pater and Armstrong betray and express the paradox of Rossetti’s work. Although his paintings and poems often treat and depict dream or near-dream states, they also rely on the extreme wakefulness of the senses. The continuum between dreaming and being mindfully awake is the continuum of attentiveness, and as I hope to illustrate through the readings of Rossetti’s double works and *The House of Life* below, his work performs an idealized perceptual experience in order to challenge modernity through attentiveness.

Repetition and Attention in Rossetti’s Double Works of Art:

“Soul’s Beauty,” “Body’s Beauty,” and “The Portrait”

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the role literature played in the creation of the visual art within the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. The original group of Pre-Raphaelite artists drew heavily upon medieval legends and Shakespearean plays as source material for their paintings. *The Germ*, the short-lived publication of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, attempted to advance literary arts as well as promote the work of the artists associated with the movement. Rossetti went beyond the common literary borrowing practices associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in order to explore and generate possibilities for new arrangements of poetry and painting, word and image. As both a painter and a poet, Rossetti created what has come to be known as double works of art, or pairings of paintings and poems that share the same primary subject material or scope of representation. In this section, I approach Rossetti’s double works of art from the point of view of performance rather than representation.

How to theorize the relationship between Rossetti’s paintings and poems has been a source of critical disagreement for generations. Maryan Wynn Ainsworth argues that in

general “the two arts served throughout the poet-painter’s career to reinforce and stimulate one another” and that Rossetti “saw both arts as emanating from the same poetic source” (2). Ainsworth describes that Rossetti often put the two media “in a symbiotic relationship” (4). She notes, “A poem could be used, for example, to convey the psychological meaning of a visual image or to explain situations not evident in the picture but which are important for a full understanding of the image” (4). Ainsworth finds the two arts working together productively in order to “expand the reader-viewer’s experience of the other” (4).

Unlike Ainsworth’s claim that poetry and painting work together productively in Rossetti’s body of work, J. Hillis Miller characterizes Rossetti’s pairings as fundamentally “alogical” (336). He claims that the “relation between Rossetti’s painting and his poetry is asymmetrical, skewed” (336). He argues that Rossetti’s double works construct “a false mirroring” and that regardless of how “deliberately they may be matched,” one always “exceeds the other” (336). By asserting that one medium “exceeds the other,” Miller means that one “says more or less than the other, and says it differently, in ways which have only in part to do with the differences of medium” (336). He points out that either the poem or the painting “may be taken as the ‘original’ of which the other is the ‘illustration’ or the explanatory poetic ‘superscription,’ writing on top of another graphic form” and that the outcome does not “depend” “on the chronology of Rossetti’s actual creation of the two works in question” (336). Miller concludes that “the secondary version in the other medium is always in one way or another a travesty, a misinterpretation, a distorted image in the mirror of the other art” (336). Ultimately, for Miller, the “false mirroring” is symptomatic of what generates and informs Rossetti’s

work; he posits that all Rossetti's productions are "haunted by an experience of devastating loss. That loss has always already occurred or is about to occur or is occurring, in memory or in anticipation within the divided moment" (336).

Like Miller, I argue that the relationship between the poems and paintings in Rossetti's double works can be best described in terms of excessiveness rather than, following Ainsworth, in terms of symbiosis. In my argument, however, a poem does not serve as a false mirror to a painting and a painting does not act as a false mirror to a poem, but instead the poems and paintings function as repetitions that make a show of themselves as repetitions through diction, poetic devices, and thematic content. By elucidating the repetitions that occur in Rossetti's double works, I hope to suggest that these double works are most like musical arrangements, in which certain passages and notes are played over and over again. Like music, Rossetti's double works engage all of the senses of the reader-viewer and bring into a being a perceptual experience characterized by a sustained attentiveness. In other words, the double works of art perform the act of attentiveness.

Following Miller's reflections on the lack of significance attributed to the chronology of Rossetti's work, I also wish to emphasize that there is not necessarily an original work within a pairing that the accompanying poem or painting comments on, fleshes out, or describes. In Rossetti's work, the original is always already elusive; there are only repetitions. Rossetti's double works exemplify this notion more than any of his other poetic or visual productions. The presence of female beauty that dominates his work does not point back to an identifiable original woman, idea, or feeling, but it instead reveals that the original has always already been lost. By repeating the same images and

words, by calling upon the same sounds, and by reiterating the fixedness of the eye, Rossetti's double works show that the original has always already been lost and that repetition harnesses attentiveness in both productive and dangerous ways.

In this section, I discuss specifically the sonnets "Soul's Beauty," "Body's Beauty," and "The Portrait." Although these poems are each paired with a particular painting or, in the case of "The Portrait," loosely associated with more than one work of visual art, Rossetti also included these sonnets in *The House of Life* as poems that could stand on their own. Each of these poems reflects on the artistic process and examines artistic representation, and each of these poems also performs the role of the fixed eye positioned toward the attentive eye of a beautiful woman. At the same time, through diction, alliteration, and rhyme scheme, these sonnets exhibit an excessive repetition. As a result of the excessive repetition, the idealized perceptual experience that Rossetti wishes to create and constitute is ultimately exposed and pushed to its limits.

In the sonnet "Soul's Beauty," written originally in 1870 under the title "Sybilla Palmifera" to accompany a painting of the same name and revised extensively and given a new title for inclusion in *The House of Life*, the speaker encounters "Beauty enthroned" and emphasizes the active visual dynamics that occur in his encounter (LXXVII. 3). In the sonnet, "Beauty" is personified as female. The speaker reports that "her gaze struck awe," but he "drew it in as simply as [his] breath" (LXXVII. 3,4). As the speaker draws in Beauty's gaze like his own breath, "Hers are the eyes" "which can draw / By sea or sky or woman, to one law" (LXXVII. 5, 6-7). The repetition of "drew" as "draw" exemplifies the poem's utilization of repetition. Not only does the word "drew" repeat itself here with only a slight difference, but the activities associated with the word are

also characterized by repetition. Specifically, the act of breathing that the speaker calls upon to describe how he took in Beauty's powerful gaze is an act that occurs repeatedly. Likewise, Beauty's forceful eyes that can "draw" to her whatever she wishes can also be considered to be an action that takes place over and over again. The word "draw" of course also connects the poem to the painting *Sibylla Palmifera* and to pictorial art in general. By reiterating the word "draw," the speaker demonstrates the poem's use of repetition as a thematic and formal device.

In the octave of "Soul's Beauty," the poem reveals another way that it makes a show of repetition. The speaker associates the words "Under," "over and beneath," and "bend" with Beauty. Beauty rests "Under the arch of Life," and her gaze goes "over and beneath / The sky and sea" and it ultimately will "bend on thee" (LXXVI. 1, 5,6). These words suggest movement and provide physical direction. In addition, these words accompany a chiasmus in the poem. The poem juxtaposes "The sky and sea" in line six with "By sea or sky" in line seven. Like the words connected with a sense of movement in the octave, the chiasmus also points to movement, and specifically a crossing. While the diction and the chiasmus denote movement in the poem, as well as underlie the sense of movement for the speaker who travels to visit the figure of Beauty at her "shrine" "guard[ed]" by "love and death / Terror and mystery," the diction and chiasmus together also serve as a form of repetition (2,1-2). Likewise, the word "bend" in line six is similar to the word "bondman" in line eight, and they serve a similar function in the speaker's assessment of Beauty. In line six, the speaker asserts that Beauty's gaze will "bend on thee," or exert some degree of power or influence. In the same manner, Beauty has "an allotted bondman" who would perform a similar duty, to force or inspire. While these two

words carry the same connotation in the poem, they also share the same sound. Only one letter distinguishes “bend” from “bond.” The resulting effect is that the poem conveys a sense of musicality through the repetition of both meaning and sound. These repetitions not only reflect on the attentiveness granted to the figure of beauty, but they also bring into being and perform a way of attending to something.

Although the speaker introduces “Beauty” in the octave of the sonnet, the sestet performs a shift related to the possibility of knowing and apprehending beauty. While Rossetti’s sonnets typically follow the Petrarchan form strictly, this poem pronounces the volta, or turn, at the sestet more demonstrably than most of his other sonnets. The speaker opens up the sestet by first performing a gesture: “This is that Lady Beauty” (LXXVI. 9). The speaker’s declaration both points back to the figure he has just described and encountered in the octave, and it implies prior knowledge on the part of the reader. The word “that” introduces the notion that the addressee of the poem has some familiarity with the figure of Beauty already. Even more dramatically, the speaker moves the point of view away from himself and toward “Thy” directly (10). The speaker states that “Lady Beauty” has been “long known to thee” (9, 10). By transitioning away from his own experience of encountering beauty and moving toward the addressee’s experience of pursuing beauty, the speaker repeats an introduction to the figure of beauty. The reader of the poem, in other words, meets the figure of beauty twice.

While the octave of “Soul’s Beauty” concerns primarily the movement of Lady Beauty’s eyes, the sestet treats the movement of both the addressee of the poem and of the figure of beauty. The speaker attests that the addressee’s “voice and hand shake still” when giving “praise” to beauty (10, 9). Moreover, the speaker illustrates that the

addressee chases beauty – “Following her daily” – and that beauty can hear “the beat” of the addressee’s “heart and feet” (12, 11, 12). The addressee pursues the figure of beauty “passionately” and yet “irretrievably” (13). She is always outside of his grasp; the speaker claims that the addressee knows the figure of beauty only “By flying hair and fluttering hem,” and that their relationship can be described in terms of a “fond flight” (11, 14). The proximity of “hair” to “hem” creates another repetition within the sonnet. “Hair” sounds like “her” while “hem” sounds like “him;” the closeness of these words and the sense of movement and flight associated with them not only suggests the constant pursuit of beauty (female, “hair”) undertaken by the addressee (male, “hem”), but it also repeats it. In addition, the alliteration in the sestet is built around the repetition of the letter “f”: “flying,” “fluttering,” “Following,” “feet,” and “fond flight.” The repetition of the “f” sound underscores the addressee’s perpetual movement toward beauty. Although the addressee fails to grasp beauty completely and finds that beauty is always fleeting, the experience is ultimately positive. The addressee is propelled by a love of beauty, and his pursuit gives meaning to his life.

This poem juxtaposes two different encounters with beauty. In the first instance, the speaker looks directly at beauty. In the second instance, the speaker describes how the addressee only catches glimpses of beauty, although he pursues the figure of beauty continuously. In both cases, the poem relies on repetition to elucidate the relationship between an individual and beauty. In both cases, as well, the speaker and the addressee are attentive to the attentive eye and the intentions of the figure of beauty. Beauty’s “gaze,” as the speaker notes, “struck awe” (3). The speaker and the addressee represent different poles of attentiveness. In the octave, the speaker attends to the figure of beauty

calmly and directly while the addressee attends to the figure of beauty with more energy and more frenzy, as suggested by the alliteration of words beginning with “f.” As the speaker “drew” in beauty’s gaze “as simply as [his] breath,” the addressee “shake[s]” when giving praise to beauty. Regardless of these differences, the poem performs an attentive stance toward the figure of beauty and relies on repetition for the execution of that performance.

In the sequence of *The House of Life*, “Soul’s Beauty” is followed by the poem “Body’s Beauty.” The repetition of the word “beauty” in the title indicates its affiliation with the preceding poem, and it also reveals the sonnet’s utilization of repetition as a formal device. Composed in 1867 and published in 1870 under the title “Lilith (For a Picture),” the sonnet constitutes a double work of art with the painting *Lady Lilith*. Like “Soul’s Beauty,” “Body’s Beauty” underwent revisions for inclusion in *The House of Life*. While “Soul’s Beauty” provides an encounter with beauty as powerful yet nurturing and pleasurable, “Body’s Beauty” accounts for beauty as again powerful, but in this instance, beauty is also dangerous, seductive, and deadly. At the same time, the relationship of “Body’s Beauty” to the painting *Lady Lilith* seems decisively more deliberate and descriptive than the relationship of “Soul’s Beauty” to *Sibylla Palmifera*. “Body’s Beauty” does seem to engage and to narrate the painting directly, and in doing so, seems to create a representation of Lady Lilith. For instance, in the first line of the poem, the speaker seems to take up the position of storyteller comfortably: “Of Adam’s first wife, Lilith, it is told.” The word “told” indicates that the speaker will not only engage in the act of storytelling, but that the story he will tell is a legend that audiences may recognize and that it has been told many times before. In the octave of the sonnet,

the speaker relies on the third person and never refers to himself; not only is this unusual in Rossetti's body of work, but it is also uncommon for the sonnet form. Sonnets, after all, concern the individual's unique experience of love. That the speaker keeps himself in the background indicates that the poem holds the purpose of elucidating the painting. In this sense, the sonnet unfolds as an exercise in ekphrasis. In the octave, the speaker describes that "her enchanted hair was the first gold" while the painting features the figure of Lilith combing her golden hair (4). The speaker explains that "still she sits, young while the earth is old, / And, subtly of herself contemplative" (5-6). The painting shows the female figure sitting while looking at herself in a hand-held mirror. In the sestet, the speaker points out, "The rose and poppy are her flowers" (9). In the painting, behind the figure of Lilith, a rose bush grows. On her lap, there is a garland of poppies and a poppy is featured in the vase beside her. These examples indicate that the sonnet can serve as a source of explication for the images used in the painting and that it does, to a degree, provide a representation of Lady Lilith. However, the sonnet does not function only as an explication or description of the painting, nor does it simply limit itself with being a representation. Instead, it exceeds both narrative and representative functions and exhibits its use of repetition as a device to cultivate an idealized perceptual experience. In this poem, attentiveness is created and constituted through repetition.

The sonnet features repetition in a number of ways. First, the figure of Lilith is cast as someone who is fundamentally unchanging. Unlike the dynamic world she inhabits, she is a static figure: she remains "young while the earth is old" (5). Lilith performs the same tasks over and over again – combing her hair and contemplating herself – and she is motivated by one goal: to capture and destroy men. The speaker

explains that “her sweet tongue could deceive” (3) and even as “still she sits” lifetimes after being “Adam’s first wife,” she “Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave, / Till heart and body and life are in its hold” (5, 1, 7-8). The “bright web she can weave” evokes another type of repetition; webs are patterns, and patterns are designs that are repeated. While the activity generated by Lady Lilith can be viewed in terms of repetition, the word “Draw” is also a word being repeated. It points back to and echoes the kind of drawing that occurs in “Soul’s Beauty.” While in “Soul’s Beauty” the figure of beauty exerts a powerful gaze toward her followers, in “Body’s Beauty” Lady Lilith’s power comes from her ability to attract men and sustain their attention through the brilliancy of her “web.” In both sonnets, the word “draw” refers to an engagement of the senses and to a hold on attention.

While “Soul’s Beauty” creates a feeling of movement through its use of alliteration and chiasmus, “Body’s Beauty” cultivates a mood of seduction through the alliteration of “s” sounds. In the sestet, these phrases demonstrate the poem’s utilization of alliteration: “shed scent,” “soft-shed,” “soft sleep shall snare,” “spell,” “straight,” and “strangling.” These words and phrases all underscore Lady Lilith’s dangerous nature and her power to seduce, captivate, and destroy her prey. She is the opposite of the figure of beauty presented in “Soul’s Beauty” who engages her pursuant in a “fond flight.” However, the poem does more than attempt to give a representation of the dangerous figure of Lilith; it also performs an exercise in perceptual experience. The repetition of the “s” sound illuminates the poem’s engagement with attentiveness. The “s” sound indicates that attentiveness can be associated with wakefulness as in “Soul’s Body” as much as it can be associated with sleepiness. The “spell” Lady Lilith casts is meant to put

“heart and body and life” in her web’s “hold” (13, 8). In other words, Lady Lilith seeks to induce sleep in her prey in order to “hold” onto them. By gaining their interest, Lady Lilith proceeds to lull them to sleep by relaxing – but not releasing – their senses. The “s” sounds in the sestet enact this process of seduction by repeating the word “soft” and by creating music through the repetition of the “s” sound.

If in “Soul’s Beauty” seeking out beauty implies a lifetime of actively pursuing an ideal of beauty and of giving attention to something fleeting and elusive, then “Body’s Beauty” looks at attentiveness from another angle. While in “Soul’s Beauty,” the reward for attentiveness is great, in “Body’s Beauty” the consequence of attentive absorption is the obliteration of the self. The alliteration of “s” sounds reveals the sleepiness associated with the Lilith’s seductive powers, and it also illustrates how committing to a state of attentiveness can lead to a dangerous absorption. The speaker underscores the sonnet’s engagement with attentiveness when he exclaims, “Lo! as that youth’s eyes burned at thine” (12). The burning eyes of the youth suggest not only that the youth is burning with passion, but it also shows that the youth is fixated on and wholly attentive to Lady Lilith. His absorption directed toward her will lead to his own destruction; the fire in his eyes will burn him up. Moreover, the “thine” expressed by the speaker in line twelve refers to Lady Lilith, whom the speaker addresses directly for the first time in the sestet. Breaking out of the role of storyteller, the speaker looks directly at Lady Lilith and accuses her: “for where / Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent / And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?” (9-11). The speaker’s shift from objective narrator to accuser illustrates how this poem can be approached as a kind of performance.

