A Sensuous Love of the Unseen: Beauty and Ordinary Life in the Works of Gautier, Pater, Proust, and Bellow

by

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the ambivalent relationship between art and ordinary life in the works of Théophile Gautier, Walter Pater, Marcel Proust, and Saul Bellow. I specifically look at the representations and discussions of art, the artist, and ordinary life, and view these in relation to the mode of thought reflected in the style of each writer. I argue that the artist passes from a proud and heroic ideal type in Gautier to an out-of-place neurotic in Bellow. A shift occurs also in which ordinary life passes from being an object of scorn, derided as opposed to art, to becoming the supreme generator of value in life generally. Moreover, I present a view of the work of art as epiphanic, as a form that cannot be understood but through the peculiar “intoxication” it provides. As a way to reconcile this view with the arguments I discuss, I write essayistically and sometimes ironically to better capture, if obliquely, such elements in the works that depend on epiphanic perception.

My first chapter focuses on the French writer Théophile Gautier, who first popularized the slogan “art for art’s sake” in the preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. I argue that Gautier creates a triumphalist image of himself and of the artist generally as a virtuosic handler of the sublime and as a consummate and convincing judge of taste. Despite this apparent lionizing of the artist, aesthetic experience is often presented in his stories as hopelessly short-lived, with the vague evil of ordinary life eventually regaining its primacy.

My second chapter focuses on Walter Pater and the idea he develops of an “aesthetic education” in *Marius the Epicurean* and his aestheticist reading of Plato in *Plato and Platonism*. Rather than viewing aesthetic experience as necessarily an adversary of quotidian experience,
Pater focuses on how life could be lived aesthetically. The education he proposes involves the internalization of artists and writers who serve as possible ideals of meticulously self-created personalities, distilled in their works of art. I argue that this maintenance of aspirational ideals, together with the promotion of a habitually self-reflexive state of mind, disposed to maintain dialogue with itself, accounts for Pater’s vision of how to become an artist and how to live life aesthetically.

In my third chapter I argue that Marcel Proust views the past and our relationships with our pasts as the foundation of aesthetic experience in our lives. In his style as well as in the content of his novels, he most fully absorbs ordinary life in a vision of art. In articulating our lives in narrative form we discover and create interpretations of ourselves by means of substantively contextualizing who we are and what we were. Nevertheless, Proust views the artist as apart from above ordinary society.

In my fourth chapter I argue that Saul Bellow does not view the artist as a heroic martyr, as Gautier does in his casting the artist in the quicksand of ordinary life, or as an idealized personality, in the manner of Pater, but as an unwilling eccentric, a real-life neurotic particularly ill-equipped to deal with the problems of “ordinary life.” Instead, I claim that he redeems ordinary life as the determiner of our attachments and values, independent of what value art does or does not attribute to it.
Chapter 1 Introduction

I will begin by noting the unconventional nature of this dissertation, especially its introduction, so that the reader will be better prepared to read it and will be less disturbed by any unexpected idiosyncrasies. Rather than deploying clear arguments and transparent language I often rely on metaphor and an exaggerated style to present a metadiscursive argument on the importance of style in literary criticism. This serves as an ironic appropriation of the styles of the authors I write about to address the question of the suitability of style generally when writing about literature. This argument is most fully presented in the introduction, although it reappears at various points throughout the dissertation. This concern is also reflected in the title of this dissertation, borrowed from Pater’s *Plato and Platonism*. When reading one looks at markings on a page, but the activity is more properly understood as supersensual, creating a form in one’s mind that apart from the mind has no tangible existence. Likewise, the activity of writing involves a manner of applying and observing the results of peculiar effects in the mind, judging and considering the appropriateness of one and another of such effects, all the while forming a kind of character.

Another unconventional aspect of this dissertation concerns my unusual use of footnotes. My discussion of secondary sources is almost exclusively relegated to footnotes, and I also use footnotes to present various digressive thoughts related to points I make in the dissertation—passages of which I am reminded by what I happen to be discussing, more general thoughts about some aspect of style or form, etc.. These thoughts are sometimes ironic, speculative, and
fanciful, and should be understood as part of the broader enterprise of creating a style, a form, a literary personality in the manner of the writers I discuss.

Inspired by writers like Walter Scott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and George Eliot, who often use epigraphs at the beginnings of chapters or essays, I likewise employ epigraphs to prefigure themes which are of particular concern in each chapter. I use these epigraphs, arriving from different writers than from the one on which each chapter focuses, to broadly set in relief the concerns that I will discuss.

These points concern the atypical style and form of my dissertation, both of which are meant to signal my ambivalence about the means commonly used to discuss works of art—whether the experience art provides could be conveyed transparently or whether it can only ever be a matter of private revelation. This ambivalence also reflects the complex, ambivalent relationship each of the writers I discuss have to art and to what could be called ordinary life. I understand the development of this question of the relationship between art and ordinary life from Gautier to Bellow as one that becomes ever more expansive in terms of the concerns in its orbit—history, economics, sociology, politics, etc.—while nevertheless retaining an insistence on a kind of hermetic insularity, in the persistent restatements from one writer to the next of the value of epiphany. The character of epiphany becomes defined differently in terms of the style employed, from the decadent, intoxicated style of Gautier to the relatively sober style of Bellow, as well as the concerns permitted in its orbit and the greater definition of ordinary life from one writer to the next. While the desire to integrate art into ordinary life is never fully achieved, we gain an awareness of what such a union might look like with each writer, and while Gautier serves as perhaps the low point for this enterprise, in light of the stark division he places between the two, he nevertheless views the experience of art as providing exultant highs and is most
vehement in championing the value of art and the distinction of the artist. The admission of other concerns into this discussion knocks the artist from her perch, until she is seen in Bellow as even distinctly beneath the ordinary individual, in light of the neuroses by which she is afflicted and the alienation from which she suffers. The artist is no longer defined by the exultant epiphanies which she is able to summon but by her maladjustment to the terms and values dictated by the mass of human civilization. This concession to the terms and values of ordinary life is in fact reflected in Bellow’s style, which is far more casual than the decadent styles of Gautier, Pater, and Proust, even as the latter two tend towards styles that reflect ordinary forms of thought.

While I occasionally talk about some aspects of aestheticism that reflect its existence as a vague historical literary movement and some topics, such as class, politics, and sexuality, with which it is often concerned, I do so only occasionally and by no means thoroughly. The implications of these concerns onto the broader aesthetic visions of the writers I discuss are brought up insofar as they reflect that writer’s views on the role of art generally, at the level of the writer’s theoretical formulations and style. I especially seek to frame each writer as a kind of peculiar optical perspective, the understanding of which requires an attempt to inhabit their style. What I seek to do, then, is to frame a writer as a kind of idealized type, an artistic personality, a perspective that is often understood by impressionistic description.

While the choice of writers I discuss and the sequence with which I arrange my discussions of them suggests a historical narrative on the decline of aestheticism, I am rather hesitant to claim that the writers are necessarily broadly representative in this manner. It is true that they have in common a central consideration in the role of art in life, but this is true of countless other writers, whose styles, plots, and perspectives would raise myriad objections to such a narrative. My own manner of observation, moreover, tends to view in the subtle
coherence of style and form a peculiar and distinct vision of art, so that not only conspicuous aestheticists like Gautier merit this sort of consideration, but any writer or artist whose work is sufficiently rich in subtlety and intricacy. One might say that this is a vague and dubious metric of assessment, but I mean it to signal the necessarily personal manner of reading and writing that I will develop in the course of this dissertation, a manner of reading which I view as reflecting Pater’s idea of artists and their works as “personalities” communicating in the world of art, a world that is constituted of one’s own impressions of it. If, on the one hand, I lay out my own readings of the peculiar and distinct visions of art in these four conspicuous aestheticists over the course of this dissertation, on the other hand I now view myself, writing now at the conclusion of this enterprise and surveying the distance I have covered, as providing a manner of reading that could include almost any other writer under this banner, and which may itself be called “aestheticist.”

In the first part of this introduction I will explore some of my doubts about the language I use to talk about literature. These doubts concern the role of memory and the strength of an impression of a work of literature and whether anything that is not the work itself, as a distinct kind of epiphanic experience, could be said to refer, in any uncontroversial manner, to it.

In the second part of this introduction I will explore how these doubts are connected to my own experiences as a reader and writer. I will lay out my attempts (and what I take to be my sporadic successes) to demonstrate how writers’ styles reflect manners of perception and modes of thought already more or less universally familiar. I will then discuss how I understand the styles of the particular writers I will cover in this dissertation (Gautier, Pater, Proust, and Bellow) and how they otherwise position their novels and aesthetic experience more generally in relation to ordinary life.
1.1 The Music of Literature: A Brief Exercise in Style and Perspective

Accustomed as we are to taking into account the influence of light in our ordinary perceptions of objects—to the point that we effortlessly assimilate and inadvertently disregard its nimble colorings, and imagine that we see, in our talk of objects, things of uniform colors—it is a matter of some difficulty to revive that state of naivety in which we might distinguish the myriad shades that surround us. One must make an effort to properly recognize that nothing one sees is uniformly colored, that the chair one ordinarily conceives of as blue in fact harbors upon it tinctures of gold streaming outward from a white patch where light is reflected, and we struggle to reconcile these hues with the variegated blues by which they are surrounded, and which we at last seize upon by consciously, and with difficulty, abandoning--or, rather, looking through the haze of--our notions of continuous solid objects and of depth. By recapturing a kind of naivety regarding our impressions, we are able to briefly isolate one little fragment and another among the fabric of motley.

I may again notice this golden deposit strung upon the ridge of a blue blanket—however, this time as a kind of illusion, as now the light is merely burnishing a paler blue next to the black and the navies of the dark shadows in the folds, rather than the flax I imagine. Or else, in trying to account for the yellow light on the blue surface, I attempt to reconcile the two as if combining paints, asking myself, “Do you see that fine band of color? It’s almost green.” And here, upon the suggestion of the idea, I begin to recognize a vein of the richest jade flashing from the downy stone.

With this thought in mind I look to the window and see the fallen blinds, the fluted slats which I know to be white now colored with the grey-pink of a pigeon’s feather. Though they
obstruct the view of the world outside, they do little to encumber the light, which, provoked by the sight of this insolent fortification against its eddying tide, seems to pierce with its coppery jets those apertures through which the blinds are strung together, and spills over these modest embankments its waves of molten copper where they fall one on top of the other in tangled curls and rise, roiling the air suspended above and the objects around with sylph-life flecks of indeterminable shades, and finally, amid this wanton extravagance, splash down onto the crest of my blue blanket, as onto the ocean’s shallow waters, an enamel of verdigris.

1.1.1 Reading, Writing, and the Sublimation of Forms

Sing, then, for this is also sooth.

-William Butler Yeats, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd”

With this little experiment I feel I have arrived at a similar thought to what must have inspired impressionist painters, and that I can thereby better appreciate a certain splash of color here or there inconsistent with the object on which it falls—the rough grey concrete of a street made gold by a lamp, the mauves that twilight drapes on a white wall. For instance, one might see in a painting of this sort a pink on some rough patch of ground that corresponds to the pink of a cloud, the pink of its reflection in a lake, and, down a path, amid some flowers and hemlock umbels, the pink of a hat emerging from the overgrown trail. These are things one notices by applying a kind of abstracted vision to the image, not looking for objects but for colors only, and, in seeing the colors, one happily recognizes again the dexterous arrangement of the objects that harbor them. In looking at a painting of that sort I will recall what I have written here, as now in looking at what I have written I recall impressionist paintings. I have the feeling that this little
epiphany serves as a portal by which the two communicate, a portal which cannot be opened except with the adoption or creation of a certain perspective.

Apart from this, I view this exercise as a little homage to Proust, an attempt to take up his style, to view things in a similar manner, to occupy his perspective, although I recognize, without making comparisons with any specific passages, that the tempo is somehow off, stilted, even if the conceit at the end is of the sort that he uses, and that consequently the image also is somehow not right.

Finally, I intend this little experiment as a kind of allegory of reading, where what is seen is dependent on the reader, and the reader’s own experience of the sublime. In reading the reader hears, as it were, a kind of music beneath the words, comprising the cadence as well as the content of the speech, and a latent growth of ideas and emphases shapes one’s peculiar understanding. In writing, meanwhile, one fabricates the perspective through which one purports to merely observe. The more precise the language we use, the more dependent the sense is on the peculiar choice and order of words, the more enigmatic, the more strangely various the meaning. Any criticism seems to me to be the creation of a sense that is not in the work of literature. Even if it claims to be the recognition of certain features, a description, perhaps, of a certain tone peculiar to a novel or to a writer, this nevertheless implies a fastening of what is only loosely suggested in the work of literature, and therefore a distortion—however unwilling—of it, the imposition of a foreign perspective. At the same time, we could recognize a certain paradox, for what is the work of art but just such a generation of perspectives, such a repository of gazes, such a range of attempts at prolonged observation and definition?

To say that a work of art embodies or advances certain arguments is perhaps rather vulgar. At the same time, to say that it does not is disingenuous, as its arrangement of formal
characteristics, its representation of the world, its position within it, its position in the history of art, and its relationship to oneself each imply a vast network of points whose definition involves the creation of arguments. Moreover, the work of art solicits observation, consideration, and even admiration. Every seduction of this sort involves persuasion and interest.

The act of writing is itself an activity of constriction, delimitation, exclusion, of choice and definition. I look and see and meanwhile I am also watching my own manner of looking. The work of art passes through the reader somehow obliquely. When reading one hears a kind of music. It sounds in oneself! One looks away and it stops. Yet, for all its strangeness, it sounds familiar. By and by, something of its like returns and seems to arrive from elsewhere. In reading one summons a voice, becomes it—how easily it pervades. It does so before one has even had a chance to welcome its arrival; one only has to follow the words. We read and become what we are reading, but also stand apart from it, watch ourselves, our reactions. When one reads how easily the spirit of the words fills one! When one looks away how quickly it departs! The ease with which we command the spirit’s arrival upon opening a book does not help us in making it stay when we close it. We would eagerly continue the story we have been reading, or else continue something of the same flavor, the same pitch and tempo, but immediately recognize that we have been struck mute. Our minds distort the story everywhere. Neither the words are remembered, nor most of the details. A vague sketch is all that remains.

In reading one’s attention is very particularly marshalled and directed—“look here, now here”—and one observes these signals and learns to look to and speculate upon the performance and to ask, as if prompted by the object, “What do I see? What accounts for the production of this, the integration of all these subtle elements into a coherent whole? What kind of personality is it that is showing this to me?” We are provided with falsehoods as if they were facts. We are
set in place, but presented with information as if we were merely overhearing the story being
told. When we are addressed directly, with some such phrase as “dear reader,” we view this as an
even more garish feint. One speaks the words and listens to them, but they are not one’s own.

We have minds for definite objects. We could easily recall the notes of a song or the
words of a poem, but not the impulses that led to them, and we cannot create the like for
ourselves. How strange that one should be any more difficult to appropriate than the other! If I
cannot recall the spirit, then how can I be sure I hear it rightly when reading it? How do I know I
make any contact with it? I can talk of events and a choice of words, but in this manner seem to
break the vessels whose contents I sought to gather. We look at our gaze being directed and
wonder what is guiding it.

When I talk of music I have in mind something along the lines of Gide’s novel La
Symphonie Pastorale, where the musical effect is created by the title, in directing the reader to
look for it, as much as it is observed. The title encourages us to combine and dissolve story and
style into a pure and unadulterated aesthetic effect—an effect which, by giving the music a setting
or definite theme, is relinquished and newly accomplished. The novel is a “symphony.”
Therefore, consider its effects as purely musical. Pay less attention to the words, characters, and
events, than to the music they disclose beneath them, a music that cannot be carried but through
these vessels. In order to view these things as music one must understand them spontaneously,
instinctively, yet at the same time with a spontaneity that is the product of long and laborious
reflection. One must look upon them with an abstracted vision, but also with the knowledge that
these effects, these almost musical impressions, have come in specific forms and ideas.
However, the novel is, in a nod to Beethoven, a “pastoral symphony,” so let the music evoke a
pastoral scene—the scene, as it were, of the novel. The delicate style is meant to evoke or even
become music, a music so fine and delicate that it may evoke the gentle light of the sun above a field of barley, or a scene of a shepherd bringing home a flock of sheep.

This fine synesthetic effect directs our attention to a scene in the novel, where the adopted blind girl, Gertrude, who is learning about the world through her belated learning of language, thinks that the song of birds is an effect of light. Just as another of its effects is the warmth she feels on her hand, or as an effect of boiling water is that it bubbles, she supposes that when the air is sufficiently heated it begins to sing. She asks, after hearing Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*, if the world hidden from her sight is really as beautiful as the music. In this confounding of senses and speculation on what beauties lay hidden from us, in the encouragement to look upon the world of color as if for the first time, the strain we put on our imaginations in our attempts to see and hear guides us to a revitalization of our senses, by awakening our supersensual faculties. The novel, which has to do with the awakening of a sense, in making us look at with wonder our own senses, is aimed at awakening sensibility. In the suggestion of synesthesia we recognize the synesthesia, the richly associative thoughts to which we are already predisposed.

I also mention this novel because it also allows me, under the sway of this suggestion, to view the pastoral novels of George Sand in a similar manner, and thereby to appreciate them in a way which was, perhaps, not at all Sand’s intent, nor that of Gide, yet for all that more treasured still, since it serves me as my own private portal into books like *François le Champi*, which would otherwise remind me of a mere sketch of a Thomas Hardy novel. When looking at it this way I seem to be in possession of a key to a secret chamber of the novel, in which its greatest pleasures are found, and I am able to transform what appears to be a moralizing that approaches
the pasteboard politics of Hardy into the voice of humble wisdom, and to transform a relative
lack of distinct color into an auspicious generality that already turns in the direction of music.

    In the effort to sublimate into one form or another, or to reconstruct from memory, we
see to be in contact with the essence, which we inevitably transform into a different rendering.
We must recall flavor, cadence, image, sentiment, and perceive them in unison.

    I have often had the thought that it would make for an interesting, if often humiliating,
exercise to try to write from memory some books or stories I have read. The reconstruction of
some Grimm fairy tales would appear to be a relatively simple task. I could summon Snow
White, her stepmother, and the dwarves well enough, these strange figures who seem—how
unlike the inhabitants of other stories!—undiminished in their features (since they have so few),
though last encountered long ago. To set things in motion I could place among these figures the
gossiping mirror, the unmentioned castle in which it is found, the forest of—does it merit
saying?—unknown location, the bump in the road that will prove fateful in dislodging the bit of
poisoned apple, etc. But where can I place the apple to make sure it is not conspicuously out of
place? Shall I hang it from a branch, or drop it on the forest floor? No, it merely appears when
the old woman/queen hands it to Snow White.

    I could apply the simple oral style and perhaps, with a sidelong glance and a wink to
those familiar with these stories and their manner, make it even more elliptical. Of course, I do
not have these stories memorized, either in the brothers’ rendering or the translations I have read,
but my makeshift version would, I think, pass. In any case, let this synoptic view of some of its
elements, this surveillance of a possible layout persuade you that it can be done, provided I hide
my tracks, rid the story of the various perspectival adulterations I have included above. In the
reconstruction I employ such critical faculties as I possess in examining the few elements of the
story, reexamining from the remains of my memory the points at which they intersect, recalling
the peculiar effects of its style, measuring these recollections and trying to reproduce their like,
its progression of events, much as one who wishes to make a clock looks beyond its face and
examines the operation of its gears. In the reproduction a thousand cautions will have to be
observed, a suspicion and wariness over each phrase, a weighing and consideration.