Written in 1869, associated with a chalk portrait of Jane Morris as well as the paintings *Beata Beatrix*, with Elizabeth Siddal as the model, and *Mrs. Morris in a Blue Dress*, and included in the 1881 edition of *The House of Life*, the sonnet “The Portrait” expresses the notion that an artistic representation can be truer and more authentic than the real thing or person it represents. In the sestet of the poem, the speaker, having just completed the portrait of his beloved, declares, “Let all men note / That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!) / They that would look on her must come to me” (X. 12-14). By reiterating the word “all,” the speaker claims that the portrait will last for generations and exceed his beloved’s as well as his own lifetime. When viewers desire to “look on her” in the present or in the future, the speaker insists that they must “come to” him, which means specifically his painting. Not only does the speaker suggest that the portrait shows “the perfect whole” of his beloved, but he also indicates that the portrait conveys his personality as much as it does his beloved’s (X. 4). In the octave, the speaker desires to illuminate his beloved and “praise her name,” but “Under [his] hand” (X. 3). At every turn in the poem, the speaker reminds the reader that his representation supersedes and exceeds the real thing.

Despite the poem’s direct orientation toward the production and constitution of representation, the poem itself is not a representation but a performance. For instance, at the volta, the speaker proclaims, “Lo! it is done” (9). The poem does not merely mark the occasion of the portrait’s completion, but instead it enacts the completion of the portrait when it expresses that “it is done” (9). When the speaker says the picture is complete in line nine, then and only then does the picture come into being. The picture is completed again and again with every reading of the poem. The words are not merely descriptive of

an action that has already occurred (a final brushstroke, for instance), but the painter's declaration is what makes the portrait a completed work. The word choice in the sestet reinforces the poem's performative purpose. For instance, the speaker points out that "The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss, / The shadowed eyes remember and foresee / Her face is made her shrine" (10-12). The verbs "testifies," "remember and foresee," and "made" all indicate the action performed by the portrait and enacted within the poem. That is, the poem does not describe what the portrait looks like, but rather the poem shows the action executed by the portrait and how the portrait and the repetition of the portrait within the poem intends to act on the senses of the reader-viewer. Like Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" (1842), "The Portrait" features a male artist claiming possession of a woman's identity through a portrait. However, unlike "My Last Duchess," "The Portrait" presents the portrait as a living and breathing thing.

The notion that the portrait within the poem is primarily an active entity finds support in the octave. The poem follows a conventional rhyme scheme of abbaabba. The b rhymes in the poem, however, are verbs, and within Rossetti's sonnet sequence, it is unusual for all the b rhymes to be the same part of speech. The words "glow," "show," "throw," and "know" comprise the b rhyme scheme in the octave, and they suggest that the portrait within the poem is not being described, but it is instead being performed, because they denote action. The repetition of active verbs within the rhyme scheme suggests that the poem is active rather than descriptive. "The Portrait" is concerned with attentiveness, and it enacts an idealized perceptual experience.

Performing the Fixed Eye:

Apprehension and Elusion in Rossetti's *The House of Life*

Although the sonnet “Mid-Rapture,” composed in 1871 and published in *The House of Life*, does not contribute to any double work of art, it does incorporate elements of repetition as part of an effort to perform an attentive pose. For instance, the first and final lines of the poem employ the same basic words: “Thou lovely and beloved, thou my love” and “O lovely and beloved, O my love?” (XXVI. 1, 14). The use of three forms of the word “love” in these lines not only illustrates the poem’s use of repetition as a rhythmic device, but it also underscores the speaker’s desire to double, or repeat, his feeling of love. In the sestet, the speaker emphasizes his desire for doubling when he asks “What word can answer to thy word, – what gaze / To thine” (XXVI. 9-10). He wants his “worshipping face” to be “mirrored” in her gaze (XXVI. 11). Yet, while the speaker’s desire to match word for word and gaze for gaze dominates the sestet, the sonnet also suggests that the repetition of language and gestures within the poem serves another purpose. In the octave, the speaker performs a chiasmus when he describes his beloved. He expresses that her “voice” “[i]s like a hand laid softly on the soul” and her “hand is like a sweet voice to control / Those worn tired brows it hath the keeping of” (6-8). The speaker’s assertion that his beloved’s voice is like a hand and her hand is like a voice seems to break down any movement toward sense or meaning. That is, the poem is not attempting to illuminate or portray an image or to provide the reader with knowledge. Instead, the circularity of the similes – the voice is like a hand and hand is like a voice – demonstrates the space of “mid-rapture.” It is a space that encircles the two beloveds and that occurs through the act and exercise of attention. The repetition of the three forms of

the word “love” in the first and final lines of the poem similarly functions as a repetition that encircles the poem and demonstrates the process of holding and suspending perception on one thing. It also suggests that attending to something, giving attention to some object or idea, does not necessarily lead to knowledge, but it can instead encircle one and cultivate a lack of sense.

“Mid-Rapture” functions like a double work of art in terms of its repetitions and its performance of an attentiveness that shows attention as a limiting, or encircling, mechanism rather than a liberating or freeing one. Brian Donnelly perceives a similarity between Rossetti’s double works of art and the sonnet form generally. Arguing that the “idea of doubling that would become so central to Rossetti’s manifesto is inherent in the sonnet form, particularly that which dominated the nineteenth-century, the Petrarchan,” Donnelly reasons that the “Petrarchan sonnet, divided as it is between octave and sestet, invites a self-reflexive mode of representation, an opportunity to explore two sides of a single thought or emotion, fashioned, in Rossetti’s image from his ‘Introductory Sonnet,’ as a ‘coin’” (479). While Donnelly rightly suggests that Rossetti made a practice out of looking at two sides of a feeling or experience, Rossetti also happily embraced contradictions. Unlike Donnelly, I argue that Rossetti did not approach the sonnet as a form for reflection and representation; instead, Rossetti used the sonnet form to perform an attentive perception that results in the manifestation of what attention is and what attention can do.

Unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s extremely popular *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), Rossetti’s sonnet sequence *The House of Life* offers multiple perspectives and undermines expectations of a stable, unified speaking subject. The

sonnets do not offer a progression of action and emotion leading to a final resolution; instead, each sonnet can function as an independent entity, and individual sonnets express dualities and illustrate the cyclical quality of love and life. It is through the repetition of a similar position of the speaker to the beloved that the activity of attention is performed by the sonnets. In John Holmes' analysis, *The House of Life* unsettled Victorian belief systems, provoked new discussions about sexuality, and influenced the production and popularity of sonnet sequences in the second half of the nineteenth century. While *The House of Life* certainly accomplished what Holmes elucidates, the sonnet sequence also engages visual culture through the performance of attentiveness.

In addition to setting into motion the trends House describes, *The House of Life* also modifies the traditional organization of the sonnet form. Like other sonneteers of the nineteenth century, Rossetti composed sonnets after the Italian or Petrarchan style. Conventionally, the Petrarchan sonnet consisted of two parts, the octave and the sestet. In addition to being a treatment *of* love and a treatment *for* love, the Petrarchan sonnet most often relied on the octave to elucidate a problem related to love and desire and used the sestet to offer a solution to that problem. In Rossetti's *The House of Life*, a different pattern emerges in some of the sonnets. Instead of posing a problem and expressing a solution, these sonnets perform a desire to apprehend something or someone in the octave and tend to affirm the elusive nature of that something or someone in the sestet. The repetition of the dynamic of apprehension and elusion supports the construction of an attentive eye that emerges within Rossetti's sonnet sequence. Rossetti's *The House of Life* constitutes a form of knowledge about attentive perceptual experience. It gives attention form.

As I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, a common critical approach to Rossetti's *The House of Life* is to elucidate the play between Rossetti's desire to describe the presence of an experience only to be left documenting or reflecting on that experience's absence. In proposing to approach Rossetti's sonnet sequence as performative, I want to shift away from the terms "presence" and "absence," and instead focus on "apprehension" and "elusion" within the sonnet sequence. Although the terms "apprehension" and "elusion" share with "presence" and "absence" a sense of having and a sense of losing respectively, "apprehension" and "elusion" emphasize the physicality of vision that Rossetti develops in his sonnets. Within the sonnets, the speaker's attentive look holds, grasps, and clings, but it cannot deter the inevitable passage of time or death. Ultimately, what the speaker apprehends will never fail to elude him.

The movement between apprehension and elusion in Rossetti's *The House of Life* exposes an underlying truth about the exercise of attentiveness. As Jonathan Crary asserts, in the nineteenth century, attentiveness, on the surface, "seemed to be about perpetual fixity;" however, experience showed that "it was instead about duration and flux, within which objects and sensations had a mutating and provisional existence" ("Unbinding Vision" 51). Despite what appears to be *The House of Life*'s investment in attentiveness as an antidote to the distractions associated with modernization in order to tend to something more authentic, true, or durable that can only be accessed through the heightening of the sonnets, and through a continual reading of Rossetti's poems, the sonnets illustrate the limitations to attentiveness as a cure to the flux and change characteristic of modernity. Even as the fixed eye attempts to hold onto an object, idea, or feeling, that object, idea, or feeling cannot help but elude the grasp of the fixed eye.

In the sonnet “Lovesight,” the speaker struggles to fully apprehend his beloved. In the first line of the octave, the speaker asks, “When do I see thee most, beloved one?” (IV.1). The use of the word “most” in this line reveals the speaker’s wish to perceive the “beloved one” in a way that exceeds ordinary perception and in a way that maximizes his insight while at the same time the expression of that wish as a question betrays the speaker’s uncertainty about “when” he achieves the kind of looking he desires and elevates above common experience. Seeing the most, in addition, is a way of expressing attentiveness. The reliance on a question, furthermore, demonstrates that the speaker is more involved in performing a query than describing or trying to represent a moment. As the octave unfolds as three questions about the speaker’s opportunity to see the beloved “most” and relies on the word “when” three times, the speaker presents the activity of sight as a kind of holding. His desire to “see” the beloved “most” is a desire to lay hold of, or apprehend, the beloved. In other words, the speaker wishes to fix his eye on his beloved. For instance, the speaker poses this question: “Or when in the dusk hours, (we two alone), / Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies, / Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies, / And my soul only see thy soul its own?” (IV. 5-8). In this question, the speaker proposes that he might see his beloved the “most” when the daylight recedes. In the sestet of “Lovesight,” however, the speaker pursues a different course. He imagines what it would like if he “no more should see / Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee, / Nor image of thing eyes in any spring” (9-11). By presenting this possibility, the speaker recognizes the ultimate elusiveness of what he desires.

In the next section, I discuss four sonnets from *The House of Life* that reflect on the relationship between language and vision and that perform and play with the dynamic

of apprehension and elusiveness. These poems, “A Day of Love,” “Beauty’s Pageant,” “Genius in Beauty,” and “Silent Noon” not only demonstrate the multiple voices contained within this sonnet sequence as they offer conflicting perspectives on the relationship between language and vision, but these poems also reflect the position of the fixed eye and as a result they perform attentiveness.

Written in 1870, “A Day of Love” concerns a meeting between the speaker and a beloved woman from his past. In the poem, both “Love” as a personified feeling and the two lovers attempt to apprehend, or lay hold of, something only to be ultimately eluded by it. In the octave, the emphasis on physical places introduces the theme of apprehension. In the first three lines of the poem, the speaker compares the places that his beloved usually inhabits with the “lonely place” that they could instead occupy together if circumstances had only been different: “Those envied places which do know her well, / And are so scornful of this lonely place, / Even now for once are emptied of her grace” (XVI.1-3). Not only are the places that “do know her well” “envied” by either the speaker of the “lonely place” or both, but, as personified entities, they also express feelings of jealousy and contempt. These places claim to understand the woman; they apprehend her and they want to hold onto her without sharing her. When she eludes these places for a day, they become drained by the absence of “her graces.” The word “emptied” in line three suggests that these places are like containers or even cells; they hold the speaker’s beloved, but at the same time she fills these places with her unique individuality. As much as these places apprehend the woman, she is not without freedom or agency. The first three lines of the sonnet not only establish that the separation of the speaker from the

beloved has become the normal state of the affair, but they also indicate the poem's development of a theme of apprehension.

In the second half of the octave, a personified "Love" seeks to apprehend the two lovers of the poem. The speaker describes "Love" as a commanding force; "Love" casts a "spell," he has a "predominant presence," and he "doth compel" (XVI.4-5). Like the first half of the octave, the emphasis in the poem again turns to a consideration of space: "The hours of Love fill full the echoing space / With sweet confederate music favourable" (XVI.7-8). Just as the speaker's beloved fills the places she regularly inhabits with "her graces," the "hours" associated with "Love" make the "echoing," or perhaps more accurately frequently empty, "space" reverberate with music. The phrase "fill full" illustrates the intensity of the music that operates in alliance with "Love;" the music crowds the space. Yet, while the words "sweet" and "favourable" accompany the introduction of the presence of the music at "Love's" command, the "spell" of "Love" works on "All alien hours, an outworn populace" (XVI.6). Even though the music is "sweet" and "favourable," the hours responsible for generating the music are tired and weary as well as strange and unfamiliar. The ambivalent description of the "hours" indicates not only the two lovers' usual absence from the place, but it also suggests "Love's" desire to apprehend the pair. The "hours" are "alien" and "outworn" because they pass by without the lover's attendance. Even in the pair's absence, "Love's spell" persists, but it is generally ineffective. The title of the poem betrays the fleeting quality of "Love's" apprehension; it lasts no more than a day.

While "Love" attempts to apprehend the pair, the speaker and his beloved endeavor to apprehend the past. The "words" that "take wing from" the "delicate love-

lines of” the beloved’s “mouth” convey the memories she shares with the speaker of the poem (XVI. 11,10). The speaker explains that the “love-lines” of his beloved’s “mouth” are “lit / With quivering fire” and that this fire inspires speech (XVI. 10-11). The phrase “quivering fire” reveals the ephemeral quality of their “Day of Love.” The fire will eventually die down or be extinguished, and the word “quivering” suggests that the flame itself, while moving passionately, is in danger of burning itself out. To a certain extent, the expression “love-lines” invites a comparison between the woman’s speech and the poem itself. After all, the poem can be characterized as lines of love, a token of or monument to the past that the speaker and his beloved share. Because the final couplet of the poem pairs “Speaking of things remembered” in the penultimate line with being “Speechless while things forgotten call to us” in the final line, the limitations of speech, and by extension poetry, are brought into focus. Even though the speaker and his beloved try to grasp the past by speaking about it and by writing about it, the past is elusive. Time and those “things forgotten” pull the speaker and the beloved out of the past while the last line of the poem hints that the reader too will be called away to other commitments now that the poem has ended and has too become “[s]peechless.” If the poem is an effort to lay hold of the past, the final couplet in the poem challenges its ability to do so.

In the sonnet sequence, the poem that follows “A Day of Love” comments directly on the limitations of poetry. “Beauty’s Pageant,” composed in 1871, offers this reflection in its final couplet: “and sorrow yet for eyes / Unborn that read these words and saw her not” (XVII.13-14). The speaker exhibits a belief that although his words will endure the passage of time, the poem cannot recreate the original perceptual experience that inspired them. Indeed, the poem unravels as an occasion to testify to the idea that

language cannot be as immediate or as primary as visual experience. In the octave, the speaker asks to what the “loveliest woman” can be compared (XVII.7). In the poem, there is no “last /Incarnate flower of culminating day” (XVII.2) and no “glory of change by Nature’s hand amass’d” (XVII.4) that is capable of competing “with all those moods of varying grace / Which o’er one loveliest woman’s form and face / Within this hour, within this room, have pass’d” (XVII.7-8). The octave seeks not only to emphasize the intensity of the woman’s beauty by noting that it is incomparable to anything in the natural world and that it is essentially indescribable, but it also calls into question the very function of simile and metaphor. The poem mourns the ineffectiveness of simile and metaphor to reiterate an immediate perceptual experience. In his study of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Joel Fineman argues that for Shakespeare, “Language re-presents what vision presents, and yet this repetition produces something different from that which it repeats, for the truth of language is that, compared to vision, it is false” (16). In the case of Rossetti’s “Beauty’s Pageant,” the speaker dismisses the capacity for language to “re-present” at all, especially something as extraordinary as the many sides of the nameless woman’s beauty “within this hour” and “within this room” (XVII.8).

Despite the poem’s proposition that language cannot “re-present what vision presents” and the poem’s accompanying implication that poetic language can be ineffective, the poem also suggests that direct perception is in a sense inadequate and limited as well. In the title of the poem, the word “pageant” prepares the reader for a spectacle or procession while also conjuring up images of extravagant costuming. On one hand, in the octave, lines six and seven – “all those moods of varying grace” that pass “o’er one loveliest woman’s form and face” – imply that the word “pageant” refers to the

movement of “moods” across the woman’s “form and face.” The variety of graceful expressions and the range of feeling that the woman embodies create the “pageant” of beauty. On the other hand, the sestet takes advantage of the word “pageant’s” association with elaborate costumes. In the sestet, the speaker elucidates that “Love’s very vesture and elect disguise / Was each fine movement, – wonder new-begot / Of lily or swan or swan-stemmed galiot” (XVII.9-11). “Love” is not only adorned in costume, but the speaker makes it clear that “Love” chooses its “disguise.” The speaker’s encounter with “Love” is mediated through “Love’s” dress; it is not an absolutely direct encounter with “Love.” The quick transition in line eleven from flower to a similarly shaped yet different entity (an animal) to a similarly shaped yet different object (a boat) indicates the speaker’s struggle to account for the metamorphosis of “Love” in front of his eyes. The slight adjustments “Love” makes to its costuming keeps the speaker-as-viewer wondering at a distance. Although the spectacle pleases the speaker-as-viewer and brings “Joy to his sight,” the speaker remains at a remove (XVII.12).

If “Beauty’s Pageant” challenges the expectations associated with poetic language, then it also precedes a poem that associates the beauty of the speaker’s painting of his innominata with the work of two poetic giants, Homer and Dante. Like “Beauty’s Pageant,” “Genius in Beauty,” written in 1871, begins with a declaration of the incomparability of the portrayed woman’s beauty. In the octave, the speaker employs the word “not” three times; halfway through the octave, the speaker even combines “Nay” with “not” in order to punctuate the lack of suitable comparisons between the portrait of the woman and any other work of art or work of nature. However, the negative language

that dominates the octave contrasts with the affirmative first line of the poem: “Beauty like hers is genius” (XVIII.1).