I could convince myself that I could write a version of “Snow White” that is a close
approximation of the versions that I have read. Trying my hand at the first third or so and
comparing it to an English translation, I even find that my version is more or less just like the
one I find, until Snow White gets to the dwarves’ house, which my mind wreaths in a thick haze
of forgetfulness not found in the story itself.

It would seem to me that if I could rewrite, for example, the seven volumes of Proust’s
Recherche, this would be a great piece of criticism, not quite in the manner that Borges talks
about in “Pierre Menard,” but in the sense that what is, after all, the remarkably weak organ of
memory and assimilation would have proved grander and more flexible than I imagined. I do not
mean that I would be impressed with a mere recitation. Rather, I mean to present a case in which
one might have an impression of a work of art so detailed and complex, that one might recall the
spirit of it in its entirety as well as in its myriad intricacies. The fact that we do not have such
clear and defined ideas but rather foggy ones that could only be used to produce the coarsest of
approximations makes me skeptical of what it is I refer to at all when I ostensibly refer to a well-
known work of art.

I am at a loss when presented with this challenge. Where to begin? “Longtemps, je me
suis couché…” and, at best, the lofty dream collapses into scraps of dreadful pastiche, or else I
am condemned into producing a laborious and stiff vulgarization. As a result, I find myself
placed in a position where I am suspicious of what I refer to when I talk about the novel. Apart from the solid volumes and the lengthy inscriptions, do I not attribute to Proust what are rather my misshapen impressions of the novel? The idea that I will recognize my attempt as falling far short does not comfort me, for this recognition should be sufficient to refine my attempt. If I know that my attempt is insufficient, should I not be able to see in what manner it is insufficient and therefore repair it? I could paste a passage and declare that I refer to it just as it is, but that does not convince me, since my imperfect ear will have not heard the music correctly. As soon as I begin I think I speak rather of my impression, which rudely obscures my vision of the original. This suspicion and these attempts nevertheless convince me of what an ideal criticism might look like.

My experiment with Snow White convinces me that, even if I could claim to have an impression of the story that seems more or less exactly like the original, I arrive at it, on the one hand from recalling its events and its flavor, but on the other from an ironic detachment from it and from an appreciation of what strikes me as a distinctly strange, though apparently simple, style. In the example of Snow White I provide, assuming I am able to write a nearly identical version of the story, I will have arrived at it by a very different route than the one that first led to its telling. I doubt that my ironic comments, which perhaps persuade one that I have sufficiently looked around it, observed its peculiarities enough to accurately reconstruct it, would be appreciated by those who first imagined it, and therefore my story would appear to be a very different one from theirs. Through my observation of the “unmentioned castle in which [the mirror] is found,” I even think I enrich the story, by viewing it as somewhat akin to a story by Italo Calvino. In any case, I find that this phrase which occurs to me allows me to read the story as if I were reading Calvino and serves me as a kind of happy adulteration. Suddenly, with the
appearance of the castle in this form, I become aware of its disappearance in the story, where its presence is only inferred by the reader—a spectral, insubstantial presence. I seem to hear the strange music of Calvino in the simple fairy tale. The music of one accompanies that of the other in harmony. I begin to view the figures and objects of the story as points on a plane, and by writing it is for me to draw the straight or looping lines that will connect them. I hear the self-conscious strangeness and paradoxical quality of Calvino’s writing by growing conscious of—what seems to me—the unwitting trail of paradoxes that runs through Snow White and other fairy tales.

I think of a work of art as a thing so unwieldy as to make one embarrassed in attempting to carry it. The adoption of a certain style allows one to carry parts of it that cannot be transmitted but through this particular vessel. It acknowledges the necessary partiality of one’s observation, in a manner that an explicit delimitation can only fail to convey.

In recognizing the partiality of one’s observation it also acknowledges, in an ironic gesture, the insoluble complexity of the work of art—it suggests its wholeness—as it does the insoluble complexity which is the heritage of all its observers. In the work of art one observes countless points that shine one upon the other with a strange light. So it shines upon the observer, and so it shined to its writer, who observed those lights in herself. This irony, this simultaneous, almost surreptitious, communication between the multivarious parts of the work of art seem to occur in it, but occur in oneself.

The writer, no less than the reader, is upset by the paradoxical position of art. Some ideas are separated from others through an exercise of judgment that deems them worthy of remembrance and further consideration. These arrive with a deflected deliberateness, whose appeal lies in casting an oblique perspective on lived reality, one that purports to reveal
something about it. They are externalized and thereby gain a quality of appearing false, yet on the other hand they seem to reveal something of the artist for herself, something but for the production could not be observed. One makes an exhibit of oneself, performs for oneself in front of oneself, and performer and audience doubt and simultaneously suspect the authenticity of the other. Irony appears to solve this paradox of identification by allowing for the integration and cohesion of multiple perspectives.

Oneself appears the more familiar the less known, the stranger the better acquainted. This holds equally true for our consideration of a work of art, which changes shape under the eye that observes it.

1.3. How I read Generally and Readings of Gautier, Pater, Proust, and Bellow

I began this project after the peculiar impression of a term I read in Sheldon Wolin’s *Politics and Vision*, where Plato’s project of creating a utopia is described as one that is founded on “soul-crafting.” What appealed to me in this phrase, I suppose, was the sense of considered, deliberate formation of character, the sense of making life artful through the application of a certain perspective. I read in this also a desire to remove the authority of fortune and accident from the determination of fate. Of course, any choice one makes could be described in this manner. One is always involved in the creation of what one will become and always implicated in some design outside the range of one’s thought. I am reminded of a passage from Emerson I will quote later, in my chapter on Bellow, a saying he fancifully attributes to “the Persians”: “Fooled thou must be, though wisest of the wise:/Then be the fool of virtue, not of vice.” Experience determines the range and appeal of our thoughts long before they become the objects of conscious reflection, so we tend to find a past rich with apparently stolen goods, never mind our designs. There is a kind of cunning, which we imagine to be vestigial, but is in fact
determinative of our characters, a fatalism in each thought, since it persuades us of its importance, frames our understanding, intoxicates us, orients us in the world. Art does this rather more conspicuously, drawing our attention for brief moments only, transforming the character of our thoughts with its crude effects. By its ostentatious display we may recognize how it directs us, so that consequently we may recognize the more nimble work of our own silent thoughts.

I will explain myself as a reader and as a writer before I discuss the writers that will be the focus of my dissertation. I attend to reading with a kind of feverish interest that typically departs from me when I write, and only occasionally returns for brief moments. Thus my best writing retains this kind of manic, obsessive quality, while on the whole I have difficulty with what one might call the architectonic aspects of writing. I have a kind of concentrated gaze that I could apply briefly, but it only notices certain intricacies and lacks a broader synoptic, synthesizing quality. I would be happy as a medieval artisan carving away at some gargoyle with little thought of the building on which it would stand. In any case, when trying to write what I think about a certain novel or work of art I find myself mired in my own confusion, my own doubts and suspicions, and any attempt to convey what I hope seems bound to fail.

On the other hand, it seems to me that if I happen to be talking to someone about, for instance, political and social differences between the United States and Denmark, although I am far from an expert on these matters, I could speak with relative fluency about things like GDP per capita, economic inequality as measured by things like GINI coefficients, tax rates, military vs. social spending, healthcare outcomes, etc., as well as some differences I have noticed between the two countries (the presence or lack of sugary colorful mascot-championed cereals, among other things) that reflect disparities in influence between public and business interest. In the latter case, when speaking about matters that I would more readily admit are of broader and
more immediate public concern, I do not have many doubts about the applicability or utility of the language I use. Such residual doubts as I may possess—I might ask myself, “Well, what is a country? Have I any idea?”—could be more or less comfortably pushed aside while I provide more focused discussion. I am confident that the various statistics I might cite, the aspects of American history I might bring up, as well as the variety of political parties and differences in the political systems, scant as my knowledge is of the Danish one, reflect general aspects and trends of the real world. I would not contend that the sense of what I was trying to say was dependent on a very particular formulation. In fact, the fretting over the difference between some internal flavor held in the mind and that expressed on a page would represent to me a case of almost grotesque self-indulgence.

Yet this is a self-indulgence that I can never quite get beyond in a different sphere, and which seems to me, rather than a superfluous exercise, the one essential one. When discussing my thoughts about a work of art, I am never confident that my language—or any language, for that matter—ever refers in a straightforward manner to that which it claims to be about. Instead, I grow perhaps excessively wary and suspicious, obsess over whether what I have said has been said rightly, wonder whether I have been self-deceived. I find that talking about art is akin to what Pater says about art, in *Plato and Platonism*, as “itself the finite, ever controlling the infinite, the formless” and that I seem to hear with what Robert Louis Stevenson, in his essay “On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature,” calls “the supersensual ear,” listening and always tuning, as it were, my supersensual voice to best arrive at an understanding of what it is I hear (60, 11). Writing has a strange appeal that falsely limits yet enchants because of the definition it provides to thoughts. It provides a kind of estranged, cryptic perspective that distorts the world, reducing its manifold shades into a few flat planes.
I recently read in William James’s *Pragmatism* something that reminded me of Pater’s discussion of “personalities,” indefinite but somehow reflexively known, that I try to capture in my own writing:

Not only Walt Whitman could write "who touches this book touches a man." The books of all the great philosophers are like so many men. Our sense of an essential personal flavor in each one of them, typical but indescribable, is the finest fruit of our own accomplished philosophic education. What the system pretends to be is a picture of the great universe of God. What it is—and oh so flagrantly!—is the revelation of how intensely odd the personal flavor of some fellow creature is. Once reduced to these terms (and all our philosophies get reduced to them in minds made critical by learning) our commerce with the systems reverts to the informal, to the instinctive human reaction of satisfaction or dislike. We grow as peremptory in our rejection or admission, as when a person presents himself as a candidate for our favor; our verdicts are couched in as simple adjectives of praise or dispraise. We measure the total character of the universe as we feel it, against the flavor of the philosophy proffered us, and one word is enough. (21)

James goes on further to write, “Expertness in philosophy is measured by the definiteness of our summarizing reactions, by the immediate perceptive epithet with which the expert hits such complex objects off” (21). I know little of philosophy, but discovered in reading this—as I often do in reading Emerson, a sentiment that Emerson himself so well describes in “Self-Reliance,” when he says that “in every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty”—the thrill of recognizing a fellow traveler of my own attitudes and ideas, as well as thanks in receiving a benediction from a higher sphere for what I considered my own humble thought, as when a character from a mythological scene realizes that the person he has just had occasion to meet, though unremarkable in appearance,
was in fact the temporary form of a god (*Essays: First and Second Series*, 29). In a footnote contained in my chapter on Gautier I had occasion to say something in the same vein, though about the manner in which the critic, over time and through a process of familiarization, comes to view writers as broad personalities:

[Gautier’s] attitude also reflects the demystification of art that a preoccupation with it engenders, perhaps to an equal measure as a reverence for it. The more one reads the more readily assimilable each work of literature becomes, categorized and stored as a kind of perfume in one’s cabinet of memories, ready to be opened again at some later time and to lavish its scent in recollection. But it’s not necessarily all so elevated. The critic becomes a kind of horse-trader, clutching mouths, counting teeth, hanging about where all those creatures are judged, priding themself on evaluative skill, approving certain features of a writer while scorning others, elevating in loving tones an admired writer while irritably casting suspicion upon the worth of another. (39)

The reflexive judgments one makes with a certain turn-of-phrase, with “the immediate perceptive epithet,” come laden with an appreciation of the subtleties of thought and feeling rendered by the work of art, since the utterance could not have been made without the recognition, the consideration of those richly elaborated subtleties, without feeling for oneself, though perhaps less intensely and somehow obliquely, the thoughts and sentiments that motivated their first formulation. Pater writes that for Plato “all knowledge was like knowing a person” (129). I understand Pater as suggesting by this the peculiar aesthetic appeal of any form of knowledge, the mind’s constriction of a rich variety of different phenomena into an abstract idea like “personality” that defines—and by defining enriches in turn—the phenomena from which it derives.
I occasionally like to think of myself, in writing as in reading, a member of what I would call “The Goldilocks” and “The Captain Ahab” schools of criticism. My chief interest is in discovering what I like and do not like. As much as I like some writers for what they do well I nevertheless find complaints in nearly everything, and I become fussy in my appraisal, full of reservations, back-handed compliments, and only a few unqualified encomiums. I thus voice complaints to myself and try to wish away certain aspects until the whole is “just right.” As much as I am in awe of a writer like Pater I cannot but wish that he had more of a storytelling ability, hardly conscious that this addition would necessarily mean a shift of focus in his writings generally, which would perhaps detract from the special appeal they have.

1 My reference to Ahab is meant to draw attention to the scene in *Moby Dick* where, in response to Starbuck’s confusion as to why Ahab should seek vengeance on an animal that only injured him out of instinct, he says, “Hark ye yet again- the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event- in the living act, the undoubted deed- there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike though the mask!... Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (203). Ahab’s ravings, with their mixture of insult, coquetry, and insolence, are conveyed with sufficient inspiration to intoxicate others with his perspective. Under his eye all objects, all words appear like runes and talismans with bewitching evocative power. To some extent I view the content of a work of art as “the unreasoning mask” in this scenario and form and style as together the “unknown but still reasoning thing” which it is the role of the critic to conjure. Here is more or less the same idea put forward by Carlyle in *On Heroes*:

“...That deep sea of azure that swims overhead; the winds sweeping through it; the black cloud fashioning itself together, now pouring out fire, now hail and rain; what is it? Ay, what? At bottom we do not yet know; we can never know at all. It is not by our superior insight that we escape the difficulty; it is by our superior levity, our inattention, our want of insight. It is by not thinking that we cease to wonder at it. Hardened round us, encasing wholly every notion we form, is a wrappage of traditions, hearsays, mere words. We call that fire of the black thunder-cloud ‘electricity,’ and lecture learnedly about it, and grind the like of it out of glass and silk: but what is it? What made it? Whence comes it? Whither goes it? Science has done much for us; but it is a poor science that would hide from us the great deep sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as a mere superficial film. This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical and more, to whosoever will think of it” (7-8, emphases in original)

2 G.K. Chesterton, in an essay on Alexandre Dumas, makes a somewhat similar point in comparing the French writer to Robert Louis Stevenson: “In novels of this kind, novels produced in such immeasurable quantities, of such prodigious length, and marked throughout with its haste of production and dubiety of authorship, it is, indeed, impossible that we should find that particular order of literary merit which marks so much of the work that is now produced and is so much demanded by modern critics; the merit of exact verbal finish and the precision of the mot juste. Stevenson would have lain awake at night wondering whether, in describing the death of a marquis in a duel he should describe a sword as glittering or gleaming, or speak of the stricken man as staggering back or reeling back. Dumas could not, in the nature of things, have troubled his head about such points as that, so long as somebody killed the marquis for him at a moderate figure. All technical gusto, the whole of that abstract lust for words which separates the literary man from the mere thinker, were certain, through the facts of the case, to fade
kind of reaction I sometimes have, I will mention an epithet for Dostoevsky that came to mind as I read *Crime and Punishment* a year ago: “a writer of no talent but of great genius.” Of course, the first part is hyperbolic, but it is meant to stress his apparent weaknesses—his clumsy, slapdash style, his incessant reliance on long-winded dialogue, the almost unfailing manner in which one character enters a scene just as another is leaving, all contributing to the impression of a writerly slapstick. Nevertheless, over these coarser aspects, and even making use of them, one sees a sublime vision in such sharply drawn, keenly felt, and widely differentiated characters. I do not altogether dismiss the influx of snobbery, which left alone only leaves one complacent and curtails the kinds of pleasures available to one, but I find that I can repair it, so that I come to view supposed defects as essential elements of the peculiar pleasures a work of art is able to offer.

I mention this fastidious attitude to my reactions and impressions because this is how I imagine that the particular aspects in any given writer or work of literature that become the focus of my attention first gain emphasis, first develop into perceptible proportions, and only by an acquired reflex do I eliminate reference to my likes and dislikes. As a reader I am just as often peevish as I am reverential. In the latter mood I will look at a more or less common and informal style, such as that which Bellow typically employs, in the following manner (this from my chapter on Bellow):

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more or less out of Dumas” (606). We cannot leap beyond our characters, since they will determine the spot in which we land, and our writings will be determined by the impulses that lead to them. Stevenson, a stylist rather similar to Pater, writes that, of all the arts, “literature alone is condemned to work in mosaic with finite and rigid words” (5). Why “finite” if, after all, there are far fewer keys on a piano, for example, than there are words in the English language? Because, one could say, the preoccupation over the “right” word is exhaustive as one juggles in one’s mind the various possibilities as imposed by a particularly narrow focus. Why “rigid”? Because the obsession over exactness does not allow one to write freely. As the free and easy style has its merits in providing us a wide and expansive view, in moving along a story without drawing attention away from its action, the needling exactness of a style like that of Pater or Stevenson or Gautier has the merit of concentrating our sights onto the pleasures of particular formulations.
…in a work of art a gnostic vision is inescapable. The abandonment of a lofty style does not indicate the abandonment of a vision; it only graces the common, informal style with a peculiar quality that allows it to retrieve types of beauty that a different style would fumble and drop. It argues for the appropriateness of this kind of style, of these kinds of considerations. If most individual sentences are not iridescent, then the accumulation of them in weaving the events and thoughts they describe endows them with their own peculiar gleam, not to be found elsewhere. (138)

While I think this is an accurate statement regarding the peculiar pleasure afforded by this kind of style, especially in light of the way that it gathers to itself a certain aureole in memory, as representative of a particular perspective on the world, often when I read I cannot readily appreciate this distinction, and become overly fastidious, reminding myself of the character in Baudelaire’s “Le Mauvais Vitrier,” who shouts in a rage at the glazier who has brought him only colorless transparent glass rather than the reds and blues, the enchanted windows for which he hoped, “La vie en beau! La vie en beau!” In reading I always hope to find an experience of transcendence, of ready intoxication, and if I read a book for long without being in awe I grow irritable, chastising my poor luck for spending my time on it, often only to find later on that it has nevertheless managed to latently develop sublime proportions that finally reveal themselves to me. Thus if I would at first glance condemn as too casual, insufficiently laden with the riches of poetry, some passage like the following (chosen at random from Herzog): “He had moments of sanity, but he couldn’t maintain the balance for very long. The ferry came, he boarded it, pulling his hat tight in the sea wind, slightly shamefaced because he enjoyed this typical moment of a holiday”--I would, upon reconsideration, and within the context of the narrative in which it is found, view it as an ideal type of the beauty to which it contributes, its flavor sharpened, differentiated by all those other styles with which I have become familiar.
Elaine Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, talks of something like a mimetic impulse that people have when coming into contact with beautiful things. In reading this I find myself somehow surprised to see something that is relatively obvious appear so strange—attended by the quality of “alienated majesty” about which Emerson writes—or to be set so clearly in relief. One looks at a beautiful painting or listens to a beautiful song not once only, but again and again, eagerly anticipating and delighting in encountering anew some choice detail, and soon one may delight in creating the like for oneself, observing various mechanisms and effects.