In “Silent Noon,” the speaker attempts to apprehend the present moment by offering the reader different physical perspectives on one scene. In the octave, the speaker describes his beloved’s “hands” and how they “lie open in the long fresh grass” (XIX. 1-2). In the next line, the speaker pronounces that his beloved’s “eyes smile peace” (3). The speaker personifies the woman’s eyes in order to indicate contentment, but the personification also casts her as reflective rather than perceiving. While the speaker scans the entire scene, shifting perspective rapidly, his female beloved stays absorbed in her contentment. The difference between the darting eyes of the male speaker and the peaceful content eyes of his female beloved suggest and underscore the connection between an ideal of femininity and an ideal of attentive absorption that runs throughout Rossetti’s sonnet sequence. In these lines, the speaker directs attention first to the woman’s hands and then shifts attention to her eyes. In the next line, the speaker moves the line of sight to the “pasture” that “gleams and glooms / ‘Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass” (3-4). Here the speaker shifts from the land to the sky. If the speaker first concentrates on the “hands” of his beloved, then the final lines of the sonnet move outward and take a survey of all of their surroundings: “All round our nest, as far as the eye can pass, / Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge / Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorne-hedge” (5-7). What I want to stress about the octave of “Silent Noon” is the constant shifting of the speaker’s (and reader’s) attention; the speaker concentrates on both small details and global ones, encouraging the movement of the eye. The speaker ends the octave by declaring the moment to be one of “visible silence, still as

the hour-glass” (8). The pairing of “visible” with “silence” underscores the octave’s persistent focus on the eye. It is through the act of seeing and being attentive that the speaker realizes the “silence.” In this poem, the senses of the speaker do not stay isolated, but they instead conflate to give a sense of the intensification and intermingling of the senses.

In the sestet of “Silent Noon,” the speaker provides this image in a double simile: “Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly / Hangs like a blue-thread loosened from the sky: – / So this wing’d hour is dropt to us from above” (9-11). The “dragon-fly” that is “like a blue thread” is like the “wing’d hour” the speaker and his beloved experience. The double simile in the sestet underscores the speaker’s searching for the best way to describe the moment and it also illustrates the speaker’s performance of attentiveness. As the speaker seeks to illuminate the “silence” and stillness of the moment as well as the way that he and his beloved inhabit that moment he stretches language to its limits by placing simile on top of simile in order to attempt to achieve a perfect description of the moment that will ultimately elude him. The penultimate and final lines of the sonnet echo the double simile: “This close-companioned inarticulate hour / When twofold silence was the song of love” (13-14). The “close-companioned” and “twofold silence” indicate the sestet’s interest in the idea of doubling, but the word “inarticulate” to describe “hour” verifies the speaker’s struggle to find the right words or right expression for “the song of love.” The “song of love” is one of “silence,” but it is also “visible.” In this poem, attentive looking, or the occupation of an attentive gaze, communicates more than language; however, there is a fusion of sensory experience that makes sight function in the same way as words. “Silent Noon” demonstrates what occurs

throughout the sonnet sequence: there is a performance of attention that illustrates the desire for sight to communicate but that desire finds itself confined or limited by the inability of attentiveness to steady or freeze time completely.

Epilogue:

Poetry and the Nation-State

Readers have always identified love, beauty, and death as characteristic themes of Rossetti's poetry as well as universal themes of poetry. From the initial critical response to the publication of Rossetti's collected poems to the inclusion of Rossetti's verse in anthologies today, critics have called upon these themes to describe Rossetti as either unintentionally antagonistic or intentionally indifferent toward issues of national identity. In making a case for Rossetti's antagonism, Robert Buchanan in "The Fleshly School of Poetry" argues that Rossetti's poems function against national interests and the common good. He claims that Rossetti and poets like him "are, so to speak, public offenders, because they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read." Associating Rossetti's work with contamination, Buchanan urges his readers to stay away from the "morbid" verse of Rossetti and his circle. More recently, critics, with a few notable exceptions, have either ignored or overlooked the relationship of Rossetti's poetry to broader political and cultural trends in late Victorian society. Focusing on his "ornate style" or his depiction of women, scholars have evaluated Rossetti in terms of aesthetics or gender, but, in turn, they have implied his indifference to broader political concerns (NAEL 1443).

One reason why Rossetti's poetry has failed to provoke discussions related to national identity has to do with expectations associated with genre. In the nineteenth

century, the novel dominated the literary field. Today, the novel is widely recognized as the genre most closely aligned with the process of national identity formation. As Timothy Brennan states, “It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations” (49). For Benedict Anderson, language plays an important role in the development of the nation-state. As he describes, “print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (44). The gradual standardization of language through print capitalism, in other words, created a sense that national language had its origins in a very distant past and that it was an unchangeable and unchanging aspect of nationhood. Building on Benedict Anderson’s critical observation that print capitalism “created the conditions where people could begin to think of themselves as a nation,” Brennan argues that the “novel’s created world allowed for multitudinous actions occurring simultaneously within a single, definable community, filled with ‘calendrical coincidences’ and what Anderson calls (after Benjamin) ‘traverse, cross-time.’ Read in isolation, the novel was nevertheless a mass ceremony; one could read alone with the conviction that millions of others were doing the same, at the same time” (52). Given the novel’s potential for creating a sense of community and for re-enforcing notions of national cohesiveness, late nineteenth century poetry has not, generally speaking, been given enough consideration in terms of its engagement with the process of consolidating national identity.

By performing the position of the fixed eye and demonstrating the formal qualities of attention, *The House of Life* does engage social and cultural issues of the nineteenth century. Specifically, *The House of Life* is an important part of the history of

visual culture in the nineteenth century because of the way it takes seriously attention's form. It is also important because of the demands it places on the reader; by performing the fixed eye, the sequence produces knowledge about perceptual experience and suggests that one way to attain a heightened perceptual experience is through the repeated reading of the sonnet cycle. Because attention emerges as a form of social control and regulation as well as a technique for forging national identities, Rossetti's performance of attentiveness deserves a closer look.

CHAPTER III

THE ART OF SELF-CREATION:

THE ETHICS OF ATTENTION IN HENRY JAMES' *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

In Chapter Two, I argued that Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The House of Life* can be read as a performance of attentiveness and that the structure of *The House of Life* invites the reader of the poems to gain an elevated perceptual experience through the activity of reading and re-reading. In this chapter, I propose to show that Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, published originally one year before *The House of Life* in 1880, and the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, written in 1908 for the New York edition of James' works, concern how the exercise of attention bears on the process of and ethics associated with self-creation.

As Jakob Stougaard-Neilsen elucidates, by the late nineteenth century, books in general had become "immersed in a dominating visual culture. Attention defines the new economy in which authors must now compete, but inattentiveness seems built in the traditional material form" (17). While attentiveness informs James' depiction of characters within the novel, James also brings attention to the experience of being attentive in the 1908 preface. His explicit views on attention reflect the beliefs held by and expressed by his brother, William James. In 1890, ten years after the original publication in serial form of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James' brother, William James, released *The Principles of Psychology*. In this extensive survey of the relatively new field of psychology, James touches on topics such as "Stream of Thought" and the "Perception of Time," and he also devotes a chapter to a discussion of "Attention." In this chapter,

James delivers what Stougaard-Nielson describes as the “most famous definition of attention” at the end of the nineteenth century (17). James writes,

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreuung* in German. (403-404)

Implied here, but not stated directly, is James’ belief that attention is to a certain extent about *choosing* to concentrate on one of a number of possible objects or ideas at the expense of excluding or withdrawing from a concentrated consideration of other objects or ideas. He presents his views about attention and agency more directly when he states that “*My experience is what I agree to attend to*” (402). He explains, “Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me” (402). James emphasizes the individual’s ability to freely choose and select what will be attended to, and therefore, what one’s experience of the world will be. Later in the essay, James elaborates on the role of individual willpower plays in creating experience. He asserts, “*There is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time*. What is called sustained voluntary attention is a repetition of successive efforts which bring back the topic to the mind. The topic once brought back, if a congenial one, *develops*; and if its development is interesting it engages the attention passively for a time” (10). In this

passage, James stresses the subjective agency of being attentive of something; for James, even when the attentiveness is being exercised passively, it is initiated by the subject's original interest.

For Jonathan Crary, William James portrays “the creative and pragmatic dimension of the attentiveness of any given autonomous subject” while ignoring or missing the “emergence of increasingly powerful technologies and institutions that would determine and enforce *externally* the objects of attention for mass populations” (63). As Crary conveys, James “attempted to salvage some relatively stable notion of consciousness and some form of a distinct subject/object relation” at a time when the relationship of subject and object is undergoing transformation in the capitalist industrialized system (63). In Crary's assessment, William James overlooks the dynamics of power that become increasingly important to an evaluation of the function of attentiveness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I hope to illustrate below, Henry James offers a more complicated view of the relationship between attention and power that becomes apparent when juxtaposing the 1908 Preface of *The Portrait of a Lady* with the original 1880 text. While the original text offers a skeptical view on the exercise of autonomous and unmediated perception, the Preface suggests that unmediated perception is possible and even necessary to artistic creation. One way to explain the different perspectives offered in the original text and in the Preface is to suggest that while James wished to carve out for himself as an artist licensure for unmediated perception, he also feared how changes to the economic structure could impact the autonomy of individuals as well as reading practices.

In the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, written twenty-eight years after the original publication of the novel, Henry James follows his brother in attempting to present a unified and stable view of subjectivity on the basis of perception and attentiveness. In the Preface, he declares that any work of art should not be evaluated in terms of its perceived morality or immorality, but it should instead be judged according to whether it is “genuine, ...sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of life” (5). In James’ famous “house of fiction” metaphor, he clearly offers an account of the subject as unified and stable. In his account, the artist figure is able to perceive the world without any influence from other and without any mediation of institutions or disciplines. He describes, “The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will” (5). From the windows in the house of fiction, the windows

have this mark of their own that each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may not open. (5-6)

In this metaphor, James affirms the autonomous individual's capacity to view without any influence or mediation. While he suggests that "a field glass" may be used, it is the "pair of eyes" that forms the "unique instrument" that can view the scene completely uniquely.

What is interesting and important here is that *The Portrait of a Lady* exposes the limitations of the point of view elaborated in this metaphor. Isabel Archer, the heroine of the novel, believes that she can look out and perceive the world and create her own experiences without that experience being manipulated or influenced by any external factors. That Isabel's characterization and the plot of *The Portrait of a Lady* undermine the central premise of James' house of fiction metaphor shows, I suggest in this chapter, that James earlier work, *The Portrait of a Lady*, registers more acutely the influence of the marketplace on what individuals do or do not perceive. Rather than illustrating that individuals have a free field to pursue their interests in and to operate without influence, *The Portrait of a Lady* brings into relief how market relationships, such as Isabel's marriage to Gilbert Osmond, manipulate and trick perception. If the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* invites the reader to read the novel with a certain attentiveness to perception, then it also sets the reader up for a consideration and evaluation of Isabel's agency. The contradiction between James' statements about perception in the Preface and Isabel's inability to realize that her perception is mediated cause the reader to look at perception critically. Instead of providing an example of genuine perception, the novel requires the reader to examine the relationship between perception and agency.

The Portrait of a Lady originally appeared as a twelve-part serialization simultaneously in America and in England in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in *Macmillan's*

Magazine respectively. While James profited financially from the rare transatlantic publishing opportunity, he tended to balk at serialization in general. As he expresses in a letter to W.D. Howells in order to explain why he neglected to read Howells' *April's Hope* when it had been serialized in *Harper's* magazine, he feels Howells would be sure to agree "how little the habit of writing in the serial form encourages one to read in that odious way, which so many simple folk, thank heaven, think best" (134). Betraying an elitist attitude toward the reading public he nevertheless acknowledges dependence upon, James also complains that serialization creates an unnecessarily unpleasant writing and reading experience. Although James does not clarify what is specifically "odious" about the serial form, one strong possibility may be the scheduled interruptions that the writer has an obligation to design in clever and compelling ways. Most evidently, serialization eliminates the possibility of being able to read continuously.

While James faults the structural demands of serialization for cultivating poor reading practices, *The Portrait of a Lady* explores further how different media affect the reader's quality of reading. For instance, in the opening chapter, three characters – Ralph Touchett, his father Daniel, and his friend Lord Warburton – reflect with humor on the technology that made communication between individuals at great distances swift and efficient in the nineteenth century: the telegram. Specifically, these characters remark on and marvel at the "art of condensation" "mastered" by Ralph's mother, Mrs. Touchett (24). Ralph professes that even though people tend to "say women don't know how to write" telegrams, his mother excels at it because she fully embraces the truncated structure and shortened form the telegram offers. At the same time, Ralph finds the abridged messages she sends to be "rather inscrutable" (24). He gives this example from

his mother's recent trip to America: "Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister's girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent" (25). Ralph admits to Lord Warburton that "my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling; it seems to admit of so many interpretations" (25). Although the telegram accelerates the speed of communication over long distances, Ralph illustrates how it can also obfuscate meaning and create confusion. The multiplication of possible readings that arise out of the compressed form of the telegram becomes a source of laughter for the characters within the opening pages of the novel.

The novel takes advantage of the incident of Mrs. Touchett's telegram to play with language and the relationships that language attempts to convey. Throughout the novel, Ralph characteristically expresses an attitude of irony, and in this case he half jokes about the relationships between people as they are presented in the telegram: "We thought at first that the sister mentioned might be the sister of the clerk; but the subsequent mention of a niece seems to prove that the allusion is to one of my aunts" (25). The "art of condensation" perfected by Mrs. Touchett not only relies upon an abbreviation of statements, but it also jumbles together and mixes up relationships. Paradoxically, for the plot of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the telegram serves the purpose of establishing relationships and introducing characters. As critics have noted, readers of the novel first learn about Mrs. Touchett and the novel's heroine, her niece Isabel, through the language of the telegram. For some critics, this moment in the novel supports the theory that Isabel and Mrs. Touchett, as well as the other female characters, are linked to the notion of textuality itself. In Laurel Bollinger's argument about the representation of textuality in the novel, the male characters can be judged ethically according to what

extent they fail to or refuse to read the women as texts. While this approach has its merits, it also glosses over James' implicit critique of the "art of condensation" that emerges with telegraphy. As I will argue in this chapter, *The Portrait of a Lady* demonstrates concern about the relationship between reading practices and technology. Specifically, I argue that the examination of reading practices in *The Portrait of a Lady* takes place within the context of the technology of portraiture. As I hope to illustrate below, portraiture emerges as a technology of self-creation as well as nation-creation in the nineteenth century.

This chapter consists of two parts. In the first half, I discuss Isabel's process of self-creation through practices of reading and seeing. I argue that her sense of the limitless opportunities for self-creation drives her to view Gilbert Osmond's creed that "one ought to make one's life a work of art" as the epitome of the self-creative act. In the second half of the chapter, by calling upon the debates around portraiture in the nineteenth century, I argue that the word "Portrait" of the title does more than indicate that the novel presents a portrayal or description of one woman's life. Instead, I argue that portraiture in the nineteenth century participated in the process of self-creation and nation-creation. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, portraiture emerges as a false, rather than authentically representative, art.

The Attentive Reader:

Isabel Archer's Program of Self-Improvement

In the nineteenth century, reading and attentiveness were connected within a discourse of self-improvement. As Stephen Arata attests, writers such as John Ruskin, J.J. Wright, and Lucy Soulsby viewed reading as a labor of self-improvement and even

placed reading within “the context of time-management systems” (201). Arata illustrates that when Ruskin advises educators in his lecture “Of Kings’ Treasuries” (1864) that reading should be approached, in his words, as “severe work” and that to get at the true meaning within a written work a student must “crush and smelt” the “rock” that is the language of the text, he is offering a reading method, as Arata explains, “explicitly as a new conception of the activity of reading, one he expects his auditors and readers to find unfamiliar almost to the point of strangeness” (200-201). Ruskin promotes a style of reading that educators at all levels tend to echo today; as Ruskin dictates, “You must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable – nay, letter by letter” (qtd. in Arata 200). Ruskin prescribes a now familiar reading method that relies on a sustained attentiveness to language that requires time and patience on the part of the reader. Yet, as Arata makes clear, Ruskin’s advice would have struck a wholly new chord for his intended audience. Ruskin’s argument to see reading as work and to read language intensively and rigorously would stand as innovative concepts to his nineteenth century audience.

Less familiar than Ruskin to readers today, Wright and Soulsby shifted away from Ruskin’s focus on students and advocated for the benefits of strict reading practices for men and women, respectively. Arata reports that both Wright and Soulsby urged on their readers “the importance of routine, of having a regularized plan of reading” (201). Wright and Soulsby also stress that reading should not be undertaken for pleasure only. In *So Many Books! So Little Time! What to Do?* (1891), Wright explains that “really profitable reading is *work* – not play” (qtd. in Arata 201). Soulsby’s *Stray Thoughts on Reading* (1897) takes a similar position against reading for pleasure. Soulsby introduces her main

topic to her readers as the “duty” rather than the “pleasure of reading” (qtd. in Arata 201). She professes, “I have no faith in reading that is compatible with an armchair” (qtd. in Arata 201). Soulsby goes beyond Wright in her recommendations when she explicitly turns her focus off of the reading material and puts it on the activity of reading itself. Arata points out that “for Soulsby, the locus of self-improvement ... migrated from the books to the activity of reading. The *content* of what is read is of great importance, just as it is for Ruskin and for Wright, but even more important, according to Soulsby is *reading*; reading properly, that is, reading as a form of self-discipline” (201-202). From Soulsby’s perspective, an attentive act of reading is profitable regardless of what is being read. The text itself does not matter, but the style and process of reading does.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel develops and sustains a reading habit in order to serve two purposes: self-improvement and mental discipline. Isabel’s aspirations to train and discipline her mind underscore her belief in positive self-creation; perceiving herself as completely responsible for her own development, Isabel has absolute faith in her ability to make and cultivate her own future without much support or influence from others. Isabel takes the activity of reading seriously. Immediately before meeting her aunt, Mrs. Touchett, for the first time, Isabel sat in her late grandmother’s house attempting to benefit from undertaking the task of a difficult reading:

she kept her eyes on her book and tried to fix her mind. It had lately occurred to her that her mind was a good deal of a vagabond, and she had spent much ingenuity in training it to a military step and teaching it to advance, to halt, to retreat, to perform even more complicated manoeuvres, at the word of command. Just now she had given it marching

orders and it had been trudging over the sandy plains of a history of German Thought. (37)

In this scene, Isabel does not read for pleasure, but she approaches reading as a way to discipline her mind. Her reading requires effort in order to “fix her mind” on the book at hand. Isabel reads not to engage new ideas; instead, she reads as a way to order her mind. Anticipating Soulsby’s recommendations for young women, Isabel reads not necessarily to benefit from or out of interest in the subject matter presented in the book, but instead she reads for the sake of reading itself. Isabel’s reliance on a military metaphor for the training of her mind captures her interest in imposing mental discipline on herself.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Isabel actively pursues self-improvement. As the narrator reveals when Isabel is at Gardencourt, “Isabel’s chief dread in life at this period of her development was that she would appear narrow-minded; what she feared next afterwards was that she would really be so” (71). Reading is part of Isabel’s program for not only expanding her mind and introducing herself to new things in order to avoid being caught as a “narrow-minded” person, but it is also part of Isabel’s attempts to train her mind. As importantly, Isabel’s concern touches on not only who she is authentically, but it also touches on how she appears. While the narrator suggests here that Isabel thinks about the difference between appearance and essence, Isabel, at least throughout the first part of the novel, maintains her belief in her special ability to see through appearances.

In addition, Isabel turns to reading when she wants to calm or steady her mind. Yet, this habit hardly ever produces the positive results she desires. Her efforts toward reading are often interrupted in the novel. For instance, while visiting London with her cousin Ralph and friend Henrietta, Isabel reserves time alone, and “trying with the aid of

two tall candles to lose herself in a volume she had brought from Gardencourt she succeeded only to the extent of reading other words than those printed on the page” (159). While Isabel attempts to escape from pressing thoughts by opening a book, she finds herself reading another text: the words spoken by her cousin Ralph only a few hours earlier. Her awareness of and attention to Ralph’s words participates in her continual endeavor of self-improvement. Earlier that afternoon, Ralph had challenged Isabel to express what she will do with her life after refusing Lord Warburton’s proposal of marriage. Although happy with Isabel’s refusal, he considers it to be “a remarkable act” because most women would not refuse an offer of marriage from a wealthy British nobleman (156). After the proposal, Isabel herself reflected at the time that if she did not marry Lord Warburton that she then “must do great things, she must do something greater” (120). At the same time, she felt “really frightened at herself” for possibly being “a cold, hard, priggish person” (120). To Ralph, she protests that she only wants to see the world despite that Ralph half-teases that she really wants endless adventure and exciting experiences. Ralph insists that no matter what she will do she will have “plenty of spectators,” and he will be among the most enthusiastic (156). By reflecting and studying his words after this crucial conversation, Isabel confronts her own intellectual, social, and emotional development. According to the narrative, Isabel examines Ralph’s words as if they were a text. Yet, before Isabel can arrive at any conclusions regarding Ralph’s comments, she is interrupted by an unexpected visit from Caspar Goodwood that leaves her more agitated still.

During Isabel’s Roman excursion with Ralph and Henrietta, Gilbert Osmond meets them in that city to continue his pursuit of Isabel as orchestrated and manipulated

by Madame Merle. Before Isabel leaves Rome to join her aunt, Osmond confesses his love to Isabel. Interestingly, throughout their discussion, Isabel handles a book she had been reading when Osmond came to visit her. In my view, this book is not merely a prop; instead its presence indicates not only Isabel's quest for self-improvement and her desire to test the validity of her travel plans, but its inclusion in the narrative also suggests that Osmond's profession of love challenges Isabel's boundaries of selfhood. Osmond's words compromise Isabel's adherence to a process of self-creation. While Tessa Hadley contends that James "likes to write in the novels about people who only read perfunctorily, as part of a larger expected social performance," I find that Isabel's relationship to the activity of reading is much more complex (231). Isabel's interaction with Osmond illustrates Isabel's reliance on and belief in reading's capacity to assist her during difficult moments. Discovering what she perceives to be a loosely veiled criticism from Osmond, Isabel "with her eyes bent, fingered the pages of M. Ampère" as she exclaims to Osmond that he "turns things into ridicule without seeming to do it, though not, I think, without intending it. You've no respect for my travels – you think them ridiculous" (306-307). Attending closely to Osmond's words and tone, Isabel finds that he does not always speak directly or truly. However, Isabel turns her acute observation into a critical statement of her own actions rather than allowing it to be indicative or revelatory of Osmond's own double motives, which are known to the reader. I want to suggest that Isabel's inability to perceive Osmond's double motives stems from her reading habits. Not accustomed to "mining" a text in the manner of Ruskin for intricate meaning, Isabel more often approaches reading as a discipline of self-improvement. Thus, Isabel takes Osmond's words as a reflection of herself rather than as a meaningful

statement on their own terms. Later, after she and Osmond have been married for years, Isabel will look back and realize that “she had not read him right” (421).

The presence of the book in this Roman scene is not just a confirmation of Isabel as someone who reads as a favored hobby, but it also points to Isabel’s desire to seek out and do the best thing. As she continues pressing Osmond for a direct opinion on her loosely formulated plans for traveling the world, she continues to handle the book: “She went on in the same tone, fretting the edge of her book with the paper-knife” (307). Isabel’s treatment of the book reflects her treatment of herself; she “frets” about her future. This “fretting” becomes evident in her speech to Osmond: “You see my ignorance, my blunders, the way I wander about as if the world belonged to me, simply because – because it has been put into my power to do so. You don’t think a woman ought to do that. You think it bold and ungraceful” (307). Despite assurances from Osmond that he approves of her plans, and that indeed he finds them to be “beautiful,” Isabel continues to challenge the veracity of his opinions and wants him to clarify his view of her (307). Isabel approaches Osmond’s views in terms of how they reflect on her rather than on how they reflect on him.

The narrative directly confirms the absolute seriousness Isabel brings to her exchange with Osmond. The narrator reveals that the “tone of their conversation was not jocose” (307). From Osmond’s perspective, “Isabel had in fact her solemnity; he had seen it before” (307). Her seriousness underscores her desire to evaluate her choices as honestly and as directly as possible. She operates under a contract with herself to be the best that she possibly can, and she often experiences agony in attempting to decide

between two paths. After Osmond expresses his love for her in the same scene, she feels an ambivalent response and her body expresses that ambivalence through tears:

The tears came into her eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine bolt – backward, forward, she couldn't have said which. The words he had uttered made him, as he stood there, beautiful and generous, invested him as with the golden air of early autumn; but, morally speaking, she retreated before them – facing him still – as she had retreated in the other cases before a like encounter. (309)

As this passage indicates, Isabel responds in two ways. She experiences an aesthetic response as well as an ethical one. On one hand, she finds Osmond “beautiful and generous.” She is pulled toward the aesthetic possibilities he represents. The association of Osmond with “early autumn” indicates her attraction to his experience and the wisdom that she associates with that experience. Isabel’s mistaken notion that Osmond is “beautiful and generous” further confirms her sense of him as someone to model and someone from whom to seek approval. The “golden air” that envelopes him with light and openness in her imagination becomes a stifling narrowness when they are married. Despite Isabel’s favorable feelings toward Osmond at this point in the narrative, she resists reciprocating his admission of love on ethical terms. For Isabel, that “slipping of a fine bolt” within her must be checked. Committed to her independence, Isabel approaches her free life as an ethical act. However, her ethics do not follow any institutional moral code. Instead, that code is something she creates on a daily basis with every choice. For

Isabel, to live ethically is to remain independent and to be driven by a principle of self-creation.

Isabel's interest in self-improvement and belief in self-creation develop out of a desire to preserve her independence as well as a deep sense of her own originality. She is described early on as "a young person of many theories" (60). Isabel sought "to have a larger perception of surrounding facts and to care for knowledge that was tinged with the unfamiliar" (60). At the same time as she actively pursues the unfamiliar, "she had an unquenchable desire to think well of herself" while she "had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong" (61). Among her theories, Isabel believed herself to be "independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of that state" (62). In her encounter with Caspar in London, Isabel tries to convey her reasons for refusing his offer of marriage. In this scene, Isabel indicates that she is occupied by a project of self-creation. As she tells Caspar, "I'm not in my first youth – I can do what I choose – I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition" (168). Free from any family obligations and without anyone dictating the direction her life will take, Isabel professes that she will "try to judge things for myself" and that she believes "to judge wrong ... is more honourable than not to judge at all" (168). More than anything else, Isabel wants to avoid being "a mere sheep in the flock" (168). Claiming complete and total responsibility for herself, Isabel declares, "I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think compatible with propriety to tell me" (168). Isabel quest for self-discovery is underscored by a belief that she can create herself and her future without any dominant

influences but her own. She believes she is in a special position to create her own identity.

As a famous heroine of nineteenth century literature, Isabel shares traits in common with another well-known female figure – George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Both are unconventional, original, energetic, and driven to what others deem extremes as a result their independent views. Most importantly, both enter marriage with high expectations that are never fulfilled. Although Madame Merle and Osmond calculated and tricked Isabel while Dorothea had only been wrong in her opinion of the elder Edward Causubon, Isabel and Dorothea both suffer severe disappointment when they discover the stifling narrowness of their husbands’ minds. In their youth, both Dorothea and Isabel strive for self-improvement.

While Dorothea’s efforts of self-improvement are mostly directed outward toward the world, Isabel turns inward. I want to suggest that Isabel represents a more modern heroine than Dorothea Brooke in her engagement with and dedication toward a process of self-creation. When Isabel confronts the suffering of others in an abstract sense rather than in a concrete way, for instance, she always goes through the same mental process. As the narrator reveals, Isabel

often checked herself with the thought of the thousands of people who were less happy than herself – a thought which for the moment made her fine, full consciousness appear a kind of immodesty. What should one do with the misery of the world in a scheme of the agreeable for one’s self? It must be confessed that this question never held her long. She was too young, too impatient to live, too unacquainted with pain. She always

returned to her theory that a young woman whom after all everyone thought clever should begin by getting a general impression of life. This impression was necessary to prevent mistakes, and after it should be secured she might make the unfortunate condition of others a subject of special attention. (64)

While Isabel's youth, inexperience, and impatience provide legitimate reasons for her lack of sustained attentiveness toward the suffering of others, she betrays another, more fundamental reason why she chooses to suspend her concern for the "misery of the world." In the first place, although she seldom admits it, other people's views do influence her to a certain extent. Because others find her to be "clever," she feels encouraged to take a wide survey of what she later refers to as the "human spectacle." More tellingly, Isabel expresses confidence in her ability "to prevent mistakes" in the future by first seeing as much of the world as possible. Isabel's reading habits parallel her initiative to obtain "a general impression of life." In both instances, Isabel prioritizes the activity itself over the substance of the activity. It is part of Isabel's belief in the possibilities of self-creation that she concludes with a tone of certainty that she can avoid mistakes.

Isabel's approach to self-improvement becomes even more apparent during an exchange with her aunt during one of her first evenings at Gardencourt. Mrs. Touchett interfered with Isabel's intention to stay up late to continue conversing with her cousin Ralph and Lord Warburton. When Mrs. Touchett alerts Isabel to the impropriety of her plan to remain in the drawing room without a female chaperone, Isabel easily complies with her aunt's wishes although she expresses confusion about the rules governing

English drawing rooms. After the two women depart from the drawing room, Isabel exclaims that her aunt was “very right to tell” her about what is considered “proper” (77). Isabel admits, “I don’t understand it, but I’m very glad to know it” while her aunt assures her that she will “always tell” Isabel “whenever I see you taking what seems to me too much liberty” (77). While Isabel confesses to her aunt that in the future she will not necessarily find her aunt’s “remonstrance just,” she is still very eager “to know the things one shouldn’t do” (77). Even though Mrs. Touchett assumes that Isabel’s desire to find out what things not to do is so she can “do them,” Isabel claims that her motivation consists instead of being able “to choose” what to do (77). Not only does Isabel’s assertion of choice confirm her originality as a person and her commitment to originality, but rather it clarifies Isabel’s perception of selfhood and her motivation behind a project of self-improvement. It illustrates how choice is central to Isabel’s sense that her identity is something that does not already exist entirely but that it is something to be constructed through a series of choices. For Isabel, making the right choices – not necessarily the proper ones – becomes of paramount importance. Isabel firmly believes at every turn that she is free and independent to create herself.

The range of possibilities for what Isabel might do propels the novel; unfortunately, her field of action in the novel becomes mainly limited to selecting a husband from three very different suitors rather than, for instance, pursuing a career or emerging as an artist. At the same time, for James, looking at the novel with fresh eyes in 1908 for the preparation of the New York Edition, the chief question behind the work consisted of what Isabel would do. He claims that the main interest in the novel rests in “the scale of her relation to herself” (10). As he elucidates in the 1908 Preface, the action

of the novel built itself around the other characters' interest in what Isabel would make of her life. Ralph exhibits this integral feature when he reflects directly on Isabel's future. He insists that Isabel "was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself?" (73). Ralph emphasizes that Isabel was an original because "she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own" (73). As Adrian Poole reminds readers, Ralph finds reason to continue living despite his illness in order to witness what Isabel would do with her life.

While James explicitly puts the question of what Isabel will do at the center of the novel, Isabel does occasionally call into question her own ability to choose and create her future. She makes an ethical system out of the project of her self-creation. As much as Isabel struggles throughout the novel to make the right choices to preserve her independence and to create her identity, she feels the potential to be thwarted and challenged by fate. As she tells Lord Warburton, the real reason why she does not accept his offer of marriage is because she "can't escape [her] fate" (139). Before expressing this belief to Lord Warburton, Isabel's "eyes ... saw nothing; they had suddenly been suffused with tears" (139). Her decision to share her sense of her fate with Lord Warburton was incredibly difficult. When he presses her on this subject, Isabel elaborates on her original statement. She states, "I can't escape unhappiness," and, yet, she explains, "I'm not bent on a life of misery" (140). Isabel protests that "I've always been intensely determined to be happy, and I've often believed I should be. I've told people that; you can ask them. But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself" (140). Isabel reveals here the central crisis at the root of her perspective on life: she is determined to be happy, and

yet she is convinced that her efforts will not guarantee that happiness. Isabel struggles to control her fate, but she doubts that she will be able to do so.

Isabel confronts the pull of fate against the push of choice when Caspar Goodwood surprises her in London and demands an explanation of her refusal of marriage and her insistence on maintaining her personal freedom. When Caspar Goodwood departs from her rooms in London, Isabel collapses and feels the full force of her emotions: “at last she heard Caspar Goodwood walk out of the sitting-room and close the door behind him. She stood still a little longer, and then, by an irresistible impulse, dropped on her knees before her bed and hid her face in her arms” (169). The “irresistible impulse” that pulls Isabel down to the floor encapsulates her struggle to keep choice at the center of her life even though there are other forces pulling her in an opposite direction.

On one hand, Isabel’s stated preference for choosing rather than blindly following propriety illustrates her sense of estrangement as an American in Europe. On the other hand, it also touches on Isabel’s burgeoning philosophy of selfhood. If Isabel is reading about Kantian ethics at her grandmother house in her journey through the field of “German thought,” as Bollinger suggests, then throughout the text she enacts and demonstrates an ambivalent response to Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative (145). The categorical imperative places heavy weight on the exercise of choice. In Kant’s system, every choice should be made as an exemplification of universal law; choices do not reflect universal law, but instead they constitute and construct universal law, and that is why every choice matters. Even though as Bollinger indicates Isabel is not a very good interpreter of texts, Isabel’s emphasis on choice in her life echoes traces

of Kant's categorical imperative. Instead of being concerned with a universal ethical system, however, Isabel focuses on the establishment of ethics in her own life. Isabel approaches every choice seriously because having a choice is what enables her to be an ethical person.

While I wish to suggest that Isabel takes choices seriously because those choices enact the construction of her identity and selfhood, and that she approaches these choices as part of an ethical stance toward the world, I also wish to stress how Isabel exemplifies and even anticipates to a certain extent a type of modern individuality based on a confrontation with limitless choices and possibilities. When Ralph persuades his father to leave half of Ralph's share of the inheritance to Isabel, he does so in order to give her a completely free field of choice not limited by any financial realities. Ralph is more familiar with Isabel financial situation than Isabel herself is. As he informs Mr. Touchett, when Isabel was young, Isabel's "father then gave her everything, because he used to spend his capital. She nothing but the crumbs of that feast to live on, and she doesn't really know how meagre they are – she has yet to learn it. . . . Isabel will learn it when she's really thrown upon the world, and it would be very painful to me to think of her coming to the consciousness of a lot of wants she would be unable to satisfy" (189-190). As Ralph reveals his own motivation for wanting to secure Isabel's future, he also indicates how she has always experienced life as a limitless range of choices and how she has never experienced any limitations due to financial stress. Ralph, despite admitting that to a certain extent his request is made to secure his own entertainment and to give him a reason to live, wants Isabel to remain wholly modern in the sense that her choices never be restricted or limited.