Not long ago I had the thought, “The ocean, when seen from above, looks like an expanse of blue tiles.” I recognized something of the flavor of a metaphor from Bellow. Without having read him I doubt that something of that flavor would pass across my thoughts, since the appreciation of it in one form likely allows for its return in a different one. At the same time I remembered the only occasion on which this impression must have seemed true to me: when, as a child, eager to make an exhibition of my daring, I pleaded to be allowed to parasail and, with this permission granted, as I was dragged in the air, I marveled at the shifting tiles on the ocean surface. In thinking of this experience I also recognized the form in which memories appear in Bellow’s novels—abruptly, without prelude, as flashes intermingled among the present—as well as something of the flavor of many of them, how they appear under the banner of what I call in that chapter a “somewhat consciously inelegant perplexity.” I suddenly felt my nearest connection to what I would call the music, the caged sentiment of his novels.

What is the value of finding this kind of relationship between one’s own thoughts and those of a writer one has happened to have read? I answer this question in terms of what Pater

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3 To say that this was the exact formulation is somewhat disingenuous. Rather, some emergently verbal scraps of thought arrived that I noticed, followed by my noticing their likeness to the character of many of Bellow’s metaphors.
views as an aesthetic education—the appropriation of instincts that allow for a kind of varied and subtly differentiating, concentrated vision that sweetens experience, makes it more assimilable and memorable. Certain thoughts attain a more definite character and seem inspired, not because they appear to have a likeness to those of a famous writer, but rather because they arrest one’s gaze and allow one to notice the peculiar quality with which they arrive. They arrive in everyday experience with the quality of art already emergent, and the recognition of this quality only further refines the quality of revelation. This is, in any case, how I read Pater when he writes the following of Plato’s philosophy, in which he describes it as an unwitting attempt to sweeten experience:

By its juxtaposition and co-ordination with what is ever more and more not it, by the contrast of its very imperfection, at this point or that, with its own proper and perfect type, this concrete and particular thing has, in fact, been enriched by the whole colour and expression of the whole circumjacent world, concentrated upon, or as it were at focus in, it. By a kind of short-hand now, and as if in a single moment of vision, all that, which only a long experience, moving patiently from part to part, could exhaust, its manifold alliance with the entire world of nature, is legible upon it, as it lies there in one’s hand…Generalisation, whatever Platonists, or Plato himself at mistaken moments, may have to say about it, is a method, not of obliterating the concrete phenomenon, but of enriching it, with the joint perspective, the significance, the expressiveness, of all other things beside…He not only sees but understands (thereby only seeing the more) and will, therefore, also remember. (158-159)

In talking of the Lacedaemonians as “gaining strength and intensity by repression,” whose taciturnity and discipline come from a desire that “[they themselves] may be a perfect work of art, issuing thus into the eyes of all Greece,” Pater, apart from speculating upon the reasons for Plato’s admiration for Sparta, seems equally to describe art generally, and his own style
particularly, which becomes enriched by this apparently oblique description (222, 232). The Lacedaemonians, apparently so austere, cultivate an intense self-consciousness, a second sight that monitors the effects and appeal of each of their actions. The idea of repression is already contained in Pater’s formulation of art as “being itself the finite, ever controlling the infinite, the formless” (60). In talking of the dialectic as “co-extensive with life—a part of the continuous company we keep with ourselves through life ” and in his description of Plato as “a seer who has a sort of sensuous love of the unseen,” Pater seems to further talk of the activity of writing itself (185, 143). In writing one savors again what one has seen. One chooses, measures, considers the effect of one word or phrase against another, comparing against some ideal held in the mind, which itself appears to become the more defined the more one chooses rightly, according to the standard of taste that continually develops within oneself, and the various impressions left by one’s writing (or by any artistic activity) will enrich further one’s ability to perceive, recognize, and appreciate various aspects of experience.

I am happiest with my own writing when I appear to myself to capture what I privately call the sylphs, the will-o’-the-wisps of a style or perspective. I think I do so in the following passage where, talking about, in Ravelstein, Chick’s response to the question of what death will be like—”The pictures will stop”—, I say the following:

The casual manner of speaking here conveys the felt sufficiency of the explanation. In this way the style mirrors what the narrator says about the surface of things communicating the heart of things. We see a childlike expression—”the pictures will stop”—yet one readily understood, without much need for elaboration, which would only diminish its effect. It is knowingly hackneyed and mawkish, as if it were lifted from a bad Hollywood movie, but there is no contempt or criticism for these qualities. Instead, they are presented sincerely, even as though they have special claims to sincerity, as if the commonplace
expressed best and most sharply those ideas before which we all become childish, helpless, and sad, those ideas the importance and understanding of which are unchanged from the period of childhood. This passage is ambivalent towards art because it seemingly undermines the fineness and authority of poetry while lauding the value and richness of sense-experience. Nevertheless, in choosing to use a somewhat hackneyed manner of expression, the writer makes use of a certain artistic dexterity in framing the ineloquent phrase, thereby, paradoxically, making it poetical. (139-140)

These are things which are reflexively understood while reading, while one briefly inhabits the perspective of the work of art, but the self-estrangement of oneself from that perspective, to the point that its fleeting boundaries could be defined, is only accomplished with the greatest difficulty. The difficulty is in occupying the perspective, holding it in one’s mind, while simultaneously looking from outside onto it, so that one may recognize its texture, redescribe and convey its iridescence. It appears as a kind of recognition of what is already known, because it is keenly felt while one reads, but appearing in relief now, in an orderly, deliberately arranged manner, allows for the revival of the infinite, formless impression in a more distinct and concrete form.

I provide readings of writers that situate their styles among familiar manners of perception. By this I mean to say that a work of art merely sets in relief a manner of perception and feeling that is already the province of everyone, although it has to be cleaved from the raw material by the artist in order to be seen as such. Otherwise, it is overlooked, even if it forms the conditions through which we look and experience at all. I understand myself as following—if not deliberately, yet in spirit—what Emerson says in “History” in regard to the easy grasp of what is seemingly beyond reach, the commonness, the shared quality of what is seemingly elevated:
It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings. Universal history, the poets, the romancers, do not in their stateliest pictures—in the sacerdotal, the imperial palaces, in the triumphs of will or of genius—anywhere lose our ear, anywhere make us feel that we intrude, that this is for better men; but rather is it true, that in their grandest strokes we feel most at home. All that Shakspeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself. *(Essays: First and Second Series, 8-9)*

It is true that Shakespeare does not overly concern himself with the handling of the affairs of state or with an enumeration of territories belonging to his sovereigns, but it is also likely that even kings would find these alternatives more tedious than his plays such as they are. Reading this I am reminded of Tolstoy’s criticism of *King Lear*, in which he condemns as preposterous Lear’s credulity in the circumstances around his abdication. Nobody could believe, he claims, that someone would fall for the vulgar flattery of Regan and Goneril without any regard for the past behavior of the three daughters. The implausibility of the events is supposedly a gross failure, preventing people from seeing something of their own lives in the play. I prefer to look at the implausibility of the events as necessary to tune the lamentation at the outset to a higher pitch. To mistake such a transparent exhibition of imprudence as a proof of vigilance provides from the outset a sense of catastrophe that will only deepen. The suspicion that seeks alleviation finds it in a villain. The most wary, if the most desperate, is the most likely dupe of charlatans and soothsayers. It becomes a world of “madness maddened,” as Captain Ahab says of himself, where roles are inverted and everything careens toward disaster. This crazed vision, presented in such a controlled manner, the reader feels helpless to mollify, and the reader may better appreciate this sentiment out in the “real world” after having observed its iridescence when caged.
As another examples of how I contextualize the style and perspective of a writer or work of literature within the context of ordinary life and perception I include here a brief discussion of Robbe-Grillet that I include in a digressive footnote in my chapter on Proust:

The level of detail and the coldness of tone with which Robbe-Grillet describes objects seem, at first glance, unaccountably extravagant, but these in fact reflect the manner in which the details in the perceptions of the objects we perpetually orbit accrue to us. Robbe-Grillet passes over minute details over and over again and, by doing so, describes the labyrinth of images and actions that comprise much of life, as dictated by routine, in which orderings of before and after are largely beside the point because the same little fragments occur thousands of times and our definitely located temporal selves are lost among them. He does not always present his descriptions of objects as having come from routine observation, but this is how we reconcile their apparent insignificance with the level of detail attached to them. We recognize all the subtleties in things we have seen countless times from a glance. They appear much clearer to us, and indeed provide us with our ideas of definition, and these are often objects that play a role in routines, shutting us up in a maze of perceptions, actions, and expectations that define much of life. They serve as the cages of one’s vagrant thoughts. We see the same bed, the same threads that compose it, the same sink, turn on the same faucet, with the same curved handle, etc. These are details which a “realist” writer may note here and there but the state in which they compose one’s ever-repeating and ever-revolving perceptions is lost entirely in the work of the “realist” writer. As a realist writer filters out these details, or only mentions them in order to establish a certain predictable environment in which characters interact, so Robbe-Grillet filters out character from the world of routine perception and observation, the growing definition and familiarity with objects, in which time hardens the bindings of our thoughts.

Imagine, for example, four golden tassels hanging from the four corners of a pillow, each below the binding diffusing into innumerable fine threads, and
above, brought together into firm winding chords. It is a proclivity of idleness to absorb oneself in such trivial details, pressing the threads together, pulling a few apart, observing the play of light, studying the texture of now one part and now another. Such careful and also careless observations, from which the slightest call to action will deliver us, comprise a much greater part of our lives than do the great acts of life, those to which in memory we direct the flow of our emotions, and are perhaps no less important in characterizing us, even if they often lack emphasis in our memories and in the narratives we read and construct for ourselves.(110)⁴

I sought here to describe how Robbe-Grillet allows us to recognize in the recurrence of our perceptions of familiar objects something like the quality of a fugue. One sees the same chair, day after day. Its image, without one’s noticing, becomes ever more defined in one’s mind, seen from countless perspectives. Even when it is not the recipient of rapt attention but merely an object of habitual use it insinuates itself, makes room for itself in memory, haunts one. Definition

⁴ I use this example because it is illustrative of the kind of qualitative description that I would hope to apply to more writers. I talk of Robbe-Grillet because I think I have grasped better than in other writers the peculiar appeal of his style. When thinking again of this passage I have written I am reminded of a line from Beckett’s novel *Malone Dies*: “I see a stick on the floor, not far from the bed. That is to say I see part of it, as of all one sees” (248). There is a fateful partiality to any perception or thought. Everything is seen only partly, and we superimpose countless images in our memories of familiar objects to arrive at the ideas we have of them. Consider the following: I see a chair, day after day. I approach it from one angle and another, never the exact same one but of all the countless ways many are nearly identical. I sit in it, sometimes loom over it. When doing something else it does not escape my observation, even if it is not a focus of my attention, even if it merely becomes a kind of blurred color in the background of my current focus. Of course, the rest it provides my legs and the slight pressure it applies to my back when I sit in it are not lost on me, although it is generally visual perceptions that occupy Robbe-Grillet. Periodically I seem to re-encounter it, where it is again the brief object of my attention, where I again notice the texture of its threads, or the pattern of grain on the wood, the play of light on its gloss. When I am in a different room, this difference is in part characterized by the lack of this chair. Sometimes it changes position, situated among other familiar objects slightly differently. All the while it gains definition in my thoughts, restricts and defines my orientation to it, mostly latent, since the consideration of it in this manner is an obvious distortion and not at all reflective of its customary admission into my thoughts. I view Robbe-Grillet as removing the typically privileged, also partial, ordering consciousness, the consciousness that reflexively and almost complacently directs itself one way and another, contextualizes itself among certain endeavors, people, ideas, and instead sets in relief the progressive definition of our perceptions of objects, those perceptions we typically overlook in our eager attendance to worldly matters, the manner in which our time among them is an infinite variation on a theme, a maze in which the distinction between ourselves (we who are a cacophony of perceptions) and those things which we perceive seem to dissolve.
involves the incessant superimposition of perceptions, the application of the familiar upon the familiar so that it becomes ever better known.

This is again a case of something that is already latently known to everybody, but it requires the second sight of the artist—in this case Robbe-Grillet—to set it in relief so that it may be recognized and appreciated. The presentation in a deliberate form, in language, of a manner of perception which is by its nature non-verbal, sets in relief what otherwise would continue to be overlooked in our ordinary perceptions. To each style there is an excessive peculiarity that we at first scarcely notice—so credulous are we that we sink into it as if it were our natural state of thought—and which we perceive with greater clarity the more it is defined in time, the more familiar it becomes to us. A kind of fatalism attaches to the vision. We likewise set its partiality in relief by defining it in language—an exercise, as we learn from Pater, of reacting, appraising, reflecting, and forming, an exercise that betrays its own partiality.

Of the writers I discuss, Gautier is the most difficult to recontextualize within ordinary life. I do not mean this in regard to the plots of his stories, which typically begin and end in its confines. Instead, I refer to the perspective that his style betrays. Like Pater’s style, and less like that of Proust or Bellow, it exhibits a kind of rigidity in the formal representation of its minute observations. One sees what I call a “preening virtuosity” in the apparent spontaneity and sharpness of the observations, but unlike in Pater, one does not see the considering judgment, the sense of appraisal, and the search for the well-balanced phrase. He would have us believe that he is a kind of seer who sees the invisible just as readily and with as much detail as anyone sees the visible—indeed more readily and in more detail, because he spontaneously recognizes, not only sees, and this with an air of ease. However, the reader rather insists that he hides his tracks and leaves only what has been deposited by his sense of the sublime. In the easy self-assurance we
recognize a strange artificiality, a feigned naturalness of manner, and the elimination of the critical judgment that appears in Pater’s style. The sense of ordinary life that is repressed from the style finds its way into the plots as the vague banalizing force from which his protagonists seek deliverance.

In my chapter on Bellow I perhaps write with the greatest clarity and I set what I find in his novels among the widest variety of ideas. In other words, I am able to examine matters with a measure of distance, which I do not find myself doing so much in my other chapters. In a certain sense, what I want to say in my chapter on Proust I feel confident is the most worthwhile, but when I look at much of what I have written I find myself still struggling to say it. It is still a matter of occasional flashes of awareness of something that I struggle to present coherently.

This difference in presentation also reflects the differences in style between the writers. Bellow is the only writer of the ones I examine who writes of ideas with relative clarity and fluency, which is to say with a kind of synoptic brevity and easy manner. This not only reflects the 20th century development of specialized approaches to areas of knowledge with which he, more than, for example, Gautier, would be familiar—with a certain canon of texts in sociology or psychology—but also the manner in which this wider reading fosters a kind of suspicion of poetic language as not peculiarly suitable to discovery of truth. For all the desperation, self-pity, and hysterical doubting of his characters, Bellow’s style is far more sober than that of either Gautier, Pater, or Proust, and it is this style that reflects his ambivalence toward art most. It is a style in which ideas could be conveyed more or less intact.

On the other hand, the other writers I focus on are more or less always intoxicated by their own poetical perspectives, outside of which they cannot see with great clarity. This is perhaps a surprising thing to say in regard to Pater, more so than either Gautier or Proust, for he,
after all, is best remembered as a critic, and wrote essays on various writers and artists, together with a book on Plato. However, in these writings, as much as in his fiction, one cannot help but see, above all, the traces in his style of his painstaking effort to match what is said to the nonverbal sense he attempts to fix in his mind. Thus one reads the constant emendations, the pauses, the channels to related thoughts, the modifying clauses as efforts to restrict, to keep in place, to form for oneself clearly in one’s own mind, the idea that is at every moment diffusing and breaking apart. Language plays the role of fixing and defining, moment by moment, the nonverbal sense, the peculiar mental flavor that is simultaneously inspiring and modifying the language used. I read *Plato and Platonism*, with Pater’s talk of the centrifugal and centripetal, with his talk of Plato as a kind of aesthete in spite of himself, as an effort, above all, to define his own approach to art. While one sees the exhibition of a vision in Gautier, a proud demonstration of that sight, one sees an effort to define and describe the faculty and mode of a vision in Pater.

In my chapter on Bellow I make reference to the idea that success in his novels is formulated as something like a “dexterous management of affairs” in which one insinuates oneself into the “practical concerns of the mass of humanity.” One sees this as a doubt about whether one could read a level of alienation into Gautier’s protagonists, with their apparent, though vague, resentment towards the society in which they live (for its Christian prudishness, for its lack of a sense of the sublime), as well as their seeming isolation, but this is all by way of hazy implication. This involves some management of affairs and concerns, ostensibly—even if in the form of a kind of indirect condemnation—, the mass of humanity, but it would be more accurate to say that consideration in these terms does not take place in Gautier’s stories. For instance, the possibility that the protagonists may be mismanaging their affairs never occurs, largely because there appear to be no affairs to manage, with the exception of the possession of
whichever beautiful woman happens to be the central idol of the story. The concerns which one might call “real-life concerns” never appear, nor do the broader forces that influence them. Instead, one gets an idea of art as corresponding to a kind of transfixed gaze that creates what it sees, but only sees. In addition to this, one also recognizes the value placed on a light and spontaneous wit, a posture of easy grace.

Does the “dexterous management of affairs” or “the practical concerns of the mass of humanity” appear in Proust? One certainly sees an idea of routine life in Proust, with the narrator’s after-school visits to the Champs-Élysée, and later his regular attendance at certain salons, and this all implies the management of relationships, as well as the continual maintenance or else rupture of routine. On the other hand, the narrator plays little part in such conversations as are recorded in the novel and in most of the social interactions depicted he seems more like a disembodied spirit who is watching and recording what occurs than an active participant.

Meanwhile, as far as a management of affairs goes, Proust’s narrator never considers following his father into a career in diplomacy, nor his friend Saint-Loup into the military. In fact, he never seriously considers any line of work besides his occasional wondering whether he has the talent to be a writer. The terms in which he understands the world are never challenged by a difference in setting or by different preoccupations. Rather, even when he records the lecture of the historian Brichot on aristocratic names and place-names at the Verdurins’ rented home, or when he records Saint-Loup’s discussions with him of military strategy, his interest in these topics is principally aesthetic, which is to say that he becomes fascinated by what appears to him to be the beauty in the rich complexity and elaborate development of these topics. At a different point he registers some quotes from a maid who has playfully teased him for his own meditations on her unselfconscious poetic gifts.
Even when the Dreyfus Affair becomes a relatively significant part of the novel, in the third volume, it is almost entirely covered as a matter that stimulates gossip—interest in who is a Dreyfusard or an anti-Dreyfusard, how the trial impacts whose houses are fashionable to visit, etc. One may attribute to this depiction a certain criticism of fashionable society as full of frivolous posturing (so much do the opinions we see depend upon who is listening), in line with the condemnation of it as a drain on artistic development, but this is still far from treating it as a historically significant event that reveals or changes aspects of French culture and society.

Likewise, although people of great influence and power are seen by the narrator throughout the novel, gathered from the political elite, the aristocracy, and the ascendant bourgeoisie, the roles of these figures in shaping domestic and world affairs is almost entirely ignored, and they are instead marveled at for their titles of “Duchesse” or “Prime Minister” and become, again, the mere subjects of gossip.

This is all to say that the narrator is too much of an inveterate navel-gazer for ideas to retain anything like their broadly acknowledged proportions and definitions after they pass through him. That with which he comes into contact becomes distended, elaborated upon, developed through a range of highly idiosyncratic associations, and ceases to retain its public meaning.

This is a function of Proust’s style, since the style recalls the freely associative, pleasantly withheld and playful state of daydream. This aspect of the style gains relief at the conclusion of the novel where we see the narrator experience his series of epiphanies on the passage of time, in which he discovers that he is an artist and where he takes up the task of resurrecting his past. The past appears as an aesthetic phenomenon, in which our various narratives, our sense of structure and our ideas of persons, places, etc., are found, and the self appears as a kind of reflexive
generation of these associations, extending from the present to the past in which it wanders. Disinterested reflection of the sort that Proust imitates in his style provides the mode in which the past appears as an aesthetic unity—the paradigmatic case of an aesthetic whole—since in the past one sees all the channels of one’s sentiments, the monumentalized figures, the constitutive elements of one’s life that determine the shape and style of any given work of art. In the series of epiphanies at the end of the novel the narrator sees clearly his vital connection to the past, which now appears as a work of art laid ready, almost, before him.

It is in this sense that I see Proust at his most democratic, his least snobbish and exclusive. The disinterested wandering thought of daydream is hardly more familiar to a duchess fanning herself in a drawing room than to a menial laborer performing routine work, even if Proust depicts the latter more often than the former, and even if he is hardly concerned with the social and historical circumstances in which the wealth of one may be said to depend upon the penury of the other. Likewise, the past will appear to each in such reflective moods as a sublime aesthetic phenomenon, as rich as any masterpiece, with a reflexive knowledge of the various enchantments of character and event. It is merely Proust’s accomplishment to recognize memory as representative of aesthetic perception generally, and to set the manner in which we privately remember, along with this discovery itself, in relief.

It is this point about the past appearing as a rich aesthetic phenomenon that I seek to develop in my chapter on Proust, beginning with what might be considered the entirely commonplace character of the narrator’s revelation at the end of the novel that the past is past. Only through a kind of jolt from our customary manner of perception can we see what he takes to be the revelatory nature of this commonplace, and the revelation lies in what Roger Shattuck calls Proust’s effort “to make us see time,” which I take to mean his depiction of things as both
composites of momentary associations and as monumentalized forces that coordinate our thoughts, desires, identities. He thus unites a kind of proximity towards things and a distance from them, a mode of thought seen in style and content which unites multiple temporal perspectives.

I enact this strange play of perspectives somewhat through my own short digressive play with perspective, so this chapter is perhaps made less clear for that. However, I mean to demonstrate that the character of revelation is dependent on a manner of perspective, a kind of enacted gnostic vision that perceives the sublime aspect of things.

One could say that any perception or experience that sufficiently moves us arrives with a certain latent representative aspect, allegorical and cryptic, owing to the scattered associations it admits into its orbit, all woven together by an unaccountably resourceful and nimble power. The experience itself arrives, in spite of whatever immediate pleasure it affords, with a kind of thick hide that prevents the tasting of its choicest morsels, since it has not yet become defined by the associations and the period in which it must be framed, however much and in what number they are already laboring and swarming in its center. Only after its passage do these associations, which now wreath the thought with the grace that was present in its initial perception, though which we were only half aware of, show themselves forth, summoned by the easy reflective mood before which they willingly disport.

This transfiguration of experience by a kind of unwitting power that defines and concretizes its representative function is how I view Proust as representing the passage of time. Registering the color of Odette’s dress or parasol, for example, one could do by merely throwing a look at her in the present, and the framing of her by Swann and some other attendants, together with the ribbons of her costume that flap around in the wind is a sign of a more distinguishing
eye, one that savor{s} the particular details of the moment. The presentation of Odette’s customary walks in narrative form, with the renewed interest applied to those details that are summoned, in their definition through the associations they now acquire with a rich abundance, reflects the representative aspect which she gains in memory. Thus the particular style and the form of narrative serve to show time, and the particular kind of narrative, with its particular style allows Proust to set in relief time and present the past as the paradigmatic case of aesthetic phenomena, even as the source of form and style. How much undivined abundance, subtlety, and variation resides there, and yet animates our wills in the present. How much affects our character before it is admitted to our conscious reflection.

This talk of a kind of latent knowledge and its later recognition through the application of a different manner of observation, only made possible through a long process of absorption, and now made perceptible through the adroit and unselfconscious marshaling of associations, is how I approach criticism itself, not deliberately, but in a manner that I am now able to recognize as somehow instinctive with myself. In reading I am borne along by the easy enjoyment of the activity, the intoxication of some new perspective, and at some distance from a removal of this perspective, by some accident of circumstances that suggest something to me of the style or form of the story, or through the penetration into my thoughts of some scrap that suddenly seems essential, I am able, for the brief moment in which the mood lasts, to provide a coherent account of how I view the story as representative of some attitude or aspect of existence.
Chapter 2 Gautier’s Artificial Daydreams and Ambivalence

And you tell me, friends, that there is to be no dispute about taste and tasting? But all life is a dispute about taste and tasting!
Taste: that is weight and at the same time scales and weigher; and ah for every living thing that would live without any dispute about weight and scales and weigher!

-Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world’s not.

-A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*

2.1 Introduction

In the Goncourt Brothers’ novel *Charles Demailly* the character of Masson, who, according to Arthur Symons, is based on Théophile Gautier, says to another character,

I put on the table the paper, the pens, the ink, all the instruments of torture, and how it bores me! It has always bored me to write, and then it is so useless! Well, I write like that, deliberately, like a notary public I do not go fast, but I am always going, for, you see, I don’t search for the best. An article, a page, is like a child: either it is or it is not. I never think about what I am going to write. I take my pen and write. I am a man of letters: I ought to know my trade. Here is the paper before me; I am like the clown on his spring-board... And then I have a syntax very well in order in my head; I throw my phrases into the air... like cats! I am sure they will fall on their feet. It is quite simple: you only need to have a good syntax…. (From: Symons, *A Study of Walter Pater*, 102)
This witty speech, if not made by Gautier himself, nevertheless retains his gleeful arrogance, and, in a way, distills his attitude towards art.\(^5\) From the champion of “art for art’s sake,” a loose movement that seeks disassociation of art from worldly concerns, one might have expected a rather more lofty description of the artist than that of a mere master-grammarian, and yet rather than a mystical vision of the central role of art in the world, we instead see a deflationary view of the artist as someone who simply has a knack for something.\(^6\) And yet this description is also not without irony, since the self-congratulation of Masson here, spoken of in such plain terms, works to elevate the writer all the more, and the ordinary formal principal of “syntax” seems all the stranger in this rude aspect when it nevertheless evades easy capture for others. If not wont to speak of the artist in sublime terms, as a subject with a sacred mission, or as one in communion with a celestial realm, Masson nevertheless relies upon the wonder to which art moves people, its place in society as an esteemed, at times revered and exalted endeavor, in order to emphasize his separation from ordinary ambitious people, for it is a sign here of the master not to be overwhelmed by his productions and by his impulses, but to marshall them accordingly, so that it becomes a distinction to treat as common and perfunctory what others view with awe. Indeed, while apparently speaking of his ability in such a cavalier manner, as of a trade like that of carpenter or an accountant, he nevertheless manages to surprise with his seeming admission that he is incapable of writing poorly.

\(^5\) I am writing of what one might call the idealized personality derived from the self-conscious wit of Gautier’s stories, not so much the historical person of Gautier, who, though he fought in the “Battle of Hernani” and wrote strong attacks on journalists, was just as often full of self-deprecation.

\(^6\) This attitude also reflects the demystification of art that a preoccupation with it engenders, perhaps to an equal measure as a reverence for it. The more one reads the more readily assimilable each work of literature becomes, categorized and stored as a kind of perfume in one’s cabinet of memories, ready to be opened again at some later time and to lavish its scent in recollection. But it’s not necessarily all so elevated. The critic becomes a kind of horse-trader, clutching mouths, counting teeth, hanging about where all those creatures are judged, priding themself on evaluative skill, approving certain features of a writer while scorning others, elevating in loving tones an admired writer while irritably casting suspicion upon the worth of another.
Masson pauses after he says that he throws his phrases into the air, and then quickly finishes with the metaphor of cats; his conversation serves as an example of his professed writing technique, his reliance on his wit to find the right words, the right expression. The character of Masson points to a capacity for improvisation, the spontaneous rendering of whatever comes to mind into fine terms, a light and unlabored wit. The explanation of his talent serves also as a demonstration of it, and this is precisely the point. The artist distinguishes herself by remaining aloof of the real content of the debate, unruffled by demands for seriousness. The content of the speech of the artist is not composed of learned jargon, transparent language, but of offhand comments assembled with lightning wit. It involves speaking in multiple registers, framing and reframing one’s own speech and the contents of the speech of the interlocutor, addressing different audiences, an exhaustion of one’s sense of irony.

It would seem that good syntax would be something fairly easy to mimic and would seem also to remove spontaneity and creativity from art. Once the proper syntax is in hand, one need only slot some words into the correct form. Of course, this is not the case, and there is as much truth in the actual content of the speech as in the posture taken, enacting the role of the witty commentator, suggesting that art is equivalent with a kind of spontaneous irony, an immediate witty summation of a situation.

We see a similar irony throughout the preface of Mademoiselle de Maupin, and the preening, self-conscious virtuosity overruns Gautier’s short stories as well. In the preface of Mademoiselle de Maupin Gautier does not give a very clear definition of art nor its role in the world; instead, he mostly mocks the journalists who demand moral instruction in novels or
poetry and who would censure writers that include “immoral” scenes in their works. He never engages the critics seriously, and is only concerned with making them seem ridiculous.

When Gautier suggests that, of course, art is superfluous, as superfluous as everything else in life but one’s little bit of bread and water and a small shelter of the size of a coffin, he answers the question of the role of art in the world in a manner similar to Masson, the character for whom he serves as a model. He is sincere in his assertion that art merely provides pleasure, but even this perhaps becomes an exaggeration when compared to all that in this situation likewise becomes mere adornment. Art, from a certain perspective, is mere pleasure, if one is to accept that living in anything larger than a coffin is also a sign of decadence; in other words, it is a necessity. Gautier engages the topic as much as he performs a metadiscursive attack on it. Art, it is implied, is not concerned with exposition, consideration, and argumentation, but with the fruits of humor and wit: ridicule, exaggeration, caricature, perspectival shifts. Of course, when Gautier says this he is not merely addressing the concerns of critics; he is framing the critics, subordinating them to his description of them. This is not to say that had the critics been more clever in their reviews, more perceptive in their judgments, shrewder in their arguments, that Gautier would engage them using transparent declarative statements that would address dispassionately and with analytic rigor the points they had made. The style he uses, the verbal dexterity and the psychological nimbleness, functions as a kind of assertion of the right way to approach topics like art. Since the object is so complex and ultimately affective in a variety of

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7 In her article, “Pure Art, Pure Desire: Changing Definitions of ‘l’art pour l’art’ from Kant to Gautier,” Marguerite Murphy traces the generational changes that occurred in the idea of “art for art’s sake.” While Victor Cousin, who first popularized the term, argued that the pursuit of art for its own sake contributed to a more general attainment of a social good, its ostensible disinterestedness when applied actually playing a role in enriching the morality of a society, Gautier’s focus is on repudiating journalists rather than Cousin. No social good is mentioned with Gautier; the emphasis falls on the singularity of the artist. Murphy draws some attention to the sexual role in which Gautier casts the figure of the artist with the Muse, and his description of the journalist as an envious eunuch. The specific details of the debates and the various rhetorical maneuvers of Gautier I believe could be subsumed under the general effort to convey a lightness, ease of manner, untroubled yet dangerous virtuosity that signify the vision of the artist.
ways, one must remain aloof from transparency, aware of the multiplicity of ideas and sentiments among which it is possible to settle. It is a debate about values, but not about values insofar as they can be understood through reason, but insofar as they appeal with a sense of immediacy to the mind. If they have a positive appeal, then they will be celebrated, heralded; if not, then they will be ridiculed. All of this involves the discernment of either a lack of taste or a lionizing and exhibition of taste. Like Richard Rorty’s ironist, Gautier dispenses with what is true for what is interesting and refuses to engage with someone on the territory of a final vocabulary, but engages in the activity of redescribing in his own terms, reframing as something else.\(^8\)

Art, spoken of casually, unconcerned, as an exercise by the master Masson, nevertheless adopts the hues of sublimity--like Jove twining thunderbolts--and we take the affection of ease as yet another demonstration of aloofness and wit. This wit, perhaps typical of wit generally, is within the context of ordinary concerns, ordinary conversation. We see Gautier in the preface of _Mademoiselle de Maupin_ exercising this wit, framing his critics, speaking of art in one way that rather strongly implies another way--unserious, sarcastic, preening, triumphant.

In order to clarify the above and to connect it with the plots and the style of the stories I will discuss I will take some time to describe what might be called the personality of Gautier as I

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\(^8\) Following upon this idea, and connecting it with some thoughts of Elaine Scarry and Martha Nussbaum, one could say that our emotional responses could be redescribed as matters of taste for things in the world. Elaine Scarry, in _On Beauty and Being Just_, writes of the immediacy with which we think of a change in our opinions on some work of art: “A correction in perception takes place as an abrasive crash.” I take it that it’s this kind of playing with the spontaneity of people’s responses that interests Gautier. In ironizing something he occupies the role of a guide to “correct” perception. Martha Nussbaum, in _Upheavals of Thought_, defends a theory of the emotions as sources of intelligence, tied to our views about what matters, where we are and where we are headed. The skillful artist, in this view, attracts us to certain objects, values, ways of perceiving, and undermines others, through the immediacy of the well-executed turn-of-phrase, comments indirectly, ironically on matters. Through the artist’s seemingly adroit navigation through issues that people struggle to articulate, the confident elevation and devaluing of one thing and another, the reader is held captive, transfixed by the spontaneously enacted reorientation unfolding before him or her, an enactment with unusual persuasive power since it plays upon emotions, values being made sensuous.
see it in his defense of his own works. It will perhaps not be too controversial to admit that art involves the conscious assembly of various strokes of wit for which the artist has some idea of the impressions likely to be created, at least among contemporaries. The effect of this well-ordered whole for the reader or the viewer is the savoring of each stroke of wit in relation to the rest and to the whole (how one bit takes on a different hue in relation to what comes before or after), the attempted retracing of the route that led to one or another decision that had the effect of creating one or another impression. The position that Gautier occupies in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is as much a defense of the kind of writing he produces as it is the bold claim of a position, a very polemical position that he adopts, from which he asserts his ability to redescribe others. The adoption of the polemical position allows him the opportunity to assert himself by taking on the task of subordinating his critics to his perspective, redescribing them from a position in which reason would not sufficiently answer his charges, in which he asserts the primacy of irony as the proper tool of expression.

The Goncourt brothers cast Gautier as a bit-part in their novel. Indeed, for the author of *Émaux et Camées*, it is altogether appropriate that he be half-emergent, seen only indirectly and as if in profile, in the manner of a cameo. Limited to this exchange there is as much caricature and ridicule as there is appreciation, and even impudent self-congratulation at having come up with something not just that Gautier would say, but also something worthy of Gautier. To put something in the mouth of a master asserts the declaration of some mastery on their own part, and, in this case, this move of witty redescription, ironic reframing is what catches Gautier’s spirit most.\(^9\)

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9 Henry James writes, in *French Poets and Novelists*, published six years after Gautier’s death, “But if there are sermons in stones, there are profitable reflections to be made even on Théophile Gautier; notably this one—that a man’s supreme use in the world is to master his intellectual instrument and play it to perfection” (41). This points to the self-assurance and pride that Gautier takes in his virtuosity, his self-creation through art. James, while heaping
2.2 Allegories of Epiphanic Impermanence

I have mentioned Gautier's “preening, self-conscious virtuosity,” the nature of which is mimicked in the Goncourt brothers’ novel, in Masson’s boast and demonstration of his improvisational genius. This virtuosity is not merely confined to the fine descriptions in Gautier’s stories, but to the plots of the stories themselves, each more or less exactly like the rest, and in that way developing in a highly self-referential manner the idea of these descriptions, these stories as variations on a theme. With the accomplishment of each variation, a sense of audacity grows, owing to the repetition of an idea in new forms. It is a kind of invention through play of a series of synonyms for a complicated idea, one of the results of which is to indicate the writer as this masterful generator of synonyms. Gautier has a keen possession of the sensual perception of ideas. The idea of decadence—which will broadly suffice now to describe his mode of writing—does not occur but with a flurry of minute circumstances, dexterously arranged, that represent that idea. Ideas are saturated with the possibilities of their representation. A sense of mastery is conveyed by the adroit handling of style and form to convey again and again the same kind of plot, the same kinds of descriptions. The descriptions are marked by a fastidious,

10 Léon Breunig, in his essay on Gautier in the volume European Writers: The Romantic Century, writes, “Three factors in particular, either separately or by their convergence, make for the distinctiveness of Gautier’s style in both his prose and his verse: his self-consciousness as an author, his addiction to allusiveness, and the plethora of his ‘transpositions d’art’ (1037). Breunig also draws attention to Gautier’s meticulous descriptions. I would add the comment to this list that the second and third factors that Breunig point out reinforce the first. The abundance of
obsessive, fetishizing perspective, closely scanning and exalting the richness and beauty of objects. The plots of these stories, as we will see, broadly concern, in a rather sardonic and rueful manner, the brevity of beauty’s deliverances, often taking the forms of sexual frustration and domination.

To return briefly and for the last time to the character of Masson, whom I will take, for the sake of bringing into relief a rather striking fact regarding Gautier, to utter the thoughts of Gautier himself, since they retain in their poetry a kind of composite truth of that poet’s outlook: for the attribution of talent to a mundane principle like syntax, for the remarkable invention and control he exhibits in his prose, fully meriting his complacence, for the kind of lofty self-assessment the reader gleans from the writer’s variety in repetition, Gautier nevertheless seems to demand very particular scenes and objects for his art, and does not allow it to elevate ordinary scenes. There is a kind of doubling of style and content in Gautier’s stories, where the richness and daintiness of the descriptions matches the richness and daintiness of the material described. Rather than seeking to transform what is ordinary into what is beautiful, and thereby startle with his brilliance, he rather seeks to articulate what is already visually appealing. Indeed, rather than receiving a picture of the poet beautifying the mundane world around him through his remarkable powers of creative perception, rather than the poet universalizing beauty, we instead see a sharp demarcation between what is beautiful and what is not in Gautier’s judgment. We could note a degree of self-reliance in Gautier in regard to his self-assessment, not in moral terms

=allusions are similar to the enumeration of gems and materials, obscure vocabulary for dainty architectural details; they play the role of drawing attention to the expertise of the narrator, the writer, the consummate taste. Likewise, the “transpitions d’art” draw attention to the virtuosity of the writer. These features of Gautier’s style, I think, suggest the kind of literary personality I am attributing to Gautier.

11 This is certainly true of Gautier’s earlier stories, but cannot be said of some of his later work. The marvelous several pages-long opening description of the dilapidated state of the castle of the Baron de Sigognac in Le Capitaine Fracasse, which we will look at later on in our discussion of Bellow, sparkles with dainty observations of decrepitude.
but in terms of his artistic achievement, his proud command of style and form, made the more impressive, perhaps, and the more bold, the more self-referential in all that splendor of repetition. On the other hand, we could likewise note the felt insufficiency of that judgment precisely in the bold and provocative manner in which it is made apparent--the more bold, the more embittered--and even more so in the ruefully pessimistic nature of the stories, and in the identification of the beautiful with what is rich and exotic, a felt inability or unwillingness to assimilate what is mundane into oneself and thereby elevate it.