The logic of the capitalist economic system demands that there be limitless choices for the consumer. With many choices in front of her, Isabel ascribes to a belief that she can create her identity through her own self-creative will without any negative influences or without any one manipulating her choices. In Isabel's case, when she does embark on a journey of self-creation, others, specifically Madame Merle and Osmond, have designs to create her in their own image. Parentless, Isabel is more susceptible to being viewed as malleable. I want to stress that the notion of self-creation developed in the novel is a modern one. Due to the slow breakdown of traditional community and family structure as well as the emergence of modern cities as a result of the process of industrialization, individuals confronted new options and new pressure for identity creation. At the same time, I point out that the process of self-creation is influenced not only by the sociological transformations, but it is also engendered by changes to perceptual experiences. I want to suggest that the nature of perceptual experience, particularly in the modern city, tested the boundaries of selfhood by playing upon the senses and also participating in a formulation of the notion of self-creation.

Isabel's tendency toward self-improvement and self-creation reflect changes in perceptual experience in the nineteenth century. When Isabel trains her mind to deal with difficult texts, she is attempting to perform an exercise in sustained attentiveness. As Arata points out, in the discourse of attention in the nineteenth century, "The act of paying attention, it was argued, involved the suppression of one's conscious awareness of stimuli, both internal and external, apart from the object or thought being attended to" (198). Throughout *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel strains to be attentive toward what she considers to be the right, if not only the most picturesque, things. Arata adds,

“Innumerable late-Victorian accounts of the malady of modern life make their way round to the issue of sensory overload: too many images, too much noise, way too much information, all of it too often resulting in nervous collapse, neurosis, dysfunctions of various kinds” (198). Before Isabel’s marriage, she embraces the “sensory overload” of the modern urban environment, and her unadulterated excitement for the modern scene indicates her status as a fully modern heroine committed to the notion of self-creation. However, it is after her marriage, and after she has given up, at least temporarily, a belief in self-creative possibilities that she finds the modern urban environment to be a frightening and overwhelming performance of lights, sounds, and crowds.

From Isabel’s first appearance in the narrative, it becomes clear that she is someone who likes to look upon things. Early in the novel, Isabel “felt too wide-eyed and wished to check the sense of seeing too many things at once” (43). She finds that “[h]er imagination was by habit ridiculously active” (43). She also experiences at times the sense “of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging” (43). In these instances, Isabel seeks to check her viewing habits. However, despite Isabel’s occasional fleeting concerns for the way her habits of seeing could lead her astray, she most often associates her passion for looking with contributing positively to her project of self-improvement and self-creation. In the first place, reading is aligned with seeing in a myriad of ways. As many critics have already elucidated, Isabel at a young age was free to read anything from her grandmother’s library, and she selected her reading material based primarily on the attractiveness of the book’s frontispiece (36). Allowing images to be her guide and not receiving any instruction on the relative merits of a book’s content, Isabel approaches reading as both a visual and a verbal activity.

While she had a “reputation of reading a great deal,” she also adamantly conveys her desire to be an observer of the spectacle of life (45). Her desire to see accompanies and complements her desire to read. In the narrative, reading and seeing are placed in the same list of activities that define Isabel: “she was fond of seeing great crowds and large stretches of country, of reading about revolutions and wars, of looking at historical pictures” (45). Before Isabel’s marriage to Gilbert Osmond, she describes her purpose for visiting Europe in terms of seeing. As she informs her cousin Ralph, she is not interested in seeking out adventure or even having what they refer to commonly as “experiences,” but she wants to “look about” and “to see for myself” (157). The novel accentuates Isabel’s strong desire for seeing when her body, not just the fact of her existence, enters the narrative. The narrator explains that she “was looking at everything with an eye that denoted clear perception – at her companion, the two dogs, the gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that surrounded her” (28).

The narrative also describes Isabel’s viewing habits early in the novel in a way that connects her visual experiences and the images within the stream of her consciousness with the inventions and patterns associated with the unique advancements in and changes to visuality in the nineteenth century. For instance, after Mrs. Touchett’s first meeting with Isabel in New York, Isabel looks back on some of the events of her past: “These things now, as memory played over them, resolved themselves into a multitude of scenes and figures. Forgotten things came back to her; many others, which she had lately thought of great moment, dropped out of sight. The result was kaleidoscopic, but the movement of the instrument was checked at last by the servant’s coming in with the name of a gentleman” (46). The kaleidoscope, invented in 1815,

offers a mass produced technology for viewing that fixes and holds an individual's attention because of the repetition of patterns and shapes. As Crary documents, the French aesthetes celebrated the metaphorical possibilities of the kaleidoscope. Crary elucidates, "For Baudelaire, the kaleidoscope coincided with modernity itself; to be a 'kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness' was the goal of 'the lover of universal life.' In his text it figured as a machine for the disintegration of a unitary subjectivity and for the scattering of desire into new shifting and labile arrangements, by fragmenting any point of iconicity and disrupting stasis" (113-114). For Isabel, the uninterrupted flow of images associated with the past is mesmerizing, and the spell is only broken by the servant's appearance. Isabel embraces modernization, and the association of her thoughts with the kaleidoscope underscores to what extent Isabel's consciousness depends on a technology that organizes the interplay of those images from her past. The use of the word "kaleidoscopic" in Isabel's confrontation with her past implies that she is looking backward in a very modern mode; that is, she is ready to sever ties with the past. The technology, albeit metaphorical, informs the meaning she derives from the scenes that play in her consciousness. More importantly, as the "scenes and figures" drop out of view, Isabel is able to move forward toward a new life based on a principle of self-creation by not remaining connected to, informed by, or rooted in the past.

The past Isabel chooses to leave behind when she accepts Mrs. Touchett's invitation to travel with her through Europe is figured most dramatically in the character of Caspar Goodwood. The way Isabel considers and contemplates Caspar also depends upon a modern mode of looking. In this case, Isabel considers Caspar in terms of her association with modern institutions and his resemblance to institutions of the past. She

claims that he looks like a figure from more chivalrous times, and her knowledge of those times depends upon familiarity with the objects found in modern museums. She reflects that Caspar “was of supremely strong, clean make – which was so much: she saw the different fitted part of him as she had seen, in museums and portraits, the different fitted parts of armoured warriors – in plates of steel handsomely inlaid with gold. It was very strange: where, ever, was any tangible link between her impression and her act?” (126). Although the representation of “armoured warriors” presents her with a favorable impression, Isabel finds herself thinking less favorably of Caspar. Refusing his offer of marriage on more than one occasion, Isabel attempts to reconcile the “strange” disjunction between “impression” and “act.”

Embarking on a European tour with Mrs. Touchett, Isabel finds pleasure in their first stop – England. The narrator explains that “England was a revelation to her, and she found herself as diverted as a child at a pantomime. [...] The images of that time [her childhood trips to Europe] moreover had grown faint and remote, and the old-world quality in everything that she now saw had all the charm of strangeness. Her uncle’s house seemed a picture made real” (64). As this passage indicates, Isabel brings to Europe a mental storage container of images and mental pictures. Although she had traveled to Europe as a child, her stockpile of images is not informed by her personal experiences. Instead, this stockpile of pictures reflects upon Isabel’s participation in the passive reception of images and reveals her visual literacy. The “picture made real” indicates Isabel’s preconceived ideas about an English country house – ideas informed by images circulating in magazines and books. Further, that Isabel finds pleasure in the “diversion” England offers suggests that her response is, in a sense, not very deep, and is

instead almost childish. The narrative indicates Isabel's incorporation of images as part of her initial response to England while at the same it exposes her for having a somewhat shallow response to her surroundings.

Isabel's passion for "the spectacle of human life" is best exemplified when she moves briefly on foot through London unaccompanied shortly after she begins to gain confidence with the financial and personal independence that comes with inheriting a fortune. The narrator uncharacteristically refers to Isabel as "our heroine" at this moment in the novel to underscore not only her primary role in the novel, but also to suggest that Isabel may now think of herself as a heroine within a book that is still being written. As Bollinger has pointed out, in James' revisions to the novel in 1908, he specified that Isabel's reading tastes tended toward George Eliot and Robert Browning, so she would be familiar with the plight and expectations of nineteenth century heroines (146). When Isabel begins to see herself as an heiress, she "lost herself in a maze of visions; the fine things to be done by a rich, independent, generous girl who took a large human view of occasions and obligations were sublime in the mass" (227). By seeing herself as a character, she starts to accept her new position in society. On the London street alone, Isabel saw that the "world lay before her – she could do whatever she chose. There was a deep thrill in it all, but for the present her choice was tolerably discreet; she chose simply to walk back from Euston Square to her hotel" (320). As the narrator illuminates, Isabel was unattended and Euston square was a long way from Piccadilly. But Isabel performed the journey with a positive enjoyment of its dangers and lost her way on purpose, in order to get more sensations, so that she was disappointed when an obliging policeman easily set her straight again. She

was so fond of the spectacle of human life that she enjoyed even the aspect of the gathering dusk in the London streets – the moving crowds, the hurrying cabs, the lighted shops, the flaring stalls, the dark, shining dampness of everything. (320)

Isabel's desire for "more sensations" leads her to lose "her way on purpose." Like her reading habits, her walking style is motivated by her own spontaneous inclinations based on the desire for a full sensory experience. She is drawn to the movement, chaos, and even darkness of the modern city. For Isabel, the modern city holds together "the spectacle of human life," and she is attracted to its ceaseless activity and even potential for danger.

Five years after this walk, after Isabel's marriage to Osmond has reached its pinnacle of unhappiness, she returns to England from Italy to see Ralph before he dies. Unlike her younger self, she "performed this journey with sightless eyes" (551). Thinking back on her walking adventure in London from the past, she realizes how much she has changed:

The dusky, smoky, far-arching vault of the station, the strange, livid light, the dense, dark, pushing crowd, filled her with a nervous fear and made her put her arm into her friend's. She remembered she had once liked these things; they seemed part of a mighty spectacle in which there was something that touched her. She remembered how she walked away from Euston, in the winter dusk, in the crowded streets, five years before. She could not have done that today, and the incident came before as the deed of another person. (553)

Isabel's transformation in relation to the spectacle of life is reflected in her relationship to reading. Just as she no longer desires to look upon the great human spectacle the modern city offers, she also finds it difficult to read. During her time at Gardencourt after Ralph's death, Isabel "was quite unable to read; her attention had never been so little at her command" (572). For Isabel, reading and seeing are linked inextricably as ways that she encounters and engages with the world. In her lack of attention toward reading and seeing, Isabel exhibits a change in her attitude toward the process of self-creation. After Ralph's death, when she confronts the gap between herself and Osmond, she reflects: "She knew she must decide, but she decided nothing; her coming itself had not been a decision. On that occasion she had simply started" (571).

When Isabel chooses Osmond for a husband, she does so, I argue because he seems to fulfill her ideal of self-creative powers, and she wishes to share her fortune with someone who could create new possibilities for self-creation. In Rome, when Osmond first admits to Isabel that he is in love with her, he reminds her of his opinion of ideal living. He says, "Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first; but then I told you that it was exactly what you seemed to me to be trying to do with your own" (307). To make one's life a work of art reflects not only an objective associated with an aestheticism influenced by Walter Pater, but it is also a notion that takes to a logical extreme the principle of self-creation. With limitless choices available in an economic system of capitalism, the art of self-creation became professionalized in the nineteenth century. When Isabel takes stock of her failed relationship with Osmond, she discovers that one thing she dislikes most about him is that Osmond "took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under

all his culture, his cleverness, his amenity, under his good-nature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers” (424). Rather than being an independent and free individual pursuing his own passions, Osmond, Isabel finds, has a “conscious calculated attitude” (426). Instead of being independent from society, Osmond “was unable to live without it, and she saw that he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even he appeared to be most detached from it” (425). From Isabel’s perspective, as well as the novel’s perspective, Osmond reveals a corrupted form of self-creation. Rather than creating for the sake of creation, he instead is relentlessly cultivating the approval of the world in an underhanded way that preserves his air of independence from the opinions of the world. Isabel’s method of self-creation is more genuine and authentic. Although she is influenced by the praise of others, she persists in attempting to remain genuine. This is Isabel’s virtue, and it makes her sympathetic to readers. At the same time, Isabel’s flaw is to believe that she can pursue a path of self-creation without being manipulated or used by others.

Reading Isabel Archer as Portrait

If *The Portrait of a Lady* foregrounds Isabel’s commitment to self-creation and makes evident her crucial difference from Gilbert Osmond in terms of their execution of strikingly different methods of and approaches to self-creation, then it also examines and calls upon another self-creative technology in the nineteenth century – the art of portraiture. As I hope to illustrate below, portraiture in the nineteenth century was a social, economic, and political tool used to express and codify identities, specifically in terms of class and gender. In the novel’s title, the word “portrait,” I argue, signals more

than the narrative's purpose to offer a description or portrayal of the novel's heroine. Instead, I contend that the title calls upon contemporary debates about the role and function of portraiture as well as portraiture's relationship to acts of self-creation. I find that although James claims that portraiture can be among the greatest works of visual art, the novel also reveals that portraiture can put a false face on reality. Like the character of Osmond, portraiture relies on a corrupted form of self-creation not only because it reveals more about the artist than the subject of the painting or photograph, but it also intersects with institutional power structures that limit or narrow the field of expression. In addition, portraiture, albeit an older art form, emerged as modern technology of vision and operated within the and competed for the attention of individuals.

As critics have noted, Isabel spends the first half of the novel as a young woman who has not yet become the lady of the novel's title. She emerges as the "lady" of the novel's title after her marriage in the second half of the narrative. The event of her marriage is not described in the novel. The novel also leaves out a direct portrayal of the early days of her marriage, which includes both giving birth to and losing an infant son. When the narrative returns to a portrayal of Isabel's life, the reader encounters her first through the eyes of Ned Rosier. At the Osmonds' weekly evening social gathering, Rosier "met Mrs. Osmond coming out of the deep doorway" (365). He perceives that "[s]he was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, as he had said, and yet oh so radiantly gentle!" (365). The narrator explains further Ned's response to Mrs. Osmond:

Like his appreciation of her dear little stepdaughter it was based partly on his eye for decorative character, his instinct for authenticity; but also on a

sense for uncatalogued values, for that secret of a “lustre” beyond any recorded losing or rediscovering, which his devotion to brittle wares had still not disqualified him to recognise. Mrs. Osmond at present might well have gratified such tastes. (365)

It is significant that Isabel re-enters the narrative through the perceiving eye of Ned Rosier. In the first place, it contrasts sharply with her entrance into the narrative in the second chapter. In that case, although Ralph saw her first, the narrative emphasizes the quality of her perspective rather than her quality as an object of sight. As a collector and suitor to her stepdaughter, Ned not only offers a unique perspective to her arrival both to the room and to the narrative, but he also has something very real at stake in his confrontation with her. The narrator suggests that Ned can appreciate Isabel, now Mrs. Osmond, in the same way that Osmond found her attractive in the first place – as a collector’s item. For both men, to associate themselves with her originality is to make their collections more valuable. The narrator supposes that Ned, like Osmond, perceives Isabel in the light of a “decorative character.” At the same time, Ned’s recognition of “uncatalogued values” suggests that he holds true an appreciation of Isabel’s originality rather than, in the manner of Osmond, approaching her as an object to impose his own identity upon and then have it reflected back to the world. In hoping to make an alliance with her in the pursuit of her stepdaughter, Pansy, Ned, however, is swayed to see her in a very positive light.

The narrator adds that Isabel had both remained the same and changed in significant ways since her marriage to Osmond: “The years had touched her only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem.

She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception – she had more the air of being able to wait” (365). Time has both heightened Isabel’s admirable qualities while the narrator acknowledges that she had been affected by her marriage, specifically in her movement, which has become more restricted than before her marriage. After fleshing out Ned’s possible views on Isabel and supplementing his views with a more objective one, the narrative returns to Ned’s perspective: “Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady” (365). At this moment, Isabel emerges as the object known as “The Portrait of a Lady.” Immediately, Ned perceives that Isabel appears as a “picture.” On one hand, Isabel matches Ned’s expectations for “a gracious lady.” In this moment, she becomes an image associated with high art. On the other hand, Isabel’s framing in the “gilded doorway” suggests that she is no longer herself, but a representation of something else. The “gilded doorway” further underscores Isabel’s role as an additional adornment to the room; the use of the word “gilded” here illustrates the lack of authenticity evident around Isabel.

For Ralph, Isabel appears now only as representation. Having cautioned Isabel against marrying Osmond, Ralph no longer shares a close intimacy with Isabel. Their distance is not only physical but also emotional. Attempting to express, to himself, Isabel’s transformation after her marriage, Ralph thinks, “Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond” (390). In Ralph’s view,

Isabel's freedom is weighed down by the figurative "mass of drapery" and "majesty of ornament." She is adorned with these figurate objects in order to better represent or point to her husband. In addition, Ralph observes that "if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said – it was a representation, it was even an advertisement" (389). Like Ned, Ralph too finds Isabel to be "a representation." What strikes Ralph, however, is the "mechanical" quality of her face. Despite signaling "serenity," her face seems instead truly expressionless. Ralph's suggestion that Isabel's mask appeared "even as an advertisement" is interesting because it reveals the extent of Isabel's transformation. If Ned associates Isabel with the high art of oil portraiture, then Ralph places her within the context of the very low art of advertisement. The association of Isabel's face with both high and low art suggests one way that the novel engages contemporary debates about portraiture. Additionally, both Ned and Ralph indicate to what extent Isabel as a representation is not really Isabel at all; they expose portraiture as a false art.