I turn now to an example of the kind of repetition that I seek to explain as representing a kind of vision of art in Gautier. In *Le Roi Candaule*, immediately after we are given a lengthy description and discussion of Candaule in the parade introducing his new wife, Queen Nyssia, to the populace, we are provided with a description of her, from the perspective of the eagerly awaiting crowd:

But why should we dwell upon Candaules? The reader undoubtedly feels like the people of Sardes, and it is of Nyssia that he desires to hear.

The daughter of Megabazus was mounted upon an elephant, with wrinkled skin and immense ears which seemed like flags, who advanced with a heavy but rapid gait, like a vessel in the midst of the waves. His tusks and his trunk were encircled with silver rings, and around the pillars of his limbs were entwined necklaces of enormous pearls. Upon his back, which was covered with a magnificent Persian carpet of striped pattern, stood a sort of estrade overlaid with gold finely chased, and constellated with onyx stones, carnelians, chrysolites, lapis-lazuli, and girasols; upon this estrade sat the young queen, so covered with precious stones as to dazzle the eyes of the beholders. A mitre, shaped like a helmet, on which pearls formed flower designs and letters after the Oriental manner, was placed upon her head; her ears, both the lobes and rims of which had been pierced, were adorned with ornaments in the form of little cups, crescents, and balls; necklaces of gold
and silver beads, which had been hollowed out and carved, thrice encircled her neck and descended with a metallic tinkling upon her bosom; emerald serpents with topaz or ruby eyes coiled themselves in many folds about her arms, and clasped themselves by biting their own tails. These bracelets were connected by chains of precious stones, and so great was their weight that two attendants were required to kneel beside Nyssia and support her elbows. She was clad in a robe embroidered by Syrian workmen with shining designs of golden foliage and diamond fruits, and over this she wore the short tunic of Persepolis, which hardly descended to the knee, and of which the sleeves were slit and fastened by sapphire clasps. Her waist was encircled from hip to loins by a girdle wrought of narrow material, variegated with stripes and flowered designs, which formed themselves into symmetrical patterns as they were brought together by a certain arrangement of the folds which Indian girls alone know how to make. Her trousers of byssus, which the Phoenicians called syndon were confined at the ankles by anklets adorned with gold and silver bells, and completed this toilet so fantastically rich and wholly opposed to Greek taste. But, alas! a saffron-coloured flammeum pitilessly masked the face of Nyssia, who seemed embarrassed, veiled though she was, at finding so many eyes fixed upon her, and frequently signed to a slave behind her to lower the parasol of ostrich plumes, and thus conceal her yet more from the curious gaze of the crowd. (241-242)

Much would be lost here if the writer had merely said something like, “The queen appeared, borne aloft on the back of an elephant, and outfitted in rich clothing with countless jewels.” But what, exactly? Why the mention of over ten rare gemstones, along with fabrics and chains? Does a ruby mean something different for the purposes of this passage than a sapphire? Almost certainly not, but the enumeration displays the refinement of the eye perceiving, the taste of the mind elaborating. The more kinds of jewels one sees—and not merely enumerated, as in a list, but placed, as it were, here and there in the picture—the more an idea of the narrator as an expert
pervades the scene, and so we are later on provided a list of poets who would fail to describe Nyssia’s beauty.12

As fine as this passage is, there are passages in the works of other writers that are of equally remarkable quality, but I can think of only two that are functionally similar, that really strike me as being of the same kind.13 One, published a few decades after this story, is the scene of the costume party in Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*, too long to quote here, and the other is Mercutio’s description of Queen Mab in *Romeo and Juliet*:

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12 Henry James writes of Gautier, “Gautier’s figures are altogether pictorial; he cared for nothing and knew nothing in men and women but the epidermis. With this, indeed, he was marvelously acquainted, and he organized in its service a phraseology as puzzlingly various as the array of pots and brushes of a coiffeur. His attitude towards the human creature is, in a sublimated degree, that of a barber or tailor. He anoints and arranges and dresses it to perfection; but he deals only in stuffs and colors. His fable is often pretty enough; but one imagines it always written in what is called a studio light—on the corner of a table littered with brushes and frippery. The young woman before the easel, engaged at forty sous a sitting to take off her dress and let down her hair, is obviously the model for the heroine. His stories are always the measure of an intellectual need to express an ideal of the exquisite in personal beauty and in costume, combined with that of a certain serene and full-blown sensuality in conduct, and accompanied with gorgeous visions of upholstery and architecture” (57-58). James’s description of Gautier suggests a craftsman, which is indeed a good one. He is rather clearly not a writer for whom philosophical arguments, positions, and their implications appear with a significant degree of clarity and importance, as they do for Thomas Mann, or a profound psychologist and moralist (which is not to say a moralizer) with a keen and expansive vision of human nature, in the manner of George Eliot. He is simply a writer of great skill, an artisan as much as an artist. Ideas do not appear to him but through their sensual accompaniments and expressions, and even then they are extremely vague. What he possesses is a single-minded attention and devotion to the beautifying of his work, to the sharp, often startlingly acute observations that create an image for the reader. Gautier’s style is seemingly plain, unadorned with a lot of figurative language, yet delightfully estranging from ordinary experience in its sharpness of observation.

13 A reader may remark, “But what about all those descriptions in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, which were doubtless such an influence on Gautier?” In *The One Thousand and One Nights* one sees marble rooms filled with basins of gold and jewels, and in the fairytales of Madame D’Aulnoy golden doors encrusted with carbuncles, walls of transparent porcelain, carpets of butterflies’ wings, but to say these are very much like the descriptions of Gautier is like saying that humans have in common with leopards the possession of four limbs and 32 teeth. In their content these various descriptions are indeed alike, but not in their style. Both are interested in conveying a sense of wonder around richness and beauty, but the descriptions one finds in those other writers are not audaciously processional, both curt and elaborate, as Gautier’s descriptions are. Gautier would never write, unless accompanied with a wink to the reader, or after an already outlandish description, some such phrase as “and many wondrous things beside.” The mention of unique riches in these forerunners to 19th century decadence are by the way; they do not accumulate; the gaze does not pass over them with special interest; the gaze does not compose and arrange space. Rich things are simply mentioned rather than described. The rich descriptions, though occasionally elaborate in the stories of *The One Thousand and One Nights* and in those of Madame D’Aulnoy, are nevertheless cursory in these writers, since the pull of the action is unremitting. In Gautier, on the other hand, the fetishistic perspective, the obsessive, feverish observation is unremitting. The species of temperament to which Gautier belongs is entirely different; it’s that of Hoffmann, De Quincey, Poe, Balzac, and later Baudelaire and others. In literature one finds a rich mixture of features, without, for that matter, the appearance of grotesquerie, as we find in satyrs, centaurs, sphinxes, and chimeras.
O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes

In shape no bigger than an agate-stone

On the fore-finger of an alderman,

Drawn with a team of little atomies

Athwart men's noses as they lies asleep;

Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,

The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,

The traces of the smallest spider's web,

The collars of the moonshine's wat'ry beams,

Her whip of cricket's bone; the lash of film;

Her waggoner a small grey-coated gnat,

Not half so big as a round little worm

Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid:

Her chariot is an empty hazelnut

Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,

Time out o’ mind the fairies’ coachmakers. (1.4. 58-74)

These passages have in common a processional quality, which draws attention to their functions as elaborate, creative descriptions. Although the pace is different in the two, each has the quality of deliberate elaboration and the creation of a succession of like details. Each detail, provided in quick succession, reinforces and magnifies the idea conveyed by each preceding detail— in Gautier’s case that of the richness of Nyssia’s trappings, in Shakespeare’s that of the delicacy of
Mab’s mode of travel. Each detail works as a variation on a theme, each detail, each variation provided rapidly. However, with each added detail the reader has a sense of the compounding nature of the description. With each new detail the reader wonders how far the writer can carry the idea, how many little variations can be artfully made. The accrual of observations demonstrates the richness of aesthetic perception. The description becomes an interlude in audacity, a demonstration of virtuosity, superfluous to the plot. The sense of exaggeration grows exponentially with the addition of each new detail, though each suggests the same idea, and adds a sense of contrivance to the description. Attention becomes divided between the character or scene described and the imagination of the writer furnishing the description. The passage preens with the self-congratulation of the writer, and the appreciation of the imagination of the writer becomes as much its subject as Nyssia.¹⁴

The invocation of the reader in this passage implies the presence of the writer, and the writer, who has withheld Nyssia from the reader as she withholds herself from the bystanders, stepping forth, performs the scene of the entrance of Nyssia in his prose. In pointing to the reader’s supposed anticipation for the entrance of Nyssia, the narrator indicates that there really is something to anticipate.¹⁵ The narrator establishes a sense of expectation for the coming

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¹⁴ In his article, “Gautier/Baudelaire: homo ludens versus homo duplex,” Freeman Henry laments the fact that Gautier critics seem to treat and apologize for Gautier as a sort of lesser proto-Baudelaire. This leads him to overstate the differences between the two, saying they are not very similar, but in doing so he does notice the important difference that Baudelaire is more pessimistic, delights less in the games he opens up than feels trapped by them, while Gautier is more joyful: “...the rules of Gautier’s game are such that, at a playfully tantalizing moment, the discourse is subverted, the movement in the opposite direction is arrested, and, abruptly, both ‘hero’ and reader are drawn back into the ludic sphere” (73). I think Henry also overstates Gautier’s playfulness, or misjudges what kind of playfulness it is, as does Henry James when he praises his lightness and good-humor. There is still in Gautier the kind of rueful sarcasm that in Baudelaire is brought to a sharper pitch through Baudalaire’s greater taste for the grotesque. Even if his stories do not end with great and luxurious violence, as do some of Poe’s or Balzac’s, Gautier’s stories nevertheless end on a note of disillusionment. The kind of play he engages in is not bathed in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, as are, for example Tristram Shandy and Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, a love of and trust in naivety, but rather regret and shame over it. Gautier’s play, therefore, is still rather embittered and provocative.

¹⁵ Gautier is among the writers Edward Said discusses in Orientalism, although he pays less attention to him than he does to some others like Flaubert. Said notes that Nerval wrote to Gautier to discourage him from ever traveling to
description, a kind of event for which he serves as host, planner, and even spectacle. The enumeration of the details gives a picture of the whole object, but each detail represents the same idea, of which the object itself becomes the glittering, paradigmatic expression—richness, beauty. The enumeration, the pauses, turns, and elongations in the prose, convey a vision, at once external, fixed, straining over the object, and simultaneously internal, self-regarding, self-elaborating, self-justifying. In its continued elaboration the reader becomes aware of the ostentatious nature of the description, concerned as much with the creation of the vision, with the idea of the creation of a vision, as with Nyssia herself, who in the story’s simple plot does not require such an articulate seer. The vision we see manifested is a proudly self-conscious, dainty vision, subtly differentiating, subtly synthesizing.\

The reader, of course, soon expects to be introduced to the new queen, so each additional feature described outside or inside of it takes the form of a feint, a playful gesture, that delays the Middle East, since his own journey there served to diminish Nerval’s fantastical ideas he had. Gautier’s own ideas are of a character generally with other orientalizing writers of the period. He presents a world not of ordinary life, since he never traveled there and did not interact with real people, but only a place of fantasy, a world of sexual libertinism, rare jewels, and giant monuments, left more or less unchanged from the time of Cleopatra. It is a world of excitement to be set against the ennui of contemporary Parisian life, which only appears by suggestion. Gautier thus participates in a familiar genre of stories purportedly detailing the riches of the Middle East during a period of imperial expansion.

16 In his article, “Alchimies Visuelles dans les Contes de Théophile Gautier,” Marco Nuti writes, “Telle est cette appétence de plénitude, de complétude artistique qui anime l'oeuvre de Gautier, alors sous-tendue à la fois par l'espoir d'un accomplissement, par la confiance de la mise en œuvre, mais aussi par les halètements de l'échec, par le silencieux tourment de la frustration de ne pouvoir sans artifice atteindre le « desideratum de la pensée » (Gautier, 1995, p. 1509) de l'artiste. Il en résulte que Gautier se plaît à cultiver le sens des correspondances, comme les pratiques de l'ekphrasis et de la transposition d'art. L'écriture gautiériste, tel un mécanisme en marche vers l'épiphanie poétique, tend à rendre l'art immanent à elle-même, jusqu'à l'effacement des limites, jusqu'à ce que soient à la fois dépassés et effacés les artifices et instruments qui servaient jusqu'alors cette immixtion…” Nuti suggests Gautier’s pictorial descriptions be taken as a sign of a kind of proto-modernism, a continual preoccupation with the limits of language. I see in Nuti’s talk of Gautier’s style as “a mechanism moving towards poetic epiphany” aligned with my talk of Gautier creating a sensual vision of beauty that doubles as a submission of proof of his brilliance. What I have in mind is Walter Pater’s description of Plato as possessing “a sensuous love of the unseen.” Gautier, in his descriptions, creates through an abundance of taste (taste insofar as that means knowing what is needed for the description to be pulled off and how to recall it from all one has seen), a taste for details and effects (for which a strict self-observation is necessary, a surveillance of the aesthetic impression of one thing or another), a picture for the mind’s eye, in the deliberate creation of which we feel as though we are observers. Unencumbered with the weight of material, the picture floats to us, seen though unseen, and so too do those deliberations between the choice of one little detail and another.
that inevitable introduction. Nyssia’s adornments, her manner of presentation at the ceremony, in
texts: the inability of language to express her
beauty. We can see so many features of her apparel; we can see that not only the lobes of her
ears are pierced, but also the rims, yet we cannot see her face. We can hear the slight jingle of the
chains around her neck, perceive the minute details of the bracelets around her arms, but we
cannot see her face. As is typical of Gautier—and here he is more like other writers—we are
incredibly close to the object of worship, yet nevertheless entirely removed from it. We see such
richness, yet there is the implication (a further exaggeration): and what is all this compared to the
unspeakable beauty of Nyssia’s face? We see upon Nyssia so much richness and beauty, yet she
remains entirely indistinct, unfamiliar, featureless. This aspect of the description—the close,
minute observation of Nyssia and the subsequent concealment of her face—likewise brings
attention to the narrator, to the contrived, ironic nature of the perspective. No feature of Nyssia is
actually described, only what she is outfitted with. In fact, the elephant upon which she is borne
is described in greater detail, since there is at least some description of its skin, its ears, and its
gait. The description of Nyssia involves a long enumeration of what is not Nyssia, what only
suggests her beauty by lending to her form its own riches.

So the foregrounding of taste, of the writer’s demonstration of expert taste, is perceptible
in Gautier’s stories in the preening virtuosity of the style. The stories, which are broadly
formulaic, recount, with different settings and slight changes in plot, the same story, and take the
aspect, as I have said, of self-conscious variations on a theme. In the reproduction of all of these
similar stories there is less of the serious probing of a writer wishing finally to give expression to
something that has to this point evaded satisfactory representation than there is the playful
demonstration of wit in the discovery of yet another variation on a theme. The story, then, is a
space for the demonstration of wit, the unraveling of the layered irony of the writer. This wit is not only perceptible in the playfully formulaic nature of the stories, but in the flippant, humorous tone, which delights in the playfully formulaic nature of the descriptions.

In *Mademoiselle de Maupin* a young man bemoans his lack of a mistress until he finds one and, finally tiring of her, falls in love with a young man he suspects is a woman; this disguised young woman, desiring the freedom of men, deigns to spend a night with the hero, before she departs forever. In “Le pied de momie” a young man purchases a mummy’s foot as a paperweight at a bric-a-brac shop; in his sleep the daughter of a pharaoh asks for the return of her foot, to which the hero accedes, whereupon he is brought with the princess before her father; the hero asks for her hand in marriage; the father laughs and replies that he is centuries too young for his daughter, and the hero wakes up. In *Arria Marcella* the hero tours a museum in Pompey where he falls in love with the preserved form of a woman’s bust in volcanic rock; during a nighttime stroll the ancient city displaces the present one, and the hero meets the young woman whose form was cast in the rock at a theater; the two declare love for one another before her father enters and declares the union impossible, whereupon the dream dissolves. In *La Morte Amoureuse* a young priest on the point of earning his vestments has a vision of a beautiful woman who implores him not to take his vows; after he receives his clerical assignment he sees this woman in a dream and begins an affair with her, living in her palace; weeks pass and the hero’s old mentor appears in a dream admonishing him for his choices, telling him he has been charmed by a vampire; he opens her grave, finds her bones, and is filled with regret at having listened to his old master. In *Le Roi Candaule*, taken from myth, the king marries the incomparably beautiful Nyssia, who, out of modesty, allows nobody but the king to see her; the king, overcome by the need to share the secret of Nyssia’s beauty with someone else, convinces
his guard to hide and spy upon Nyssia as she returns from a bath; she finds Gyges and persuades him to kill Candaules and become her husband.

I provide the plots of these stories in order to bring the reader’s attention to the likeness each has with the rest. One could go on summarizing these stories for some time, choosing the appropriate details to mention. As it is, we could point to certain similarities among them. No doubt much is ignored in these descriptions. Summarization necessarily involves the creative powers involved in perceiving different categories. For instance, one could summarize the stories above with little reference to any plot elements, merely speaking of the fortunes of the protagonist. These fortunes could be summarized as follows: the young protagonist, restless amid the drudgery of his life, spiritually muddled and cynical, seeks a vague escape; the escape is achieved, purely and inexplicably through the grace of a haughty and contemptuous beauty (and so is less an escape than a deliverance, with the added splendor of one not having had to exert oneself, but merely having been chosen), with the bliss of his remaining days devoted to sensual pleasure in sight, before some arbitrary authority or some accident spoils the vision and returns the protagonist careening back to mundane existence. The fortunes of the protagonist typically, then, remain relatively low in that they are unspectacular in the beginning before soaring upward with the promise of a deliverance to a rich exotic splendor, before falling again, with the added pain of resignation, and perhaps the compensatory savor of memorable bliss.

The fact that the narrator is feverishly descriptive, and never settles into the subtleties of conversation, of prolonged psychological portrayal, gives the stories the qualities of a daydream, a point furthered by the passivity of the main character; it is the world around the character that changes shape--Omphale steps from the painting, Hermonthis takes the hero to ancient Egypt, ancient Pompey springs round unasked and Arria Marcella introduces herself to
the hero. The haughty and contemptuous beauty not only recognizes but embraces the passive dreamer. He does nothing but dreams and is delivered, and then can do nothing but fall, at times hardly through any fault of his own, at others through some minor incident, and so the stories strongly suggest wish-fulfillment and the knowledge of its inevitable failure. The melancholy fatalism of the stories could be seen also in the knowledge the reader has of their fates. Arria Marcella dies when Vesuvius erupts; the princess Hermonthis is dead when the protagonist meets her; the countess Omphale, the vampire of La Morte Amoureuse also are dead. The affairs, doomed at the outset on account of the incompatibility of the dead woman and the living man, could be described as diversions that finally recognize the kernel of impossibility implied within them, and so, in a sense, they are like labyrinths that wind their way to their own center.

In looking at the plots of these stories from this perspective one can notice several broad similarities. Each features a rather unassertive young protagonist who, if naive, yet maintains an impish sensibility. Each story features a woman at the center whose mere presence possesses singular bewitching power. The pursuit of the beautiful woman becomes an enterprise that involves entirely dispensing with ordinary concerns. On a whim, almost, a hero is ready to leave his previous life to marry the long-dead daughter of a pharaoh, or a woman who will soon lend her form to volcanic rock. Of course, the life the young protagonist leads and is prepared to leave behind is not described in any detail. No histories are provided, no family relations, no habits. Ordinary life is interrupted by an occurrence that promises to transpose one into a finer realm. A trip to an ordinary antique store soon leads to the royal court of ancient Egypt, a drink at a restaurant with one’s friends to the refreshed splendor of ash-buried Pompey. One goes from the restrictive obligations of priesthood to libertine pleasures in a palace. Even if the place does not change, as in “Omphale,” the poor guest house of the uncle, in an unkempt garden overgrown
with weeds, adopts a more thrilling aspect when the hero discovers that it is outfitted with a painting from which there descends a lustful countess.