Conclusion

In one of Alice Boughton's photographs of Henry James, the writer stands in profile and looks intently at a small painting. For James' biographer Leon Edel, this popularly reproduced image, showing James "looking squarely and coldly at a little picture in a solemn way," misleads the viewer because it fails to express James' true engagement with the visual and plastic arts and, in particular, his appreciation for the "sensuous qualities of sculpture" (5). While the photograph may not capture the totality and complexity of James' aesthetic views, what it does succeed in displaying is a moment

of quiet attentiveness. The darkness of James' top hat and coat throws into relief James' face as a perceiving viewer, and the proximity of the face to the painting emphasizes the absorbing quality of the activity. The significance of Boughton's photograph exists not in what the image does or does not indicate about James' opinions on specific works of art, but the significance consists in how the image reflects an activity or state of being investigated by and enacted within James' writing: the act of sustained attention.

As a photographic portrait of James, the image also holds together tensions that are characteristic of the genre of portraiture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, as James stands next to a door and wears outdoor attire, the image locates James near the threshold between the private and public spheres. Nothing within the context of the image itself indicates definitively whether James has just arrived or is about to leave the building's interior. His lingering near the door infuses the image not only with a quality of suspension, but also with the sense of an intermingling of private and public spaces. In addition, the image seems to promise at the very least partial access to James' own interiority; by capturing James in the process of reflection, the image provokes questions concerning the content of his private thoughts. Is he looking at the painting with approval, pleasure, or discontent? Is he thinking of the image in front of him, or are his thoughts drifting towards something else? That Boughton's photograph challenges the viewer with these questions makes this portrait an encounter not only with the author James but also with the expectations of portraiture itself.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James' offers a consistently ambivalent view about the value of attentiveness in self-creation, the role of portraiture in society, and the relationship between visual art and language. Boughton's photograph and the responses it

has generated from critics and viewers alike exemplify James' ambivalence. In the Preface to the novel, James makes the case for a commitment to "direct" and "genuine" perception of life, and yet his novel shows how external factors can corrupt or mediate that perception. By showing how the formal elements of fine art, such as portraiture, can be misleading or even false, the novel again complicates the ability of an individual to attain clear, direct, and unmediated perception. One way to approach the contradiction between what James advances in the Preface and what the novel demonstrates is to see that the implicit invitation to *read* the novel becomes a means of practicing perception and of training the senses and practicing making judgments.

CHAPTER IV

DECADENT ATTENTION:

OSCAR WILDE AND NOTIONS OF THE SELF

At the end of Act III of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack, growing tired of Algernon's incessant muffin eating, asks his friend, in exasperation, "what on earth do you propose to do?" (369). Jack's question refers to the set of problems they both face: their true identities have been revealed to their betrothed, they were caught in the act of Bunburying, and, most critically, their names are not Ernest as they had professed repeatedly. In response to Jack's question, Algernon explains that he plans to do absolutely "Nothing" (369). As he testifies, nothing "is what I have been trying to do for the last ten minutes, and you have kept on doing everything in your power to distract my attention from my work" (369). By aligning doing nothing with working, by claiming that to do nothing requires effort, and by expressing offense at being distracted from the serious work of doing nothing, Algernon's assertions demonstrate the farcical nature of the play and exemplify a type of humor that depends on the reversal of expectations and that made Wilde famous. However, Algernon's statements serve another purpose. They reveal that the comedy finds interest in the emergence of self-discipline as a form of social power in the nineteenth century, and they illustrate the association of attentiveness with self-discipline and work. Algernon's appropriation of the language of self-discipline accomplishes more than a mockery of industriousness, but it also suggests that Algernon too exercises a form of negative self-discipline. He adheres to a strict regime of indulgence and practices a form of self-discipline that restricts him from doing anything but nothing.

As the scene progresses, Algernon suggests that he behaves the way he does in order to avoid real pain. Responding to Algernon's playful divergences from the problem at hand, Jack cries out "*irritably*," "Oh! that is not the point. We are not discussing tea-cakes. (*Crosses.*) Algy! you are perfectly maddening. You never can stick to the point in any conversation" (369). Algernon replies "*slowly*," "No: it always hurts me" (369). Algernon conveys that sticking to the point, or paying attention to the topic of conversation, produces physical pain. While Jack refuses to believe that Algernon is doing more than assuming an "affectation," the stage direction for Algernon to speak "*slowly*" does indicate that the reader or viewer of the play might take Algernon more seriously at other points in the play. The stage direction "*slowly*" appears when Jack informs Gwendolyn and Cecily that his brother Ernest does not exist and was an invention; in this speech, Jack uses the word "painful" twice in association with the truth. Jack says, "it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind" (366).

When Algernon repeats the idea that "[t]he point always does hurt" and that he detests "physical pain, of any kind," he does make a play on words (370). In this instance, "the point" conjures up an image of the point of a knife. As Algernon spends the entire scene eating muffins with butter on them, the reader of the play can assume safely that a knife may be visibly present on stage. Associated with something sharp in general, "the point" presents a danger. While Algernon does play with words here as he does at other instances within the play, his seriousness about the point being painful as well as his insistence that he does not demonstrate an "affectation" in his deliberate avoidance of the

point suggest that something important has been revealed in this scene by Algernon and about Algernon. To stick to the point, for Algernon, does not merely present a minor restriction in conversation, but it is also a restriction that can produce physical suffering. In speaking and writing, maintaining the point, or main idea, means cutting off or cutting out things that appear irrelevant. Algernon takes this restriction in physical terms – as a cutting off or bounding up of something that produces pain. Algernon’s reflections suggest that self-discipline in the nineteenth century involves inflicting pain on oneself; Algernon finds this to be unnecessarily disagreeable. Moreover, if sticking to the point, or staying on topic, is a form of self-discipline that leads to greater productivity and efficiency, then Algernon rejects it.

As Wilde’s most famous and popular play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is also Wilde’s greatest comedic critique of the conventions and traditional values of late Victorian society. At the same time, through Algernon’s commentary on work and attention, the play raises ideas related to self-regulation and discipline. What Wilde introduces through the comedic situation of Algernon and Jack’s desire to be “Ernest,” he develops in a more serious way in the two works that most demonstrate Wilde’s affiliation with decadence at the end of the nineteenth century – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*. While Wilde seems to endorse a celebration of and continuation of modern visual attractions and distractions that would be in opposition to Henry James’ desire to cultivate an attentive audience, as evidenced, for example, by the brevity, portability, and easily digested nature of Wilde’s most utilized form of writing and speaking, the epigram, Wilde, like James, fleshes out a system for self-creation and self-

development in his writing that relies on a disciplining of the senses and that calls for a higher form of attentiveness.

Through an emphasis on the dynamics of seeing in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*, Wilde introduces his interaction with decadence that relies on a specialized kind of attentiveness that informs the process of self-development. In Europe in the 1880s and 1890s, decadence was recognized through two distinguishing characteristics: first, it celebrated and modeled itself after classical Greek and Roman culture and literature, and second, it prioritized artifice over nature. However, in addition to these distinguishing characteristics, as Richard Dellamora contends, decadence is best understood as “a conceptual category” that “makes most sense as a set of interpretative strategies that work by systematically reversing, inverting, and otherwise unsettling commonly held assumptions” (529). Decadence, in other words, strives to be an antagonistic force that challenges conventions. For Matthew Potolsky in “Decadence, Nationalism, and the Logic of Canon Formation,” one trend that decadence tends to unsettle is nationalism. He argues that “decadent texts return with surprising frequency to a critique of nationalism” (215). Not only do “decadent writers posit a transnational and transhistorical ‘decadent subject,’ as an alternative to the nineteenth century ideals of national community,” but decadent texts also “stress the constructedness of traditions. Demonstrating that decadence is not an essence but a product of canon formation itself, they argue that no tradition is natural or inevitable. Decadence challenges the authority and singularity of national canons both by offering a cosmopolitan alternative to national literary traditions and by narrating how such traditions are imagined” (216, 223). The “decadent canon” is also produced in the way that “Decadent works recycle stories and images, retelling the

same narratives (Salome, Narcissus, Pygmalion) in different forms and incorporating the same themes and stylistic mannerisms from a canon of ancient and modern texts (Petronius, Apuleius, Sade, Baudelaire)” (217). Although it is commonly held as nationalism’s opposite, decadent cosmopolitanism provides a critique of nationalism by undertaking the same process as nations do in the formation of a canon of literature. By conducting this process in a highly stylized fashion, decadent texts expose the artificiality of all canon formation, and thus destabilize any nation’s claim to naturalness. Likewise, decadence calls upon attentiveness to certain texts or images to coalesce an identity in a similar way that institutions utilize attentiveness to regulate a restless and unpredictable social body. Attentiveness emerges as a regulatory mechanism within decadence, but it illustrates and emphasizes that attentive look as a kind of performance.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome*, Wilde relates attentiveness to the opportunity decadence provides to critique conventional depictions of gender and identity. In these texts, Wilde demonstrates the fulfillment of personality through the experience of the senses used attentively. Because the characters Dorian and Salome, through the extension of sensory experience, contribute to their own downfall, it is possible to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome* as cautionary tales against an extreme absorption into the senses while at the same time also taking an implicit stand against any system of discipline or regulation of the senses, even if it follows the decadent tradition. Both Dorian and Salome develop systems for organizing and intensifying their sensory experiences; importantly, Wilde arrives at this conclusion not through a critique of Victorian society, but instead he implicitly offers this notion through a critique of decadent attention. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salome* both invite the

reader to experience decadence and to perceive the worlds the texts create with attention; however, these texts also jar the reader and demand that the reader react and respond in ways that extend and potentially unsettle or unhinge notions of the self.

The Reader and a Decadent Education in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Essentially, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* deals with the process of self-development and the expression of individual personality. As Wilde argues passionately in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” published in 1890, the same year *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in serial form in *Lippincott’s Magazine*, the development of the individual should be seen as the most important problem confronting modern society. In Wilde’s polemical essay, the system of private property hinders the flourishing of individual development and guarantees the conditions that allow for only a minority of people to have the opportunity to extend, test, and stretch their individualism. Under private property, Wilde contends, individualism has been “led . . . entirely astray” and the system of private property has fostered an individualism that “has made gain; not growth, its aim” (1083). Wilde claims that in the capitalist economic system, “[o]ne’s regret is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him – in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living” (1083). Wilde wonders too “whether we have ever seen the full expression of personality” (1084). Citing Byron and Shelley as recognizable “personalities” of the nineteenth century, he concludes that their full expression of personality was limited and hindered by their need to rebel against convention and authority. Wilde states, “The note of the perfect personality is not rebellion, but peace” (1084).

Wilde's explication of "the true personality of man" conveys an account of an enlightened, transcendent figure. Wilde's vision echoes eastern philosophies of the self that aim to dissolve or displace the ego. He argues that "the true personality of man "will never argue or dispute. It will not prove things. It will know everything. And yet it will not busy itself about knowledge. It will have wisdom. Its value will not be measured by material things. It will have nothing. And yet it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich it will be" (1084). The "true personality of man" will not require any material gain in order to express or discover itself. In his description, Wilde suggests that when the "true personality of man" flourishes, it will show itself to be a natural and organic process of development. Wilde asserts, "It will be a marvelous thing – the true personality of man – when we see it. It will grow naturally and simply, flowerlike, or as a tree grows" (1084). Wilde emphasizes as well that "the true personality of man" will not be critical of others, but will instead be wholly independent and nonjudgmental:

It will not be at discord. It will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others, it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is. The personality of man will be very wonderful. It will be as wonderful as the personality of a child.
(1084)

By likening "the true personality of man" with the qualities of a child, Wilde reinforces the sense of curiosity, wonderment, and joy that he associates with a full extension of individualism.

Even though Wilde maintains that “the true personality of man” has not been allowed to genuinely and fully manifest itself yet, except in the work of the imagination, the notion of personality remains at the center of all of his creative endeavours. Due to the popularity of portraiture in the late nineteenth century as well as its association with the representation of the individual, Wilde’s views on attention to portraiture emerge as one key to a more complete understanding of his commitment to the extension of personality. In particular, I want to suggest that Wilde’s opinions about portraiture in the nineteenth century can serve as a guide for measuring how successfully the titular character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* achieves the fulfillment of Wilde’s vision of individualism.

In the essay “The Decay of Lying,” published in 1891, the two speakers, Vivian and Cyril, meditate on the limitations of portraiture as an art form. Vivian, the chief proponent in the essay of the theory that society would benefit from a resurgence of the art of lying, attests, “we look back on the ages entirely through the medium of art, and art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth” (989). Vivian praises art for its distortion of the truth and its failure to represent reality as it is; art, in other words, offers something new and expresses the imagination rather than the conditions of the world as they are. Cyril protests that portraiture is an art form that does imitate reality as it is; he presses Vivian to consider the “modern portraits by English painters” as they are “[s]urely...like the people they pretend to represent” (989). Vivian, however, sees what it is portraiture intends to represent differently. He insists, “Most of our modern portrait painters are doomed to absolute oblivion” because these painters “never paint what they see. They paint what the public sees, and the public never sees anything” (989). As

Dennis Denisoff shows, portraiture maintained a consistency of style throughout the nineteenth century that allowed it to remain “a popular, conservative, and potentially lucrative art form” (20). Rather than becoming a medium through which to express unique individualities or communicate personality, portraiture tended instead to reinforce rigid class and gender identities. Vivian’s dismissal of portraiture here supports Denisoff’s thesis that aestheticism and portraiture have little in common. However, Vivian does carve out a space for portraits that transcend the limitations of the genre’s conventions. Vivian explains, “The only portrait in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a very great deal of the artist” (989). Vivian argues that the portraits worthy of attention do not exercise fidelity to their subject, but they instead persuade the viewer to believe in their truthfulness through the development of personal style. Vivian states, “It is style that makes us believe in a thing – nothing but style” (989). In other words, Vivian, and through logical extension Wilde, locate the value of portraiture not in the quality of representation or fidelity of likeness, but rather in how well it expresses and conveys what is unique to the artist.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the narrative begins by anticipating and elucidating Vivian’s theory that the only portraits that matter are the ones that have “very little of the sitter and very great deal of the artist” (989). At the beginning of the novella, the narrative introduces the portrait of Dorian Gray and places the artist, Basil Hallward, adjacent to the portrait in terms of both physical space and in the language of the text: “In the centre of the room, clamped to an upright easel, stood the full-length portrait of a young man of extraordinary beauty, and in front of it, some little distance away, was sitting the artist himself” (18). Immediately, the portrait is not considered on its own

terms, but in terms of its relation to the artist. Basil's friend Lord Henry praises the portrait; he says, "It is your best work, Basil, the best thing you have ever done" (18). When Basil informs Lord Henry that he has decided against putting the portrait in an exhibition, Basil explains, "I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it" (19). Lord Henry initially and potentially willfully misinterprets Basil's reason for choosing not to exhibit the work. Lord Henry exclaims, "Too much of yourself in it! Upon my word, Basil, I didn't know you were so vain; and I really can't see any resemblance between you, with your rugged strong face and your coal-black hair, and this young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves" (19). Lord Henry takes Basil's explanation literally and fails to perceive that Basil means something entirely different. Basil recognizes the portrait as his greatest work because he has been under the greatest artistic influence of his life – Dorian Gray. As he attempts to show Lord Henry, "every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself" (21). Basil believes that this portrait reveals "the secret" of his "own soul," and he worries that his secret will be detected (21). Although no one else in the novella ever signals an awareness of what Basil hides and reveals in the portrait until he states it directly, the reader becomes aware immediately that the greatness of the portrait develops out of the expression of Basil's admiration for and adoration of Dorian's beauty and the influence it exercises on the creation of his art.

Basil believes in high aspirations for art. He declares, "There is nothing that Art cannot express" (24). However, he worries about modern trends in art and complains that

they “live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty” (25). Basil insists, “An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them” (25). Even though Lord Henry has described Basil’s portrait of Dorian as his greatest work and later as “the finest portrait of modern times,” Basil refuses to exhibit the portrait publicly because it reveals too much about his own experience (33). While Basil feels like the portrait is too autobiographical, he also believes that Dorian’s influence will assist him in a renaissance of beauty in art.

While Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” and Basil both affirm the notion that great portraits expose the soul of the artist more than the soul or personality of the sitter, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes this idea secondary to another theory it explores in detail – the theory of influence. It is not only that Basil reveals himself in the portrait, but instead it is that Dorian has unknowingly exerted an influence upon Basil’s entire process of production of work now. Basil expresses, “Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art” (24). Basil confesses to Lord Henry that Dorian’s “personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of style. I see things differently, I think of them differently. I can now recreate life in a way that was hidden from me before” (24). Basil’s notion that he can “recreate life” comes back to haunt the text as the portrait begins to function with a life of its own in relation to Dorian; the portrait can certainly do what no other portrait has done in the past. Basil attributes his success in other artworks to Dorian as well. Basil refers to a landscape recently completed that he was offered a large sum for and tells Lord Henry, “It is one of the best things I have ever done. And why is it so? Because, while I was painting it, Dorian Gray sat beside me. Some subtle

influence passed from him to me, and for the first time in my life I saw in the plain woodland the wonder I had always looked for, and always missed” (24).

If *The Picture of Dorian Gray* concerns the development of the self, then it also, fundamentally, explores the concept of influence. The young Dorian Gray influences Basil, Lord Henry influences Dorian Gray, and Dorian Gray goes on to influence countless young men and women that he meets later in his life. As Basil expresses, influence not only affects the activity of the senses, but influence really manifests itself physically and bodily. Under Dorian’s influence, Basil could now see “the wonder I had always looked, and always missed” (24). When Dorian falls under the influence of Lord Henry, Dorian likens the experience to music. Lord Henry’s words “had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before” (29-30). Reflecting on the power of Lord Henry’s language, Dorian remembers that “[m]usic had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate” (30).