The protagonists are always solitary; they have no wide acquaintance, and rarely confide. The outlook is one of long observation, but not of custom or character or conversation, but of the dainty embellishment, the beguiling allurement of the outside world, its demands upon one’s attention, its appeal and transformation from mute sense-perception to intoxicating vision of values. So much of these stories has to do with wish-fulfillment and dreams. The hero of “Le Pied de momie” is taken to Egypt by the Princess Hermonthis while asleep; the hero of La Morte Amoureuse has nighttime visions of the vampire; the hero of Mademoiselle de Maupin laments his lack of a mistress and exhorts fate to grant him one. At the center of each story is an overriding restlessness, displeasure, anxiety availed by a nearly perfect confluence of circumstances--nearly and not quite perfect because the prospect of happiness is shattered at the moment it comes into view--brought about through no agency of the hero. Likewise, the idea of happiness is the exchange of what is familiar for the exotic, all in the perpetual embrace of some heavenly beauty.¹⁷

We have so far looked at the plots of these stories, noting each as a kind of approximation of the ideal Gautier story, dependent in part on the idea of the rest in order to understand them. This mania for reproduction is not only visible in the form that the stories themselves take, but

¹⁷ Margueritte Murphy makes the case that the character of Théodore/Madeleine in Mademoiselle de Maupin represents D’Albert’s ideal, against Ross Chambers’s idea that he/she is merely an approximation. Murphy’s suggestion, which I tend to agree with, and which I would see as present as well in the other stories with the protagonist and the female idol, points to a more total break with Victor Cousin, as it depicts a realization, however brief, that the Platonic Cousin views as immaterial and merely suggested by art. Murphy also convincingly suggests that this reading “exalts beauty as the divine made visible” (157). This reading opens up the possibility of reading this further as equally a demonstration of the impossibility that Cousin sets forth—that presenting the ideal as indeed attainable, although for only a brief moment, in a work of art only reinforces the unattainability of that ideal.
also in the style, where indeed Gautier flourishes most. I have so far documented a rather long list of repetition in these stories of Gautier, which it is useful to label a repetition of kinds, rather than a repetition of particulars. We see over and over again the same kinds of descriptions, and within descriptive passages the same kinds of details. We also see the same kinds of characters--the same kinds of male protagonists and female icons--and the same kinds of relationships, plots. A skeptical reader may ask, “But isn’t this to be expected of any writer? Aren’t the resources of the imagination so meager that the ideas of the writer necessarily flow upon some ground already furrowed? Isn’t this the basis for the perception of the continuity of interests, themes in the various works of any writer?” The continuity of interests and themes, yes, but with Gautier one sees a proliferation of virtually identical stories, characters, descriptions, dainty little details, and moreover all in a flippant, ironical tone that often draws attention to the artifice. This proliferation, this repetition of kinds brings an overriding awareness to the virtuosity of the writer, in the ability to employ one’s wit to create such variations on a theme.

18 Briefly, I understand form in a work of literature as having to do with the arrangement of things--ideas, characters, kinds of characters, places, kinds of places, events, kinds of events, situations, kinds of situations, conversations, kinds of conversations, etc. I understand style as having to do with the arrangement of words and kinds of words--the manner in which things are conveyed, the fashioning of a perspective. One speaks of the style of a monologue in a work of literature. Where that monologue is placed, though taking into account its style to make it cohere with the whole, is a question of form. Of course, it is not always easy to say where one ends and the other begins, and one does not draw tables and distinguish and order while reading. Two representative poles for me are Walter Pater on the one hand--a brilliant stylist but one with little sense of form--and Witold Gombrowicz in Cosmos--a brilliant sense of form but unextraordinary style. Gautier is, above all, a brilliant stylist, and is very clever in his plots as plots, but the execution of the plots is often lukewarm.

19 To develop this idea further, it would be worthwhile to briefly compare the case of Gautier with that of his friend and erstwhile hero, Hugo, whose repetition is as much a sign of his roughness as Gautier’s is of his refinement. Hugo writes to convince rather than to surprise, make laugh, make clap, and delight. As a poet, Hugo is earnest, unselfconscious, unsubtle, full of Carlyle’s heroic “sincerity,” a mystic and orator, a breathless enthusiast, who, in the midst of his harangues, does not notice his habit of resorting to the same themes, images, rhymes. However, this innocence and lack of grace, as it were, is combined with such strength of personality, such persistence and sublime fecundity, that, as a forest is content to rely on thousands of a few kinds of trees for its majesty, and not on countless varieties, so what appears rough in a handful of examples develops into a prophetic vision when hundreds are gathered. His manner is too carefree, his vision too grand to trouble over every word, every metaphor, every rhyme. Gautier’s studied, daring repetition shows off the virtuosity of its practitioner, through its minute attention to the idea and manner of representation, while Hugo’s unstudied and unselfconscious repetition, rather emphasizes the volubility and central concerns of the poet, the scale of the vision. To use another metaphor, at the risk, alas, of becoming pedantic, it is like the difference between dainty ornamental trelliswork, the manner in which one
I have so far talked about the self-assurance of Gautier, the conviction in his wit present in his virtuosic variations, but have left out the other side of this preening, which is the corresponding hoarseness. He provokes and insults. He points to his refinement with rude gestures. The stories end with wry acknowledgment of the evanescence of these blissful deliverances. Ordinary life, rather than being made beautiful by the artist, is a place to escape, or, regrettably, inevitably, a place to which one is compelled to return. The identification of one’s style, one’s sense of what is beautiful with what is rare and glittering assures dissatisfaction.

“What a repository of boredom and ugliness life is!” This is the kind of lament one hears implicitly over the course of Gautier’s stories. What ordinarily confronts one in the present day is lowly and undesirable. What is the remedy? A rupture, a flight to what is rare. A flight to the reanimated ancient world, a refuge in the arms of whichever female character at the moment possesses beauty beyond the words of any poet.

With a taste for provocation, for piquant delights, the passing of judgment heralds the right to pass judgment, as the haughty and churlish page augurs the richness of his master. So denunciations are paired with glittering expressions that justify the mind that made them. Gautier provokes and preens, always with a sense that he is startling his reader with his brilliance. His style, if seeking to convey the quality of spontaneity and virtuosity, nevertheless does not find a ready counterpart in a mode of thought of ordinary life, as I argue in my introduction that the style of Proust reflects daydream or the style of Robbe-Grillet reflects the manner in which our perceptions of objects accrue to us. Rather, he writes with a highly artificial style that mimics arabesque, through a trick of perspective, might find its correspondence elsewhere, crosswise, in the neatly tangled filigree of a different patch, though with a subtle change for the appreciation of the discerning viewer, between this case of repetition and that of the wave after wave thrown upon the shore, drawing and pouring forth nearly the same mixture of water in each little upheaval, ceaselessly alluding to the great and tireless power seen over each of the approaching crests—the infinite roiling ocean from which they gather strength.
spontaneity, and retains a strange impression of a contrived naturalness, an ease in holding forth fluent testimony of the invisible.

2.3 Reflections on Ordinary Life

Aesthetic perception, as we will see in Proust, can be likened to the manner in which we remember. Each idea comes laden with many others, like a tree that hides fruit under its leaves. A succession of thoughts, in which we hardly ever care to monitor the sequence--so spontaneous is the synthesizing spirit and the enjoyment we derive from it--arises unaccountably, and distends, diffuses our sense of self as much as it seizes and concentrates it. In these heady daydreams we become fortified by the train of past selves that have since departed and now reanimate our thoughts, grant them favor, make them agile. As an incidental memory arrives with a kind of pre-established harmony, in which no discord, no confusion mars its song, so it is with the memory of a writer or a book, in which style and form have conjoined to sing. Only afterwards, in examining how we were made voluble, can we note the manner in which we have assimilated the spirit or personality of a writer--the spirit, that is, the most general impressions, which carry the fruit of synthesized observations. How much the fastidious bookkeeper overlooks, he who himself at times needs to be overlooked! In this spirit I offer the following reflections, delivered from idle remembrance:

Sometimes one’s thoughts depart in lazy reflection from one’s own circumstances, as when, in an effort to submit to the pleasant darkness of sleep, one is instead borne aloft on an irresistible current of thought into the contemplation of that sublime self-weaving tapestry of human life in which one discovers oneself to have been engrossed all along. One’s own life, the circumstances that seem to have been so frugally apportioned to one necessarily appear with the meanness that familiarity always casts. Alike to all this meanness comes, but if we consider that
it was so also in times different from our own, that life centuries ago indeed was not inflamed with the dainty style, did not pass with the nimbleness of the artist who oversteps tedium, did not evade with picaresque delicacy the unseemly harshness of close psychology, but appeared to each saturated with routine burdens, or that in the future this boredom will ceaselessly continue, we may recoil in despair at the frustrations allotted to humanity, but we may also on the contrary be saved, by our estrangement from all those by whom we are bounded, by the dreams we imagine those who departed centuries ago may have conjured about us, quite apart from our dreams of them, or those millenia hence in whom our lives will inspire romance, by our unwitting contributions to the consecration of objects and ideas that will for some in a distant future, or ones presently far away, constitute the culture of an age, that multiform exotic idea, in which our unperceived artisanal labors lie, our quotidian lives which, under lock and key of insurmountable magic, are forever withheld from those not ourselves; for, even if we try to convince ourselves of the dullness and insipidity that necessarily attach themselves to any human life at any period or place, we discover in ourselves an irremediable credulity before the swaggering persuasions of novel circumstances and their promises of endless charm. Likewise, if a stranger who we may have chanced to notice before should one day approach us and remark with a shaky voice that we have made some favorable impression, a mere confession of admiration for a coat we are wearing, we wonder that our meager presence or so thoughtless gesture should have the power to marble in the minds of others the monochromatic crowd with grace and interest, above all that our meanness should have acquired through this scant observation the haughtiness and impersonality of a hieroglyph.

In imagining circumstances in which we are presently not to be found, in thinking of our own pasts, or in anticipating our futures, in imagining ourselves girt with lustrous armor in battle,
or dressed in the flowery raiment of a courtier, or toiling with dirty hands under a hot sun, though our reason admits the thrift of our imagination, though it asserts that we are like children playing with dolls, and understand little of our insinuations into this or that scene, the cunning of our fascinations overrides these protests, and we go on adoring our baubles; the inexpugnable interest of the imagination reigns over reason. We recognize a mechanism within ourselves restlessly adorning the world with bewitching powers, all that is unfamiliar with attraction, and when we shut our eyes and trust that we judge things rightly in this deprivation of sense, that darkness is shot through with yet more myriad wonders.

Consider for a moment the success of these tricks of perspective to persuade the mind of its lofty surroundings or of its own hidden native attractions. Perhaps they briefly convince--how ingenuous we are when reading, but how briefly so!--before being eclipsed once more by routine, by drudgery. Such is the fate of the pleasures of art, which briefly exalt and adorn before being subsumed once more into the flux of ordinary concerns. So they are like the treasure delivered at night by the repentant thief in The One Thousand and One Nights in exchange for a small sum of money; in the morning it is discovered that the treasure is merely painted tin. And yet this view, insolent in the face of art’s perceived insufficient comprehensiveness, hurries to disclaim art without having rightly appraised it. One hopes for the persistence of epiphany and becomes disillusioned when it lapses. It appears discordant with the rest of life, which cannot assimilate it and therefore suffers bad digestion. Gautier’s stories function as allegories of this fact. With Gautier the world seems mundane, but unlike the world in The One Thousand and One Nights, where quotidian experience conceals the fantastic, and fate leads unwitting heroes through its most marvelous passages, where they cannot but exclaim with disbelief and reverence at what befalls them, here quotidian experience leads to a wish for fantasy, a longing for
transcendence, that typically ends with a joke about that fantasy being left unfulfilled. One’s own impeded desires become the stuff of wry comment. The routine of fate becomes stultifying. Gautier is rather clearly unconcerned with beautifying certain aspects of memory or one’s circumstances in the way that I have outlined above, that is to say, he is not interested in throwing a light on the strangeness of the faculties of the mind, or in utilizing them in order to reorient oneself to one’s own circumstances. These are enterprises more characteristic of writers like Pater or Proust.

Gautier depicts a different kind of prodigality of the mind than all this. He does not see in it the success of fantastical transpositions in order to render its own operations sublime, but ultimately sees it as an ordinary faculty that creates beauty in terms that are ordinarily understood, and so his vision of art is ultimately within the context of ordinary life. In the fixity of perspective there is focus less on whatever is being described than on the influence that the object has on the mind, the capacity for praising it, for noticing and arranging its aspects. The formulaic nature of the stories likewise shifts the focus onto the inventiveness of the writer, the spontaneity of the wit. All of this brings to mind the artist as a figure who judges himself according to his own taste. We see the preening style, the clever twists and turns of the plot, all around a few themes around which the stories inevitably turn. There is a kind of what Carlyle would call “sincerity” insofar as we can note a kind of acidulous pessimism regarding the brevity of epiphany, but on the whole the stories demonstrate self-satisfaction with one’s own wit; they draw attention to the writer’s virtuosity.

This attitude, the focus on the enchantment of strange objects, distant lands and ancient decadent civilizations, on the hyperbolic beauties that tyrannize the lowly subject place a strong emphasis on the generation of values. Through long, languorous descriptions, all emphasizing
the beauty of some singular character, who briefly discloses and promises endless charm, a kind of double view is created, where the reader has in mind not only the scene described in an accretion of detail, but an accrual of the sensuous perception of an idea. The relationship all this has to what we call “ordinary life” is best thought of in this sidelong manner, that is, as the nuisance of demands that disrupt one’s splendid idle daydreams. All these beauties that Gautier writes of are invariably described as being of unparalleled, indescribable beauty. They each have the bewitching charisma of a prophet, whose mere presence fashions enthusiasts.

Even if we acknowledge that ordinary life could be full of its own strains, and that exalted sentiments like anger, desperation, sorrow, and wonder enter its homely confines as often as they do the glittering expanses of heroic or romantic life, we nevertheless imagine these as occurring within the limits of a certain placidity, or as bounded by the repetition of tedious tasks that dull the thrills of these feelings, as never acquiring substance apart from those idle daydreams that form so much of the pleasure of, and perhaps signal departures from, ordinary life. The tumult that exhorts one to action is hardly greater on a battlefield than in a household. The urgency felt by one upon smelling a cake burning in the oven, the nervous anticipation, is perhaps not so different from the urgency of the commander’s full-throated incitements in battle amid panic at the unforeseen movements of the enemy. If to the latter one wishes to append historical and personal consequence, a sense of one’s participation in the sublime, then the former achieves this by peering through a photo album, or by bringing to mind childhood scenes. Or else place the worried baker at the mercy of a fickle master, and see whether what stirs within him is equivalent to what’s in the general. Wonder at the strange achievement of fate to deliver one into some circumstance or another is felt by each, no matter the meanness of circumstance.
Whether a sentiment, like a card-player round a table, takes hold and commands in the same manner not only the various fortunes of kings and queens, but also of knaves and ciphers, whether, in short, among the motley circumstances and appearances of life some common patterns reign, or else whether each occurrence retains, insoluble, its rigid identity, is a question as much for the poet and novelist as for the metaphysician. One way of looking at the question is to treat it as simply a matter of perspective, a matter, for the writer, of style, which in turn orders place and significance in narrative. In the full splendor of particularity it seems that one could not exchange one scene for another, one set of circumstances, one life for another, without losing much. From a distance, many things seem identical. In Gautier there is a sense of immediacy and presence in the prose, no distant perspective, no theorizing. The tedium of “ordinary life” itself is a matter of perspective. The memory of having swept a room earlier today does not strike one in the same manner as the memory of having swept a particular room as a child, or some place where one lived ten years ago. Even the most menial incidents assume a kind of princely grandeur in the past, where, as they recede, they are ennobled by unconscious powers of art.

Talk of mortgages, taxes, divorce lawyers, and all these other features of our world that blot out the vision of the beautiful in their promptings that demand urgent address are entirely absent from the stories of Gautier. We will have time to look at them later on, when we talk about Proust and Bellow, if not the ones listed above in particular, yet those belonging to the category of things that engage one in the necessary task of managing one’s affairs. Only in art do such things become beautified, by means of an ironical distance that assembles them in a certain order; they become reconfigured by a perspective that grows out of the stresses they once inspired. However, Gautier does not meet the refractory glare of these issues through which beauty seems to dim. Such clear manifestations of that ordinary life that harries one do not
appear in his stories. Rather, it is signalled in short-hand. A protagonist finds something at a bric- and-brac shop; another is out with university friends. One is not engrossed in ordinary life and its concerns; it merely serves the role of providing a situation from which to escape, and so becomes qualified often retrospectively as undesirable, mundane. If the places of deliverance are themselves rich, we could say they stand in for the poet’s lustrous epiphanies.

The saturation of dainty observations we see focused on beautiful objects in Gautier is rather different from the saturation we see in Proust, where ideas come commingled with their suggestive possibilities, where one object exudes an idea, which in turn brings into conjunction something wildly different. In Gautier there remains a strict focus on what remains possible within certain given circumstances. Proust contains emendations, a profusion of qualifications, nuances, spontaneous connections that all suggest the spontaneity of thought when in its pleasant and easy reflective moods, the operation of this mechanism of largely unwitting art, the rich saturation in which our thoughts abound if we only care to look. The style of Pater, who we will look at in the next chapter, lies between that of Gautier and Proust, maintaining Gautier’s fixed gaze, but only rarely on the appearance of things, and more often on ideas and emotions, emendating each clause with a subtlety in the following one.

If in Gautier we see the exhibition of personality and virtuosity, in Pater we see a removal from personality in tone—a fine, although cold and strict, even humorless style—and a consideration of it as a concept, something to be pursued via an aesthetic education. We see less of a confident, preening exhibition of aesthetic perception, but a philosophical consideration of it, the elements that go into fostering it.
Chapter 3 Pater’s Idea of an Aesthetic Education

Were you not even now in Atlantis; and have you not at least a pretty little copyhold farm there, as the poetical possession of your inward sense? And is the blessedness of Anselmus anything else but a living in poesy? Can anything else but poesy reveal itself as the sacred harmony of all beings, as the deepest secret of nature?

-Archivarius Lindhorst, E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Flower Pot*

Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.

-Emerson, “The Poet”

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only.

-Ladislaw, George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

3.1 Introduction

Moving from Gautier to Pater, in spite of certain shared concerns between the two writers, seems like a strange exercise. Gautier, with his roguish wit and with his naively rakish characters, whose writings gesture provocatively to the presence of the writer, seems like an odd companion for Pater, whose writings conceal any trace of wit or lightness under an austere commitment to finely carving his ideas in hard, inflexible prose. Gautier’s characters, who are more or less self-same sketches, drawn with a few strokes, for the facilitation of the events of the
plot and the elaborate descriptions, retain a kind of liveliness, owing to the wit of the narrator and writer in which they partake, which the characters of Pater never do. Pater’s characters, in comparison, are ideograms, having arrived not on the wings of inspiration but through the mud of critical thought. If Gautier is always too eager to rejoice in his creations, to apply and celebrate the effects which he achieves in his writings, which arguably prevents him from moving beyond the beauty of his style and the wit of his plots, to repair and complicate the productions of his fancy, Pater, on the other hand, trusting critical thought to create the fruits of inspiration rather than perfect them, provides fine ideas and marvelous sentences but only clumsy and unnatural fiction.