The production of Wilde’s novella too is also an exercise in and exploration of influence. Walter Pater’s ideas influenced Wilde in profound ways that appear throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Walter Pater’s influence on Oscar Wilde makes itself apparent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a myriad of ways. As John Paul Riquelme notes, one common approach to Pater’s influence on Wilde’s novella has been to elucidate Lord Henry’s tendency to speak Pater’s words or “echo” Pater’s ideas (622). In this approach, Wilde borrows from Pater in a straightforward manner that shows Wilde’s dependence on Pater’s ideas for his own creative productions. For Riquelme, however, Wilde offers a more critical response to Pater in the novella than the mere repetition of language and basic principles suggests. Riquelme argues, “Wilde responds to Pater by

projecting the dark implications of Pater's attitudes and formulations in a mythic Gothic narrative of destruction and self-destruction" (609). In the process of uncovering the darker side of Pater's views, "Wilde simultaneously aestheticizes the Gothic and gothicizes the aesthetic" (610). In his argument, Riquelme contends that Pater's account of the Mona Lisa in *The Renaissance* is utilized and revised in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in order to showcase Dorian as a male Mona Lisa who is also simultaneously cast as Narcissus. According to Riquelme's argument, by calling upon Pater's aesthetic response to Leonardo da Vinci's most famous work, Wilde "reverse[s]" the implications of Pater's language by repeating certain phrases in a new context and presents a more sinister Mona Lisa in the figure of Dorian Gray (610). The presentation of Dorian as a more sinister version of Mona Lisa shows, in Riquelme's argument, that there is a sinister Mona Lisa lurking in Pater's original description. As a result, Wilde successfully fleshes out the decadent undertone of Pater's writing. By doing so, Wilde demonstrates his interest in the relationship between decadence and the development of the self. Wilde turns to decadence in order to develop his theories of self-development.

I am also interested in the way Wilde recycles Pater's aesthetic response to the portrait of Mona Lisa in his description of the production of Dorian's portrait. Like Riquelme, I wish to emphasize how Wilde transforms Pater's words and expressions into something related to the original but also into something wholly new. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* imitates Pater's response to the Mona Lisa as part of an effort to discover the possibilities for the self in an attentive pose toward visual art.

Pater's essay points out that da Vinci's "picture is a portrait" (79). He elucidates, "That there is much of mere portraiture in the picture is attested by the legend that by

artificial means, the presence of mimes and flute-players, that subtle expression was protracted on the face” (79). In this statement, Pater reveals a few underlying ideas about his views on portraiture. In the first place, Pater refers to portraiture as a secondary art form; by using the word “mere” to modify the term “portraiture,” Pater implies that portraits are less substantial and creative than other pictorial forms. Pater also indicates that although portraits represent real individuals and intend to express an individual’s personality as well as social status, portraits tend toward the artificial. While “that subtle expression” characterizes the Mona Lisa more than any other feature, Pater alerts the reader that it may have been produced through the influence of external factors not depicted on the canvas. Pater calls upon the legend of the musicians and performers in order to pose the question of the origin of the painting. Pater asks, “was it in four years and by renewed labour never really completed, or in four months and as by stroke of magic, that the image was projected?” (79). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde demonstrates his attentiveness to Pater’s text and reprocesses the legend Pater offers about the creation of Mona Lisa’s unique facial expression when he describes the events around Basil’s completion of Dorian’s portrait. Instead of “mimes and flute-players,” however, it is Lord Henry’s language that affects Dorian’s appearance. As Dorian listens to Lord Henry’s theories about influence, Basil, “deep in his work” becomes “conscious only that a look had come into the lad’s face that he had never seen there before” (29). Lord Henry speaks in a “low, musical voice” (29). Dorian “stood there, motionless, with parted lips, and eyes strangely bright. He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to him to have come really from himself” (29). Lord Henry’s words “had touched some secret chord” in Dorian “that had

never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses” (29-30). Dorian’s expression, produced by the influence of Lord Henry’s words, suggests that he is not only listening to the music created by Lord Henry’s voice, but that he is also reading the text that is himself. He is becoming aware or conscious of something about himself for the first time. Dorian’s expression shows that he is turning his attention inward. The similarity of this scene to the description of the Mona Lisa in Pater original text underscores the idea that influence is experienced at the level of the body and that to be attentive to an influential text is the same as being attentive to one’s self as something in process.

After Dorian realizes the ability of his portrait to make his soul visible, he explains to Basil why he can so easily and so quickly dismiss the subject of Sybil Vane, the young actress who committed suicide after Dorian broke off their engagement. As he claims to Basil, parroting Lord Henry’s epigrammatic style of speaking, “It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them” (89). Leading up to Dorian’s declaration to Basil, Dorian acts primarily in accordance with the immediacy of his feelings as exemplified by how quickly he becomes engaged to Sybil and then calls off that engagement. His statement to Basil marks a significant change in his approach to living, and it shows his divergence from Lord Henry’s tendency to speak without matching his words in action. Unlike Lord Henry, Dorian sets out to systematically live for experience and experience only. Dorian defines experience as the

life of the senses and as everything that pertains to the senses. In the second part of the novella, Dorian pursues a course of controlling his emotions by disciplining his senses.

Dorian first becomes aware of the possibility of exercising control and pursuing self-development when he perceives a change in the facial expression of his portrait. When Dorian detects something different in the painted image of himself, he reasons that “it was merely an illusion wrought on by the troubled senses” (78). Yet, an encounter with even the possibility that the portrait could transform initiates a shift in Dorian’s sense of self-development. He determines that the “picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation” (79). The next morning, after Dorian perceives a difference in the portrait again, he makes a similar resolution for what function the portrait would have in his life. The portrait “would be to guide him through life, would be to him what holiness is to some, and conscience to others, and the fear of God to us all” (81). He saw the painting as “a visible symbol of the degradation of sin” and as “an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls” (81). Although anyone familiar with the novella knows that Dorian enters into a much different relationship with the portrait than the one he commits to with religious fervor in his initial awareness of its magical properties, Dorian keeps alive the discovery that the portrait could be a measure of his self-development. His awareness of the portrait’s special nature initiates his sense of himself as both a spectator and agent of his own life.

After Lord Henry persuades Dorian to see Sybil primarily as a representation rather than a human being, a habit Dorian adopts in general in his relationships to others throughout the rest of his life, exemplified after he kills Basil and refers consistently to

Basil's lifeless body as "it," he gains a new perspective on what possibilities the portrait offers. Learning about Sybil's suicide, Dorian better understands the mechanism of the portrait. He explains to himself that the "vicious cruelty that marred the fine lines of the mouth had, no doubt, appeared at the very moment that the girl had drunk the poison" (87). While Dorian gets teary-eyed "as he remembered her child-like look, and winsome fanciful ways, and shy tremulous grace," he also "brushed" those tears "away hastily, and looked again at the picture" (87). As he looks at his portrait, "that most magical of mirrors," "[h]e felt that the time had really come for making his choice. Or had his choice already been made? Yes, life had decided for him – life, and his own infinite curiosity about life. Eternal youth, infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins – he was to have all these things. The portrait was to bear the burden of his shame: that was all" (88, 87-88). Rejecting his previous imperative to lead a conventionally moral life, Dorian determines to pursue his passions and allow the portrait to carry the weight of his transgressions. Dorian embraces a secretive life, and he suggests that it is both his destiny and his choice to do so.

While much criticism of the novel in the last twenty years has focused rightly on an interpretation of the implications of Dorian's secret life to sexual identity, I want to suggest that the choice he makes – or was made for him, as he implies – also sets into motion the process of making visible the internalization of a system of self-discipline. Dorian finds not only a way to be free from the judgment of others as he relentlessly pursues pleasure, but he also, paradoxically, becomes a more devoted student of the art of self-criticism. While Dorian's goal of self-criticism is not a project of self-improvement toward a conventionally moral end, he does study the painting's transformation in order

to keep careful track of his spiritual transformation. Dorian's inspection of the painting becomes a ritual:

Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends, or thought they were so, he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. (103)

As Dorian approaches the portrait as a mirror of himself, he derives pleasure from looking into two mirrors at once. What he sees, however, is not a split between the body and the soul. As he indicates, the portrait reflects the biological changes of the body while it also manifests the "corruption of his own soul" (103). What, then, is Dorian's lived body that he sees reflected in the mirror? That "fair young face" that never changes that appears on "the polished glass" indicates not only Dorian's "eternal youth" and his escape from the process of aging, but it also serves as a reminder of the photographs of Dorian that have circulated through society. As Lord Henry's wife, Victoria, informs Dorian at their first meeting, "I know you quite well by your photographs. I think my husband has got seventeen of them" (47). When Dorian protests, "Not seventeen, Lady Henry?" she replies, "Well, eighteen, then" (47). Their exchange illustrates the large quantity of photographs of Dorian that have circulated through society. When Dorian performs the ritual of looking into two mirrors, he perceives two representations of himself. One representation circulates through the world while the other is hidden away

from the world. Like Lady Henry, the world knows Dorian through a photographic image. Only the painted portrait reveals the truth.

The association of Dorian's lived body with photographic images of Dorian is suggested in the response Dorian provokes from young men. The narrative reports that "the very young men" in society "saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray, the true realisation of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world" (103). While the narrative clearly indicates that these young men see Dorian in person when Dorian "would throw open to the world his beautiful house" "while the season lasted," it also implies that the recognition of his type develops from a larger degree of literacy of images (103).

Recognized on the street, Dorian has a face that is well known. He dons disguises to escape being recognized by both friends and strangers. It is reasonable to assume that before meeting Dorian, and most certainly after meeting Dorian, these young men would possess photographs of him to re-enforce their attraction to him as a "type" that brings together the knowledge the invisible world with an appreciation for the material one. Dorian's appearance conveys his adherence to this "type" as much as does his beautiful home and particular tastes in music and in food. Even as the novella explores Dorian's unique extension of the idea of the self, it also demonstrates the tendency of community to adhere to a stereotyping of identity.

As not only a fashionable person but also a trendsetter, Dorian engenders many imitators throughout London. As the narrative tells, "His mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected, had their marked influence on the

young exquisites of the Mayfair balls and Pall Mall club windows, who copied him in everything that he did, and tried to reproduce the accidental charm of his graceful, though to him only half-serious fopperies” (103-104). While Dorian approaches his own fashion only half-heartedly, as something to prepare him for “Life,” which he saw as “the first, the greatest, of the arts,” other young men in London take more seriously his style and mimic it. The word “copied” and “reproduce” in this passage suggest too Dorian’s relationship to the visual culture of the nineteenth century. Not only do photographic images of Dorian circulate throughout London, but Dorian provokes imitation. Like his portrait, there are many copies of Dorian moving through society.

After Dorian resolves to encourage the corruption of his soul in order to watch the portrait transform, he embarks on a systematic process to intensify and elevate his sensory awareness and experience of the world. Not content to exist only as a pioneer of fashion, Dorian “sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualising of the senses its highest realisation” (104). Unlike Lord Henry, who seems to improvise his epigrammatic reflections while simultaneously leading a fairly conventional upper class life, Dorian determines to construct a system for a style of living oriented toward sensory experience. Starting with the belief “that the true nature of the senses had never been understood,” Dorian proceeds to test the limits of sensory experience through the study of perfumes, music, jewels, embroidery, and the ritual of Catholic communion (104). He “knew that the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal” (106). Dorian approached each of his subjects with the rigor of a scientist. Dorian “always had an extraordinary faculty of becoming absolutely absorbed for the moment in

whatever he took up” (109). In other words, Dorian devoted himself absolutely to studying whatever happened to catch and sustain his attention.

In Dorian’s pursuit of intensifying and elevating sensory experience, he follows the model established by Des Esseintes in *A Rebours*, the book Lord Henry gave Dorian after Sybil’s death. Although the book is not mentioned by name in the novel, it is clear that that “yellow book” refers to the fictional account described in *A Rebours* of Des Esseintes’s retreat from the modern, urban environment in an attempt to seek out pure sensory experience unadulterated by human relationships. In *A Rebours*, Dorian finds that the “life of senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy” (101). For Dorian, the process of reading the book itself was an uncommon and strange sensory experience: “The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and trouble the brain” (101). Dorian declares to be “fascinated” by the book and “could not free himself from the influence of this book” (102). Yet, Dorian understands and emphasizes his difference from Des Esseintes. While the hero of *A Rebours* lost his beauty and harbored a fear of mirrors, Dorian maintains his youthful beauty throughout his life and adores seeing himself represented in glass and in painted mirrors. He notes “an almost cruel joy” when he meditates on and bring into focus his distinction from the hero of *A Rebours*.

While the “yellow book” emerges as an obvious and important influence on Dorian and sets into motion his deliberate exploration of the senses, he also reveals another motivation that organizes his study. Dorian suggests that his discoveries could have the potential to release humanity from a history of repression of the senses. As the narrative attests, “[t]he worship of the senses has often, and with much justice, been decried, men feeling a natural instinct of terror about passions and sensations that seem

stronger than themselves, and that they are conscious of sharing with the less high organised forms of existence” (104). However, Dorian perceives that there is an opportunity to free humanity from the repression of the senses. Dorian believes that “there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that hard, uncomely Puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival” (104). Dorian proposes a system that would “have its service of the intellect” but “it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience” (104). Although Dorian rejects any system or discipline that would be founded upon sacrifice, he was not against developing a system or discipline itself. His striving toward a system would be to serve a pedagogical function in order “to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (104). It is noteworthy that Dorian believes that “man” can be instructed to appreciate the “moments of a life” that are fleeting and passing. Like Pater’s Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Dorian preaches an encounter with life in terms of moments of experience. Pater concludes that controversial Conclusion with this idea: “For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moment’s sake” (153). Pater, like Dorian, attests that this approach to living can be taught, primarily through example. It is through the activity of reading (Dorian reading *A Rebours*, Wilde reading Pater) that this appreciation for life as a moment can be made into a discipline. Thus, the reader too enters the chain of influence.

Dorian systematically surveys objects and rituals that would intensify his sensory experience and train him to take each moment as a moment. Wilde devotes several pages

of *A Picture of Dorian Gray* to a description of the interests Dorian gives his attention to. This section of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is itself a miniature instruction manual on objects worthy of attention for an aspiring aesthete who might be reading the novella. For instance, when Dorian “turned his attention to embroideries, and to the tapestries that performed the office of frescoes in the chill rooms of the Northern nations of Europe,” Wilde is not only describing Dorian’s newest interest, but he is also instructing the reader on the variety of embroideries and tapestries available in the world for attentive appreciation. (109). The narrator points out that

for a whole year, [Dorian] sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work, getting the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles’ wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as ‘woven air,’ and ‘running water,’ and ‘evening dew;’ strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with *fleurs de lys*, birds, and images; veils of *lacis* worked in Hungary point; Sicilian brocades and stiff Spanish velvets; Georgian work with its gilt coins, and Japanese *Foukousas* with their green-toned gold and their marvelously-plumaged bird. (110)

For the reader unable to see these objects in person, this list provides exposure to the objects of Dorian’s study and underscores Dorian’s project to produce a system of responding to the world that emphasizes sensory experience and that takes each moment for each moment’s sake. The extensiveness of this list exemplifies the pedagogical

motivation behind Dorian's project of self-development. Not only is Dorian training himself, but the novella also takes advantage of the opportunity to instruct the reader. This is interesting and noteworthy because it would seem to undercut Wilde's idea that the reader should not be instructed, but the reader should instead be provoked. What I hope to suggest in this chapter is the status of the text's invitation to the reader remains unclear.

At another time, Dorian takes up an interest in music and devotes time, energy, and money to collect "the strangest instruments that could be found" in the world "either in the tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that have survived contact with Western civilizations" (107). Dorian accumulated these precious objects and "loved to touch and try them" (107). Again, the narrative provides an extensive list of these sacred objects that Dorian mysteriously obtained. For instance, Dorian "had the mysterious *furparis* of the Rio Negro Indians, that women are not allowed to look at, and that even youths may not see till they have been subjected to fasting and scourging" (107). Dorian also had the "flutes of human bones such as Alfonso de Ovalle heard in Chili, and the sonorous green jaspers that are found near Cuzco and give forth a singular sweetness" (107). Dorian collected these, among many other, instruments unheard of or unseen in western culture. That narrative notes that the "fantastic character of these instruments fascinated him, and he felt a curious delight in the thought that Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous faces" (107). Because Dorian considered these objects to be grotesque, he found them even more interesting. Not concerned about their use in their original cultures, Dorian studied these instruments,

again, to train and discipline his senses to be wakeful and to take each moment for each moment's sake.

Within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the reader is invited to accompany Dorian on his self-development through the engagement of his senses toward precious and sacred objects. Dorian studies and reflects on these objects not to gain knowledge but in order to extend the boundaries of his identity. The more revolting, shocking, or grotesque something appeared the more Dorian became interested and invested. His appropriation of objects from other cultures that he used to extend his sense of self illustrates to what extent Dorian problematically requires "the other" to push his project of self-development to new limits and horizons. Until Dorian's death, his project of self-development or self-growth never ceases. The novella invites the reader to occupy a complex position. On one hand, the novella calls for the reader to share Dorian's journey and to give the reader the same experience Dorian has in the cataloguing of sacred and appropriated objects. Reading these catalogues introduces the reader to the beginning of a decadent education and exposes the reader to objects, sounds, and even smells that would otherwise remain out of the reader's realm of experience. On the other hand, however, the novella seems to discourage or denounce instruction of any kind. As Wilde made clear throughout his career, a text should not instruct, but it should spark a reaction from the reader. Thus, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers two models of reading.