From the beginning of Walter Pater’s writing career, with his early essay on Coleridge, later reprinted in the collection Appreciations, to his final completed book, Plato and Platonism, the articulation of a worldview with which the pleasures that art affords could be in harmony and from which they could arise to the greatest possible extent, was largely the focus. Much has been written about the Conclusion to The Renaissance as a sort of manifesto of the young Pater in this regard, along with the fiercely critical response that it provoked. Ian Fletcher, in covering the vacillations in Pater’s reputation over the years, has written that following the publication of The Renaissance Pater’s reputation was diminished until the publication of Marius the Epicurean, after which he was largely celebrated in his own lifetime. Stephen Cheeke has written that following the scandalous reception of The Renaissance Pater was subsequently engaged for the rest of his life in tempering and refining the ideas he expressed there.

Wolfgang Iser has written of Pater’s concept of l’art pour l’art as differing from Gautier’s in that “[Pater] does not see his hypostasised art as a protest against a specific sociological reality; for him, art is not an attitude towards a given outside world, it is a
heightening, an intensification of reality” (31). While one could read in Gautier’s fiction a deliberate provocation in the occasional celebration of libertinism, as well as in the occasional mockery of Christianity, in which he takes after certain stories of Balzac, like “L’Élixir de longue vie,” Pater is rather characterized by a circumspection that moves him to remoter regions of thought. In Gautier’s fiction one can see what sort of things amuse the narrators and characters, as well as what sorts of things of which they disapprove. In Pater’s fiction, as well as in his criticism, one sees a discretion in his well-balanced sentences, in his careful consideration of the effects of the subtlest modification of meaning. If in Gautier’s prose one reads an ostentatious exhibition of style, in which the deliberation that has gone into it has been concealed from the reader, Pater’s style demonstrates a temperance and meditation in its austere form. We see one passage that is particularly uncharacteristic of Pater, in which he boldly upholds an aestheticist outlook, at the end of Appreciations, where he writes of the competing motivations of Romanticism and Classicism across history, with the assertion that the real distinction lies between all schools of art and “the stupidity which is dead to the substance, and the vulgarity which is dead to form” (274). He thereby finds a place in a long tradition before him and since of artists inveighing against an empire of philistinism perpetually threatening to encroach further into the territory of taste. This is an attitude that finds its way also into several of Pater’s “imaginary portraits,” including Marius the Epicurean, where Marius is often mentioned as rather different from his contemporaries, as a child more exacting in his religious scruples and severe in his observations of rituals, as a youth more serious and obsessive in his studies and in his need to formulate an outlook on life. But if this position is frequently perceptible as an undercurrent in Pater’s writings, Iser is nevertheless correct in stating that the fundamental difference between Gautier’s and Pater’s projects was that the one was motivated by the desire to
maintain the art world free from the influence of moralizing critics, even if he himself becomes one in the process, and the other by the attempt to make ordinary experience more artful, that is, to make it correspond more regularly with the experience one has before a work of art.

Apart from the familiar example of the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, one could see this focus on a certain conception of life and an attempt to make it continuous with art throughout Pater’s writings. Duke Carl of Rosenmold, for instance, from Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits*, seeks just this kind of reconciliation between life and art, when Pater writes, “Was German literature always to remain no more than a kind of penal apparatus for the teasing of the brain? Oh! for a literature set free, conterminous with the interests of life itself” (130). This desire to obliterate the distinctions between life and art is not always articulated in the form of a desperate lamentation. Plato’s dialectical method is described in *Plato and Platonism* as “co-extensive with life—a part of the continuous company we keep with ourselves through life (185). In *Marius the Epicurean* we get the idea of “Life as the end of life” as the culmination of Marius’s Cyrenaic thoughts, where the value of life is to be viewed in conjunction with the artistic pleasures that arrive in its moments, each of which ought to be comprehended as bringing impressions of the things of the outside world. The intellectual removal of oneself from that stream of life, whereby “life” comes to be viewed as a thing, allows for the idea of its maintenance and its management to become easier to grasp, where it can be molded according to certain ideas and goals. One could then perceive more easily the potential application of ideas onto its content, that otherwise seems, and in fact really is, so unwieldy. This is a perspectival manipulation that Pater recognizes when he writes of Marius as an Epicurean, apt to look at himself from the outside, with a taste for the picturesque. Life thereby seems to take shape and seems more receptive to treatment and modification, as if it were a form of art. This chapter will
examine the idea of fashioning life so as to make it continuous with art, focusing especially on Pater’s idea of an “aesthetic education” that appears in Marius the Epicurean. This education could appear variously as either a course in literary tradition or as the fostering in oneself of an idealistic strain, to maintain over the material of life in order to sweeten it, or else, as I will argue, as the progression from the former to the latter. From here, I will look at relevant terms that Pater views as crucial to art, such as perception, personality, imaginative reason, and vision. I will argue that memory becomes crucial for a grounding in Pater’s flux and that his idea of a life lived saturated with artistic meaning requires, in Pater’s view, a harsh self-discipline. In this reading, Pater’s “Laceademon” chapter in Plato and Platonism suggests the possibility of the fulfillment of an “aesthetic education” in Marius the Epicurean.

3.2 Aesthetic Education

The strangeness of Marius the Epicurean has generally been remarked upon, and so I will just briefly scan over some of its elements by way of an introduction to it. E.M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, mentions Marius among a few other books that compel the critic to search for a definition of the novel that will be sufficiently broad to encompass them. Critics have written that Pater had little talent for narrative or psychological portrayal and that his fiction thus results in the genre of the “imaginary portrait” that comprises criticism along with impressionistic description. Besides “A Child in the House,” the portraits are always historical, and apart from “A Prince of Court Painters,” which takes the form of a series of diary entries by the son of a teacher of Watteau, they always contain numerous references to contemporary ideas. A narrator of a historical novel or story lodged in the present and gazing with omniscience upon scenes of the past is not new with Pater. Walter Scott’s novels feature narrators that occasionally explain what was by what was to come in broad strokes, up to the present, or juxtapose some
feature or condition of the past with those presently found. But with Scott these departures from
the narrative usually take the form of instructions to the reader—to remember that the scene
described now lies in ruin, to keep in mind that at the period of the narrative the hierarchy of
international powers was assembled differently, etc.—in order to provide some understanding or
added interest for the drama. With Pater, critical interludes generally take up as much space as
any other aspect in any given imaginary portrait; dialogue is virtually nonexistent, and so interest
in plot and character recede, these things often appearing as vehicles for the conveyance of
Pater’s ideas.

Scholarship has treated the importance of the setting of Marius and parallels have been
described between the imperial Rome of the time of Aurelius and Victorian England. This work
has mostly centered on imperial decadence and the proliferation of different systems of belief.
Rome was engaged in wars in the North, and Aurelius sets off soon after the death of his son in
the novel to lead the army positioned there in battle against the Germanic tribes, while the British
Empire also stretched itself and waged wars to maintain its hold on territories.

The genre to which Marius most fully belongs is the Bildungsroman. Although Wolfgang
Iser, for instance, has written that its similarities to this genre are superficial, this is the lens
through which I will often look at the novel. We initially see Marius as a child participating in a
religious ritual and follow him over the course of the novel until he dies at the end as an adult
following a sacrifice he makes for his friend Cornelius. His interest throughout is to find a
system of beliefs and values that will satisfy his capacity for reverence, his delight in beauty, and
his skepticism. He comes under the influence of various figures and falls in and out of religions
and philosophies but maintains throughout his strain of Epicureanism, which could be defined
broadly as the fatalistic acceptance of the passing of things, a tendency to regard himself from outside of himself, and a desire to fill what time he has with beauty and pleasure.

While these ideas are perceptible early on in the novel—before he leaves home, for example, Marius comes into contact with and under the influence of a sect devoted to Aesculapius, by whom he is encouraged to maintain with him always some small item of beauty that could stand in for the entire realm of the beautiful—they are most fully developed following the death of Marius’s friend, Flavian. Flavian introduces Marius to Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, and it is following his death that Marius recognizes the inexorable flux as the only real law of nature. Indeed, death often plays the role of generating Marius’s actions as well as the modifications and articulations of his views. When his mother dies early on, he leaves home. Observing Marcus Aurelius’s placid expression during the killing of gladiatorial bouts, he first expresses a measure of disdain for the coldness of Stoicism. When Aurelius’s child son dies, he sees in Aurelius’s hesitant, inadequately repressed depression the final failure of Stoicism to adequately reconcile itself with death. The tombs of children provoke his admiration for the way that Christianity integrates death into its system of beliefs. He leaves Rome and returns to his

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20 Deaths, specifically premature deaths, occur constantly in Pater’s works. Early on in *Marius*, Marius’s widowed mother dies, prompting his departure from home. At the end of Book One, the close friend of Marius, the aesthete and aspiring poet, Flavian, dies, prompting Marius’s retreat into his thoughts and his self-conversion to Epicureanism. We also see Aurelius’s son die, and Marius’s observance of Aurelius’s depression pushing Marius to a final rejection of Stoicism; and also the deaths of Aurelius’s wife, Faustina, and Aurelius’s brother and the co-emperor, Lucius Verus. Towards the end, we see Marius’s admiration for Christian burial traditions when he sees the tombs of children; and finally Marius’s death at the end, following a bout of illness after having been taken prisoner at a Christian ceremony. This preoccupation continues in the *Imaginary Portraits*, where the subject of “A Prince of Court Painters,” Watteau, dies prematurely of an illness, followed by Sebastian Van Stork from the eponymous portrait. Dionysus, from “Denys L’Auxerrois” is killed by the townspeople during a festival, in something of a reversal of *The Bacchae*; and Duke Carl of Rosenmold, full of hope for culture to flourish in Germany, is trampled to death by an army before having a chance to realize his ambitions.

21 Pater’s translation of the myth of Cupid and Psyche from *The Golden Ass* takes up a chapter of *Marius*. Other literary works that appear in part in the novel are some speeches by Cornelius Fronto, certain meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and a dialogue by Lucian, in which Marius takes the place of a spectator.
childhood home, first of all to revisit the mausoleum holding the remains of his ancestors. Finally, his own coming death prompts Marius’s conversion to Christianity.

Among Pater’s writings the theme of education frequently recurs. The ideas of temperament, personality, art, pleasure, and youth are often tied to education. In the Preface to The Renaissance, Pater writes that metaphysical questions regarding the nature of beauty are inconsequential to the critic, whose focus must instead turn inward, to the elaboration of particular impressions made by works of art. He writes,

The aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements… Our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety. (ix)

This same passage contains references to the “personality in life or in a book” that creates these impressions. The idea of art is already seen as more or less continuous with nature and human life. Pater sets the critic in a somewhat naturalistic setting here and describes the development of the capacities of the critic as the growth of a faculty of the mind when it comes into contact with its environment. Appealing things act on the mind as “powers or forces” that help to mold it. Pater develops his idea of criticism in reaction to Matthew Arnold, who wrote that the “aim of criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is.” To this Pater adds that the only way to do this is to see one’s impressions as distinctly as possible. To become fluent in the kinds of impressions left by works of art and by aspects of the surrounding world becomes the task of the critic, to be able to distinguish the attitude of one work of art from another and to be able to distinguish between the various impressions left by any given one.
Pater’s implicit criticism of Arnold might be put the following way: when one looks at an object one necessarily only sees the manner in which one looks at it. To make this point clearer I will attempt to explain what Pater means in terms of a quote from Philip Roth’s novel, *American Pastoral*: “Her opinions were all stimuli: the goal was excitement” (139). Roth’s narrator here, Nathan Zuckerman, provides a suspicious, Nietzschean interpretation of beliefs as primarily appealing to and satisfying largely unacknowledged sensual desires. The point is that there is no neutral manner of observation in which we might see a thing “as in itself it really is,” only a succession of ironic perspectives which mask as much as they reveal that which we are observing. We can only observe, according to Pater, the “peculiar or unique” effects of different “powers or forces” upon us, in terms of our self-conscious and personal classificatory schemes and our necessarily impressionistic constructions of our ideas.22

An abstract definition, then, is of little consequence, but “a certain kind of temperament” furnishes the would-be critic with all he or she needs (x). A temperament, then, is the goal after which the aesthetic critic strives. The critic acquires this temperament through exposure to different kinds of personalities. Self-consciousness and a diverse experience are required for the acquisition of this temperament. Self-consciousness aids the would-be critic in concentrating the powers of the intellect onto the emotional responses one has to the outside world. Successful discernment of the impressions yielded by beautiful objects increases in proportion to the variety of beautiful objects encountered and the development of an inward temperament that is sensitive

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22 This last thought is perhaps unclear. What I have in mind is Pater’s repeated insistence in *Plato and Platonism* upon the idea that one’s thoughts are “moulded” or “shaped” in the act of creating them, an act which must be practiced, according to his rather reverential account of Spartan discipline and self-consciousness, in which he seems to find a triumphant symbol for his own highly deliberative and scrupulous style, with the highest degree of alertness and austere self-criticism, by recognizing, moment by moment, the effects (the peculiar taste) of one’s words while they flow out from one. This self-consciousness in turn modifies, restricts, and expands, even sculpt[s] that sense which one seeks to convey. Pater’s view of criticism is therefore intensely inward-looking, seeking as much to get an idea of the self, in examining the effects of all those things the self encounters upon one, as it is of the work of art or other phenomena.
enough to experience beauty. Education becomes a kind of continuous refinement of self-
knowledge through its insistence that the individual is modified through engagement with works
of art.

Linda Dowling, in *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, has written of the
positive valence acquired by the terms “variety” and “diversity” in Victorian England, especially
as guiding liberal principles following the publication of Mill’s *On Liberty*. In a self-understood
modeling on a Hellenic ideal against Graeco-Roman classical republicanism, though heavily
mediated by German Hellenism, variety and diversity came to be viewed as positive attributes in
an industrial culture reformulated as mired in “stationariness” (58-61).23

Temperaments determine beliefs and the manners of belief for Pater, and before his
elaboration of an aesthetic education, Marius thinks of the Cyrenaicism of Aristippus as a happy
transformation of the melancholic philosophy of Heraclitus. The same idea of the flux does not
induce despair so much as it vivifies one’s sense of life and compels one to seek out what is best
in it. The articulation of Marius’s “New Cyrenaicism” follows along with the passage on his
“aesthetic education”:

With this view he would demand culture, as the Cyrenaics said, or, in other
words, a wide and various education—an education partly negative, as defining
the true limits of man’s capacity, but, for the most part positive, and directed
especially to the enlarging and refinement of the receptive powers; of those
powers, above all, which are directly relative to fleeting phenomena—the powers

23 Dowling writes further that this effort to establish a kind of Hellenic ideal, understood to be taken in part from
Pericles’s *Funerary Oration*, also had the effect of leading to a kind of “counter-discourse” and re-thinking of
homosexuality. Pater was involved in a scandal and failed to get the chair previously occupied by Ruskin when
letters of his to a young man were given to Benjamin Jowett. Pater was depicted in Mallock’s *The New Republic* as
wanting to create at Oxford a community of homosexual atheistic aesthetes. Mallock’s book also had the effect of,
as Dowling writes, “unintentionally imparting the dark glamour of a cultural vanguard to the aesthetic Hellenism”
(110). While homosexuality is not spoken of openly in Pater’s writings, he does write approvingly of the admiration
held by the Greeks for male beauty in his essay on Winckelmann. Heterosexual relationships generally do not
appear much, while much emphasis is placed on male friendships.
of sensation and emotion. In such an education, an “aesthetic” education, as it might now be termed, and certainly occupied very largely with those aspects of things which affects us pleasurably through the senses, art, of course, including all the finer sorts of literature, would have a great part to play. The study of music, in the wider Platonic sense, according to which, *Music* comprehends all those things over which the muses of Greek mythology preside, would conduct one to an exquisite appreciation of all the finer traits of nature and of man. Nay!—the products of the imagination must themselves be held to present the most perfect forms of life—spirit and matter, alike, under their purest and most perfect conditions—the most strictly appropriate object of that impassioned contemplation, which, in the world of intellectual discipline, as in the highest forms of morality and religion, must be held to be the essential function of the “perfect.” Such a manner of life might itself even come to seem a kind of religion—an inward, visionary, mystic piety or religion—by virtue of its effort to live days “lovely and pleasant” in themselves, here and now, and with an all-sufficiency of well-being in the immediate sense of the object contemplated, independently of any faith, or hope that might be entertained, as to their ultimate tendency. In this way, the true “aesthetic culture” would be realizable as a new form of the ‘contemplative life,’ founding its claim on the essential ‘blessedness’ of ‘vision’—the vision of perfect men and things. (158-159)

This passage, ostensibly in the form of indirect discourse, consists in a series of definitions and delimitations, setting up equivalent terms in order to give a more definite aspect to the ideas discussed. The passage thereby acquires a didactic tone, but with its interruptions, its clarifications, its exclamations, it takes on also the tone of an enthusiastic interior monologue, with the eager sense to put ideas in words that might otherwise soon fade from memory. We seem to see enacted the perceptive power spoken of in the eloquent ability to grasp at thoughts that would willingly evade capture. Excitement is conveyed at the seeming discovery of something potentially important to the speaker. The “aesthetic” education of the contemporary
period finds its antecedent in the Cyrenaic school of Marius’s time. However, we also become aware, perhaps, of a diminution in the intervening centuries in the role of culture, whereby it becomes severely circumscribed as merely an “aesthetic” education. Art is presented as reconciling spirit and matter, echoing, to a degree, the definition of the “imaginative reason” as the addressee of art, both the senses and the intellect.

Pater’s reference to “an education partly negative” recalls his early essay on Coleridge, reprinted in *Appreciations*, where Coleridge becomes defined by “what he failed to do,” and comes to represent the “discontent” and “home-sickness” characteristic of the romantic spirit (105). In contrast to the romantic spirit in the same essay, Pater writes of the classical, with its contentment in the “here and now.” This also leads to the suggestion later on in this passage that the pursuit be carried out “independently of any faith, or hope that might be entertained, as to their ultimate tendency.” A recognition of “the true limits of man’s capacity” indicates also a turn away from metaphysical systems that seek to articulate a view of the world by which means one’s place in it is to be defined. The longing of the romantic spirit for something unattainable is replaced with a conscious rejection, a careful examination and repudiation, of which it is in part the role of education to furnish. Furthermore, longing is replaced with a desire focused upon the present.

Harold Bloom writes of Pater’s idea of “vision” as being synonymous to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s “imagination,” with the addition that Pater’s epiphanies are “de-idealized,” since they do not attribute powers to the mind that overcome the natural world, and that “his true subject is the partial and therefore tragic (because momentary) victory that art wins over the flux

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24 This refers to his early essay on Coleridge and to the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. It could also be tied to the Preface to *The Renaissance*, where Pater writes that definitions of beauty and similar metaphysical engagements are fruitless for the critic.
of sensations” (12). We get here a modest notion of Pater’s vision in relation to the ambitious place assigned by the Romantics to the power of the mind or spirit. This modesty is restated throughout Pater’s works after first appearing in his essay on Coleridge. Ultimately, however, Pater’s vision differs from Wordsworth’s Imagination in that vision is something acquired, not in a moment of retreat into nature, away from art, but through the incorporation into oneself of the lessons of art, through a wide acquaintance with idealized personalities. Vision becomes the fruit of an aesthetic education of this sort, and its potential becomes to transfigure nature into art, so that experience generally acquires the aspect of revelation, even if it is a modest one that does not seek anything beyond pleasure.