Furthermore, despite the pages devoted to Dorian's study of jewels, perfumes, embroideries, and other things, the novella ultimately casts doubt on Dorian's calculated project of self-development and the discipline he imposes on himself to train, advance, and elevate his senses. Dorian's murder of Basil as well as his relief in the death of Sybil

Vane's brother invite the reader to lose sympathy with Dorian and to question and challenge his system of self-development. While the narrative seems to endorse Dorian's studies of sensory experiences, it also ultimately calls attention to and challenges Dorian's detachment that results from the discipline of his senses.

Cosmopolitanism and Decadence:

The Attentive Look in Wilde's *Salome*

Wilde's play *Salome* shares many themes in common with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The character Salome, like Dorian, is young and beautiful, and pursues a systematic course of self-development. Salome, like Dorian, is also a representation of decadence. The play *Salome* is associated with cosmopolitanism and goes beyond *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in its engagement with continental decadence. In this way, in its relationship to cosmopolitanism, *Salome* brings together the key terms of this dissertation. If, as I propose in the introduction, the cultivation of attention toward art plays a key role in how cultural institutions contribute to the formation of national identity, then *Salome* as a cosmopolitan and decadent text both undercuts the nation-building work of cultural institutions and, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, invites the reader/viewer to participate in the construction of the text's meaning in an ambivalent way.

In most considerations of *Salome*, the term cosmopolitanism refers to the play's international reputation and Wilde's status as an international – rather than a regional or national – author. The play does borrow from French decadent interpretations of the Biblical story of John the Baptist. Most notably, Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Herodiade* and Des Esseintes's ekphrasis of two of Gustave Moreau's paintings of Salome in Joris-

Karl Huysmans's novel *A Rebours* constitute the most influential source material for Wilde's own efforts. That Wilde originally wrote the play in French underscores his desire to contribute to the proliferation of late nineteenth century French Salomes. As Charles Bernheimer catalogues and reports, "Salome is the favorite femme fatale of the *fin de siècle*. In poems, stories, paintings, posters, sculptures, decorative objects, dance, and opera, well over a thousand versions of the Judean princess were made in Europe between 1870 and 1920 – and that reckoning does not include all the sketches by Gustave Moreau, whose personal Salome output totals in the hundreds" (304). The transnational appeal of the Salome story and Wilde's interest in these other literary and visual interpretations of that story do constitute one kind of cosmopolitanism in which texts from different nations influence one another, in which a writer from an Anglo-Irish heritage contributes to the body of French literature, and in which writers and artists form a type of community over a common interest. Furthermore, since Wilde's play was banned from being produced and performed in England due to a law forbidding the public performance of religious material, the play emerged as a sort of renegade text and was interpreted and performed in nontraditional settings in France and American in the early twentieth century. The prohibition on the performance of *Salome* prompted Wilde to publicize "his intention of changing his nationality," according to his friend Robert Ross, who describes that Wilde expressed that intention as "a characteristic jest" (xii). In "A Note on 'Salome,'" Ross also claims that "the play had made the author's name a household word wherever the English language is not spoken" (xiii). Ross's comments show Wilde as a distinctly international writer – one whose popularity exists apart from – rather within – his own national borders. Ross's remarks are reflected in James Joyce's

short meditation on Wilde's life, a piece written originally in Italian and entitled "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of 'Salome.'" "

While it cannot be denied that these circumstances validate the use of the word "cosmopolitan" to describe *Salome*, cosmopolitanism also shapes the circumstances *within* the play in at least two important, and interrelated, ways – the organization of space and the use of rhetorical diversions. To be cosmopolitan, as Timothy Brennan points out, is to be aware that the world is already arranged in a cosmopolitan way. Even though cosmopolitanism can refer to the "comfortable culture of middle-class travelers," in Brennan's phrasing, Wilde's play employs strategies that interrogate the dynamics of power that shape a world in which that type of travel is made possible.

First, *Salome* confronts the issue of cosmopolitanism by incorporating different, and contesting, communities into the fabric of the play. The world within the play, in other words, is itself a type of cosmopolitan reality. In the beginning of the play, for instance, when Salome escapes the banquet and steps out onto the terrace, she does so not only to remove herself from the Tetrarch's attention, but also to escape the crowd inside the palace at the celebration. As Salome exclaims,

How sweet is the air here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies, and barbarians who drink and drink and spill their wine on the pavement, and Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes and painted cheeks, with frizzled hair curled in columns, and Egyptians silent and subtle, with long nails of jade and russet cloaks, and Romans brutal and coarse, with

their uncouth jargon. Ah! how I loathe the Romans! They are rough and common, and they give themselves the airs of noble lords. (9)

In this speech, Salome indicates the scope of the political and social background within the play. The family conflict that unfolds between Salome, Herod, and Herodias is set within a vast network of diverse groups. The world Salome inhabits is definitively heterogeneous. Salome's description suggests not only that these communities have resisted blending together into one community, but that she lives in a world where travel is relatively easy and convenient. In other words, communities are not bound to one location. Salome's observations – and indeed her dislike for the crowd – suggest that cosmopolitanism is not only a fact of Salome's lived experience, but it is also a spatial problem to address and reflect upon. This conflict arises for Salome in particular because Salome's "home" is itself an unstable space.

Salome's relationship to Herod complicates the question of her home. In particular, Herod's desire for Salome unsettles her status as a family member. Salome's first lines of the play indicate the disruptive power of Herod's gaze: "I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes I know it" (8). Herod, both stepfather and uncle to Salome, displays a "strange," and ultimately estranging, desire for her, a desire that Salome fully understands despite her initial statement of not comprehending the meaning and intention behind his look. Herod's look *moves* Salome, in so far as it pushes her outside. Her declaration that she "will not" and "cannot stay" illustrates the dislocation Salome herself experiences in the beginning of the play through the force of Herod's

unspoken – yet clearly visible – desire. As Salome’s first lines of the play indicate, the issue of cosmopolitanism is not limited to Wilde’s literary predecessors, his tastes, or his reputation in the early twentieth century; cosmopolitanism is itself a point of reflection and a reality of experience for the characters within the play.

Cosmopolitan circumstances impact not only the title character, but they also shape the lives of the minor characters in the play as well. For example, the Young Syrian, who kills himself immediately upon discovering the desire Salome has for Iokanaan, lives in Herod’s kingdom as a result of being displaced by the expansion of Herod’s territory and power. As Herod himself conveys, the Young Syrian’s “father was a king. I drove him from his kingdom. And of his mother, who was a queen, you made a slave, Herodias. So he was here as my guest, as it were, and for that reason I made him my captain. I am sorry he is dead. Ho! why have you left the body here? It must be taken to some other place. I will not look at it, -- away with it!” (21-22). Herod’s use of the word “guest” to describe his relationship to the Young Syrian strikes one of the few genuinely comic notes in the play. The word “guest” is so incongruously paired with the circumstances leading to the Young Syrian’s dwelling in Herod’s kingdom that it cannot but provoke laughter. However, Herod’s speech does more than betray Wilde’s habit of making comic flourishes even in the most tragic of situations; it also illustrates how Herod conceives of and relies on a certain spatial orderliness. He directs his servants to remove the Young Syrian’s body because he “will not look at it.” His declaration reveals his desire to maintain a spatial order in which the things and circumstances that he finds unpleasant or discomfiting are removed from sight. Just as Herod’s use of the word “guest” to describe his relationship to the Young Syrian obscures the nature of his real

relationship to the Young Syrian, the strict spatial and visual economy Herod imposes is intended to discard any reminders of his own death. Even as the play presents a world in which many groups co-exist together, it also shows that Herod exercises his power through a particular organization of space.

This spatial organization becomes apparent even in the objects that symbolize Herod's power. When the soldiers reflect on the types of wine that Herod shares with his guests, they explain that the wine gains its status through its association with both a source of power and also its location. In other words, Herod's ability to transport the wine to his kingdom illuminates the reach of his power. The Second Soldier informs his companions that "Herod is very fond of wine. He has wine of three sorts" (4). Each type of wine corresponds to a source of power. As the Second Soldier reports, the first wine "is brought from the Island of Samothrace, and is purple like the cloak of Caesar" (4). The second wine "comes from a town called Cyprus and is as yellow as gold" (4). The last type of wine "is a wine of Sicily. That wine is as red as blood" (5).

Herod's desire for Salome compromises this strict organization. As the First Soldier reveals, Herod, as a rule, never appears on the terrace: "The Tetrarch will not come to this place. He never comes on the terrace. He is too much afraid of the prophet" (19). Again, it is Herod's fear that produces the spatial boundaries, and yet it is his desire that prompts him to transgress those boundaries. The dynamic between fear and desire that influences Herod's navigation of space in the play illustrates not only that Herod's desire for Salome is itself transgressive (that is, requires him to move across the boundaries he produces for himself), but it also shows that the power that organizes the

space in the world represented in the play is a power that is shaped and formed by the poles of fear and desire.

While this background impresses upon Salome, and subsequently the audience, the distinct groups participating in Herod's party, the play also demonstrates how Herod's kingdom, not unlike the British empire of the late nineteenth century, gains its status through the importation of unusual and rare products. In the first part of the play, the soldiers reflect on the specialty of the wine Herod shares with his guests. As the Second Soldier informs his companions, Herod "is very fond of wine. He has wine of three sorts" (4). Each type of wine corresponds to a symbol of power. As the Second Soldier reports, the first wine "is brought from the Island of Samothrace, and is purple like the cloak of Caesar" (4). The second wine "comes from a town called Cyprus and is as yellow as gold" (4). The last type of wine "is a wine of Sicily. That wine is as red as blood" (5). As the Second Soldier displays his knowledge of the symbolic qualities of the three types of wine, he implies that Herod likes these wines for what they reflect about his power. The correspondence between the color of the wine and the forces that maintain the Herod's rule illustrate the symbolic logic that upholds the Herod's power.

The play demonstrates that Herod's power sustains itself through a type of symbolic logic; for example, Herod's ring, when given to the executioner, symbolizes the political authority to kill. However, that power is immediately disrupted with the attention given to the moon and to Salome. As Ewa Kuryluk describes, an "intimate relationship is immediately established between the pale celestial body and the enchanting princess. At times Salome and the moon are one; at times they are doubles, mirror reflections of each other. The moon functions as a milky looking glass showing

Salome's inner life or as a screen onto which her emotions can be projected. Thus the princess and the moon are the two main characters in a play that consequently takes place simultaneously in the sky and one earth" (212). However, the moon also functions as a face, and the way the characters react to the moon is the first sign of the disruption to the authority and power of Herod.

In the stage directions for the first scene, Wilde writes that the "moon is shining brightly" (3). The Page of Herodias first speaks by declaring, "Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things." (3). The Young Syrian echoes the Page: "She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing" (3). While this exchange imposes on the face of the moon the action to come (Salome's dance and subsequent death), it not only personifies the moon, but it also shows that the moon corresponds to more than one meaning. That the moon looks "strange" for both the Page and for the Young Syrian is even more disruptive because the Page explains the strangeness by pointing to death while the Young Syrian uses the word "strange" to refer to dancing. The double use of the sense of strangeness produces an immediate sense of strangeness itself.

Herod too, later in the play, will look at the moon and exclaim that it "has a strange look tonight" (20). Wanting to emphasize the strangeness of moon, he hits the chord again: "Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the

sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman. . . . I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not?" (20). Herod's interpretation of the moon's strangeness contrasts with Salome's reading of the moon. She explains, "How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses" (9). For Herod, the moon is "mad" and looking "everywhere for lovers" while Salome insists that moon is "cold and chaste." These conflicting points of view do more than illustrate the differences between Salome and Herod; they also underscore the slipperiness of meaning in the play. That Herod goes on to slip on blood a few moments after contemplating the strange aspect of the moon reinforces the idea that the stability of meaning is unraveling in this community. That three of the four characters to initially call attention to the "strange" quality of the moon further emphasizes the shift away from the ordinary within the world of the play.

Herodias, however, sees nothing in the moon but itself: "the moon is like the moon, that is all" (20). Herodias's insistence on a literal reading of the moon not only underscores her dismissal of symbolic readings –whether in the old system's one-to-one correspondence of object and meaning (she questions and challenges Herod's authority openly) or the new system's proliferation of meaning and abundance of interpretations. She observes, but does not participate in the production of meaning.

With the exception of Herodias, the characters personify the moon in the strictest sense of personification – they put a (feminine) face on her even as the moon is already

considered to be an object that has a face. This double gesture – of putting a face on a face – contributes to the strange aspect of the moon the play calls the audience’s attention toward. In Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations for the first English edition of the text, the presentation of the face of the characters creates an estranging effect. Beardsley contributions to the text are significant for as Lorraine Kooistra argues, “As a first-edition illustrated book, *Salome*’s meaning is embedded in the conditions of its production and reception: the text cannot be considered separately from its accompanying images without some kind of distortion. For this reason its generic status as a play becomes ironically implicated in the ‘invisible dances’ seen and produced by author and artist. Since the play was not performed on the English stage for a decade, the script depends for its dramatic effect on Beardsley’s plates” (133).

In only one illustration does Beardsley depict the moon. In “The Woman in the Moon,” Beardsley presents three faces, all of which share an affinity with each other. In Bernheimer’s reading of this illustration, he suggests that Beardsley mimics Wilde’s method in the play to “look askance” (133). Beardsley presents a “shifting landscape,” in which conventional gender categories are difficult to ascribe to any of the three characters in the scene. The illustration, for instance, is entitled “The Woman in the Moon,” but Kooistra has persuasively argued it is Wilde’s face that is portrayed: “By figuring Wilde as the Woman in the Moon, Beardsley not only points to Salome as the author’s artistic figure, but also comments critically on the relations between sex and art in Wilde’s aesthetics” (140). The other two figures depicted in the painting also do not neatly fit into traditional gender categories. As Bernheimer discusses, “the naked figure in *The Woman in the Moon* has obvious male genital equipment, but his long, stylized

hair, hesitant stance, and self-protective gesture all suggest a certain femininity. The draped figure has even more typically feminine hair, wears a flowing robe, and stands passively behind her companion, but she has no apparent breasts, and the triangular tassel hanging on her robe could be interpreted as masculine or feminine. The hand crossing the tassel could conceivably belong to either of the figures, just as the robe of one is defined by the same line that creates the cape of the other” (133). Kooistra and Bernheimer both elucidate the illustration’s disruption of definitions of gender and the disruption of the visual identification of gender. What is also depicted in the illustration, but has not been expanded upon, is the sense that shifting landscape presented in the image does more than undermine gender categories; it also dislocates the characters from the setting of the play. Who is looking at the moon and from what vantage point is one of the questions embedded in the sense that the characters themselves are floating. Standing as tall as the moon, the way the characters look at the moon and the way the face in the moon *returns* the look establishes that the illustration accomplishes more than unsettling gender categories.

When Salome hears Iokanaan speak, she desires a face to face encounter with him: “What a strange voice! I would speak with him” (I. 14). Persuading the Young Syrian to bring Iokanaan to her, she says, “Thou wilt do this thing for me. I have ever been kind towards thee. Thou wilt do it for me. I would but look at him, this strange prophet. Men have talked so much of him. Often I have heard the Tetrarch talk of him. I think he is afraid of him, the Tetrarch” (I. 14-15). Salome expresses a desire to be attentive to Iokanaan and concentrate all her energy in his direction. Her fixation with Iokanaan shows itself through the cataloguing of his features. Salome takes a systematic

survey of his physical characteristics and considers them in terms of sensory experience. For instance, Salome declares to Iokanaan that she “amorous” of his body (21). To Salome, his “body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys” (21). When Salome’s request to touch his body is denied, Salome offers the opposite response to Iokanaan’s body: “They body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper” (22). While Salome presents a positive and negative reading of Iokanaan’s body, voice, and hair, she undertakes a systematic survey of his person and she articulates her responses immediately. Although Salome does not invest the time, money, and energy into collecting sacred and unusual objects like Dorian Gray does, she performs the same kind of attentive posturing toward something she is simultaneously attracted to and repelled from. Her desire for Iokanaan evolves as a desire to touch a forbidden work of art. Her concentration on the sensory experience leads to her ultimate downfall at Herod’s command.

Dorian Gray and Salome both invest in the notion of self-development through the admiration of beautiful and grotesque art. They both develop systems for engaging attentively with the world, and for creating a discipline of the senses. Although Wilde both affirmed the development of personality, he suggest that Dorian and Salome were too disciplined in their pursuit of sensory experience and their purity of devotion to sensory experience led to not only other people’s deaths but also to their own. It is through a critique of decadence in the figures of Dorian and Salome that Wilde lodges a critique against the regulation and discipline of the senses that gets promoted throughout the nineteenth century within cultural conversations and debates about national identity formation. While Wilde promoted himself as a cultural authority, he also adhered to the

belief that the breaking apart of habits of the mind through sensory awareness can lead to freedom.

Wilde is the most recognizably aesthete writer included in this dissertation, and in many ways he embodies the contradictions, struggles, and outsider/insider status of literary aestheticism in England. Rossetti, James, and Wilde each contribute to the history of attentiveness by showing the value of directing attention toward a single task or single object, but they also each show the value of shock, disruption, and distraction. While the literary aesthetes, James and Wilde in particular, yearn for recognition as cultural authorities, they are also uncertain about cultural power and ambivalent about the formation of national identity on the basis of fine art. This general ambivalence shapes the way their texts invite readers to read. By offering readers a chance to train their senses or perception through an attentive reading of their works, they also, and Wilde in particular, warn readers against paying too much attention.

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