Education generally implies the magnification of reason in the subject, the development of the powers of discernment, by which means one will be able to arrive at the truth of a matter, or nearer the mark, without persistent guidance. The aesthetic education retains this element insofar as it is concerned with paring away ignorance or rejection of matters that are deemed unknowable, but otherwise focuses on the development of “the powers of sensation and emotion.” However, this “positive” aspect deals with the refinement of perceptive powers rather than “powers of sensation and emotion.” The aesthetic education is a training in self-consciousness so that one will better know the impressions that sensations convey.

The doctrine is in part forward-directed, seeking the development of those powers of which it speaks, and in part directed toward the present, in the confidence that the development of those same powers enhances pleasure in the moment. A self-assurance regarding the ends of this peculiar education and the route by which they are to be attained perhaps suggests a speaker who has already undergone a similar education. The pleasure does not merely consist in the accumulation of as many pleasurable sensations qua sensations in a given window of time, of the
consumption of sweets and salts and the satiation of sexual desires; but with the meaningful incorporation of pleasant experiences into a comprehended lifetime. The development of a perception of time both broad and minute is required, in the ability to view the implication of the grand in the small and the manner in which the small accrues to form the grand; and the capacity or perhaps willingness to encounter things in a manner strangely exalted, and the refinement of a sense of estrangement, continuously maintained, whereby objects and persons are not so much perceived as things which make demands of one in the world as they are as things conditional that become suggestive to one, that are perceived as fluid and passing.

In order to make full sense of Pater’s aesthetic education, we need to turn to other works of his where certain ideas become defined. The major ideas of his with which we will be dealing are temperament/personality, imaginative reason/vision, sensation/perception. The first words of these groupings have a more definite application, while the second words take on an idealistic meaning. This dualistic aspect in Pater’s thought could be seen in the “vision of perfect men and things” in the midst of ostensibly ordinary experience. Ultimately, in Pater’s reading of Plato, this vision returns to ordinary experience to the point that one sees, as it were, doubly, the ideal superimposed onto the material, with experience thereby enhanced. If vision is the result of an aesthetic education, then the imaginative reason is the faculty of mind exercised and developed in obtaining this vision. Temperaments address themselves to and are comprehended by the imaginative reason, while personalities are ideal types. Sensations and perceptions differ in the ordinary way we use these terms, sensations being what one would simply call, perhaps unhelpfully in this case, “sense-perceptions,” all those sundry ways we receive “data” of the outside world; and perceptions, meanwhile, referring to the intellectual apprehension of these, referring, especially to aesthetics as perceiving.
3.3 Personality, Vision, and Self-Discipline

If education results in the “vision” of “perfect persons and things” (and these things, we will see, will themselves appear like persons), then we will need to see how Pater views “personalities.” As we have mentioned, “perfect persons” hardly exist, either for the ordinary person or for Pater. To conceive of a perfect person is a matter of art, and that is just the point: a person with the qualities of a work of art, with each aspect of action and worldly manifestation shining forth and displaying a clear idea, with nothing superfluous, nothing belabored. To see with “vision,” to really perceive is to see in one’s life interactions otherwise ordinary translated reflexively into the realm of the ideal, the reflexive perception of form among all the sundry matter, principles that gird and define raw experience. An aesthetic education, an education in perception that culminates in vision involves intimate acquaintance with persons and ideas, ideas that come to be known as persons are known.

Pater frequently refers to “personalities” as being communicated through art. He values the Renaissance in part because of “its special and prominent personalities, with their profound aesthetic charm” (xiii). He also values it because its various intellectual endeavors were linked in thought and its proponents did not work in ignorance of the broader strain of culture or of what other fields were contributing. It was thus “an age productive in personalities, many-sided, centralised, complete” (xiv). In his chapter on Joachim Du Bellay, Pater again writes of “personality” as the most important component of aesthetic value, that “it is necessary that there should be perceptible in his work something individual, inventive, unique, the impress there of the writer’s own temper and personality” (172).

For Pater artists could roughly be viewed as ideal types of personalities, each occupying a position within a kind of pantheon, where lights shining from the rest illuminate each.
the general contrasting currents of Romanticism and Classicism that rush through history, each figure swimming in one or the other tide, artistic figures themselves are often described as being composed of two elements. Thus, Michelangelo comes to be defined as “sweetness” mixed with “strength,” and Leonardo as “curiosity” mixed with “desire for beauty,” that curiosity leading him to new and enigmatic forms. Ian Fletcher has described Pater’s goal in *The Renaissance* as “trying to fix the secret individual experiences of a few personalities who in his scheme of values mattered supremely, by attempting to define in them some central quality, some fixed point in the flux” (60). Artistic tradition does in Pater’s view often seem apart from the otherwise ruinous effects of the flux, but even the pantheon of these ideal types changes, with new lights shining onto old figures. Not only (and not principally, for Pater) do reputations change; artistic figures come to be defined differently in terms of other personalities that come around. Thus, for Pater, Michelangelo comes to be interpreted through the lens of Romanticism, with the figures that most resemble him being Blake and Hugo.  

When Pater begins *The Renaissance* with his essay “Two Early French Stories” and concludes it with his essay on Winckelmann, adjusting the initial movement of the Renaissance to the 12th century and finding its last representative in the 18th century, he is engaging in just this kind of reframing. We see, then, the ideal realm of personalities being modified by the flux, just as the material world is.

Important both to Pater’s skepticism as well as his ideas on “education” and “personality” are both the form of the essay that Pater writes about in *Plato and Platonism* and the dialectical form of thought inherent to it, as a reflection of the mind’s continual conversation with itself.  

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25 I understand this argument as roughly similar to T.S. Eliot’s in “Tradition and Individual Talent,” where Eliot views one given writer as enriching readings of previous writers, providing different contexts for the understanding of those writers.
Pater writes of Plato finding ideas animated, with his alertness to aspects of personality—
gesture, manner of speech, etc.—as informing his views. He writes, for instance,

Yet, in spite of all that, in spite of the demand he makes for certainty and
exactness and what is absolute, in all real knowledge, he does think, inclines his
reader to think, that truth, precisely because it resembles some high kind of
relationship of persons to persons, depends a good deal on the receiver; and must
be, in that degree, elusive, provisional, contingent, a matter of various
approximation, and of an ‘economy,’ as is said; that it is partly a subjective
attitude of mind:—that philosophic truth consists in the philosophic temper. (187)

As with the critic who needs to develop a certain kind of temperament, we get the idea here that
truth also, Plato’s philosophic truth, depends on the development of a temperament. Pater writes
that method, for Plato as well as for other philosophers, must be “a reasoned reflex of
experience” (183). Plato’s dialectical method, “co-extensive with life—a part of the continuous
company we keep with ourselves through life,” according to Pater, does not so much provide and
defend propositions as it “forms a temper” (185, 188). Specifically, enacted for the benefit of its
disputants, for “a gradual suppression of error” in them, it leaves questions unresolved, and
instead provides an impetus to continue that dialogue with oneself, with new contrasting ideas in
the forms of new persons. It leads not so much to truth, then, but to the “vision of what we seek”
(192, emphasis original).

The vision of Plato is, according to Pater, above all an aesthetic vision, bearing always in
mind that realm of perfect persons and things, superimposed continually onto the present for an
enrichment of the things one finds in experience. Not only truth but everything else also becomes
“a matter of various approximation.

Pater writes of the kind of vision that Plato’s temperament resulted in when he writes,
By its juxtaposition and co-ordination with what is ever more and more not it, by the contrast of its very imperfection, at this point or that, with its own proper and perfect type, this concrete and particular thing has, in fact, been enriched by the whole colour and expression of the whole circumjacent world, concentrated upon, or as it were at focus in, it. By a kind of short-hand now, and as if in a single moment of vision, all that, which only a long experience, moving patiently from part to part, could exhaust, its manifold alliance with the entire world of nature, is legible upon it, as it lies there in one’s hand. (158, emphasis original)

Here one could see again Pater’s focus on “vision” and the way in which such vision is manifested moment by moment. The “aesthetic education,” the “long experience” and engagement with contrasting ideas in that process “co-extensive with life” is depicted again. We see the manner in which the sensuous world is sweetened by an aesthetic education. Each particular object or person seems to be in perpetual communion with its perfect type. The world of “perfect men and things” seems superimposed onto the world of imperfect things, and while things pass, an ideal element is retained in the memory of them.

Pater devotes a good deal to “music” in Plato’s sense in Plato and Platonism, specifically his chapter on Lacedaemon. He imagines what an Athenian tourist might find in that intensely reserved city, largely closed to foreign travelers, and focuses on the strictly observed, comprehensively enforced self-abnegation of its ruling class. Pater writes of the Lacedaemonians “gaining strength and intensity by repression” (222). Through their self-repression, the Lacedaemonians fashion themselves somewhat consciously into an ideal type, as if they took in hand pick and hammer and worked away at themselves day by day, until their strength resided latently and was harbored as a kind of self-determination:

With no movement of voice or hand or foot, …, unconsidered, as Plato forbids, it was the perfect flower of their correction, of that minute patience and care which
ends in a perfect expressiveness; not a note, a glance, a touch, but told obediently in the promotion of a firmly grasped mental conception, as in that perfect poetry or sculpture or painting, in which “the finger of the master is on every part of the work.” We have nothing really like it, and to comprehend it must remember that, though it took place in part at least on the stage of a theatre—was in fact a ballet-dance, it had also the character of a liturgical service and of a military inspection; and yet, in spite of its severity of rule, was a natural expression of the delight of all who took part in it. (225)

The idea of self-discipline implies a view of oneself from outside, a modeling of oneself through time, so that one may become an ideal type of some sort. It seeks to remove accident from fate and to concentrate onto the present a determination of will that serves as the basis for a broader consecration of an individual life. Pater raises the question finally of what the purpose of all of the Lacedaemonian self-discipline could be:

Our Platonic visitor would have asked rather, Why this strenuous task-work, day after day; why this loyalty to a system, so costly to you individually, though it may be thought to have survived its original purpose; this laborious, endless, education, which does not propose to give you anything very useful or enjoyable in itself? An intelligent young Spartan might have replied: “To the end that I myself may be a perfect work of art, issuing thus into the eyes of all Greece.” He might have observed—we may safely observe for him—that the institutions of his country, whose he was, had a beauty in themselves, as we may observe also of some at least of our own institutions, educational or religious; that they bring out, for instance, the lights and shadows of human character, and relieve the present by maintaining in it an ideal sense of the past. He might have added that he had his friendships to solace him; and to encourage him, the sense of honour. (232)\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{26} Pater’s fanciful tribute to institutions as bringing out and representing some aspect of human character and as serving as a link to the past could just as well serve for the most pernicious of institutions and could hypothetically justify any form of chauvinism. I am not sure whether Pater has a real response to this criticism, since although his
The idea that this education of the Spartans “does not propose to give [one] anything very useful or enjoyable in itself” may seem to be at odds with Pater’s otherwise Epicurean position regarding the pursuit of pleasure in each moment as it passes, but this is not so if one considers the performative aspect of a Spartan life as always indulging in the striving towards, as always representing a near approximation of, an ideal type. The last sentences are typical of the narrative distance with which Pater attends to his characters. Friendship is something frequently discussed and theorized in his writings, and here it plays a similar role to honor, broadly as something that determines character, among its range of mutability. Characters are not so much discussed as the concepts around which character is based and revealed are discussed. Pater attempts to account for all of the harsh self-imposed discipline and austerity of the Lacedaemonians, which he compares to the asceticism of monks of the Middle Ages, but without the element of guilt and the idea of purging corruption. The disturbing thing to Plato is the differentiation, the variety promoted and spread by the sophists, and so the contrary in the uniformity of Lacedaemon has its appeal. The unrelenting application of a standard of self-maintenance concentrates onto each moment a gravity that demands of oneself a perpetual engagement with an ideal, in which no moment passes that is not meaningfully incorporated into the whole of life, which in turn is fashioned into a consecration of that assiduously maintained ideal. The Spartans become exemplary in their capacity for self-discipline, and thus an expression of the potential of the will to mold life along certain ideals. The fact that they do indeed become an expression of something so definite is evidence of their success, and the deep impressibility of their accomplishment. They become ideals of human mutability in their willful submission to austerity. Not only this,
however, do they exemplify, but also the power of honor and of definite ideals to redeem hardship.\(^{27}\)

One could ask, “But why this focus on the Spartans, who jealously guard their own style of life, who forbid outsiders from entering their city? Should they not, in their apparent strident rejection of a wide and various experience, with their exclusive preference for a certain way of life, be thought of as the antithesis to all that Pater found necessary for an aesthetic education?” And, indeed, Pater’s focus on the Spartans could hardly be dismissed as merely an explanation of their appeal to Plato. Here, one could respond by pointing to the secrecy of the Spartans, their extreme guardedness. This reflects the unflinchingly inward nature necessary for the maintenance of an ideal. The dialectical nature of the aesthetic education is perhaps not reproduced here, unless one considers the application of art onto nature, of molding that nature into something that seems almost to desire pain, of overcoming the native element with art.

The concentration on the present brings to the eager Cyrenaic a vigilance to the shifts of time, to slight modifications, seeking almost to distend it by filling it with various associations, to ensure that it passes into the memory in a more lively manner, since it will go there with definite expression. Ideas that appeal to one emotionally, that play upon our affections, are ideas that incorporate broader concerns—ideas as they relate to personal hopes and desires, that subsume into them our manners of thinking about ourselves. The Spartans stand out in part because of the power their ideas seem to exert over themselves. They simultaneously look out from their own eyes and onto themselves with the gaze of others, discovering in this mutually integrative mode of thought a manner of refining, consecrating each of their actions. And so the

\(^{27}\) A similar idea is suggested by lines from Emerson’s poem that introduces his essay “Heroism”: “The hero is not fed on sweets/Daily his own heart he eats/Chambers of the great are jails/And headwinds right for royal sails.” Pain is integrated into, helps to consecrate as meaningful, a life.
purpose of the aesthetic education, then, becomes not merely the application of a doctrine onto
the present, but the enrichment of the past by making the present memorable, an enrichment,
also, that is redoubled onto the present, with past associations and ideas being revived with
renewed curious feeling upon chance occasions.

It would seem at times that Pater’s idea of an aesthetic education could be accomplished
with little more than a good deal of free time and easy access to a library. But something occurs
while the would-be aesthete comes to terms with the world and forms a meaningful relationship
to it. Pater’s view of education is not, however, systematic, unless one extends the admiration he
expresses for the Lacedaemonians in Plato and Platonism into a form of life that should be
applied to society as a whole. He writes instead to certain sensitive enthusiastic youths who wish
to surround themselves in art and instructs them on how to go about fulfilling their wishes in
beautifying life by following, as it were, a certain kind of regimen. He instructs them that self-
discipline will be necessary. Youth, indeed, in its enthusiasm, its education up to a certain point
and its desire to go further, in its recognition of certain splendid mental powers that it is just
learning to exercise and the prospect for their advancement, with the promise of a certain kind of
mastery thereby attained—a mastery of the world through understanding and temperament—
examples of which are replete in the history of art—of which the youth has a burgeoning
awareness and an appetite for a limitless one—and, with luck, in their own lives.
Chapter 4 Proust’s Revelation of the Commonplace

But by the time youth slips a stage or two
While reading prose in that tough book he wrote
(Collating and emendating the same
And settling on the sense most to our mind),
We shut the clasps and find life’s summer past.
Then, who helps more, pray, to repair our loss--
Another Boehme with a tougher book
And subtler meanings of what roses say,--
Or some stout Mage like him of Haberstadt,
John, who made things Boehme wrote about?
He with a “look you!” vents a brace of rhymes,
And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme’s book and all,--
Buries us with a glory, young once more
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life

-Robert Browning, ”Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books”

Olympian bards who sung
Divine ideas below,
Which always find us young
And always keep us so.
Oft in streets or humblest places,
I detect far-wandered graces,
Which, from Eden wide astray,
In lowly homes have lost their way.

-Emerson, “Ode to Beauty”

4.1 Introduction: Revelation and Commonplace

The revelation at the end of Â la recherche du temps perdu that spurs the narrator to begin his artistic work is, from a certain point of view, of the most commonplace variety: time passes; fashions change; each generation is displaced by its successor; the orders and interests
that constitute our lives, the institutions and sets of relations that grant the illusions of stability and permanence, fall apart. Why, then, does the narrator lose his bearings upon the discovery of something that he and everybody else has known all along? A consequence of this revelation is a new revelation, or at least a recognition, one that throughout the novel has seemed like an impossibility or a hopeless dream—that the narrator has become an artist. How could such a banality allow the narrator to recognize that he is an artist and enjoin him to begin his work?

If the revelation is commonplace, even to the point of being a tautology, since passing is implicit in any definition of time, then it is not any crudeness on the part of the writer which is to blame--it is rather the distinction of the writer to demonstrate the strangeness of this obvious truth and why its obviousness only rarely strikes us--but rather the meager understanding of the human creature for whom neither reason nor experience provide sufficient fortification against the repeated shocks of these tautologies.

The epiphany at the end of the novel makes for an ideal case of what is a rather usual form of thought in Proust, but which in this case is not presented as such: the manner in which one or another thing could appear dull and uninteresting from one perspective and from another as fantastical and abounding with riches. The revelation is a revelation because it discloses, under the ordinary dress of a commonplace, a kind of supersensual vision of things, in which people, places, and ideas appear laden with what they have meant for the narrator over a lifetime. This is a vision which Roger Shattuck, in Proust’s Binoculars, labels “stereoscopic.”

Proust, as I understand him, recognizes memory as a subtly integrative, half-conscious faculty, molding the rough material of experience into an aesthetic whole, making of life a kind of narrative whose fitting conclusion could be seen from any single point in the present, since from that point the one who lives perceives it as such, with the past pouring its riches onto present
concerns and present illusions of the future. The novel, from this perspective, appears less like a
tale of things that have happened, events concerning actions performed by characters who have
lived among the narrator, than it does an interrogation and manipulation of those objects that
have in part molded the mind—and consequently participated in the formation of the conditions of
this investigation—that is observing them.

Why is there this incongruence between the apparent meaning of the revelation and the
sentiment behind it? This question is, to some extent, answered when we read the following in
Middlemarch, as Lydgate is watching the terminally ill Casaubon go for a walk after having just
communicated to him his diagnosis:

Here was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of
death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when
we feel the truth of a commonplace, which is as different from what we call
knowing it, as the vision of waters upon the earth is different from the delirious
vision of the water which cannot be had to cool the burning tongue. When the
commonplace “We must all die” transforms itself suddenly into the acute
consciousness “I must die—and soon,” then death grapples us, and his fingers are
cruel…(387)

We see a similar discussion in The Death of Ivan Ilyich as Ivan is contemplating his own
approaching death:

The syllogism he had learnt from Kiesewetter's Logic: "Caius is a man, men are
mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had always seemed to him correct as applied to
Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—
was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a
creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a
mamma and a papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a
nurse, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of
childhood, boyhood, and youth. What did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother's hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius? Had he rioted like that at school when the pastry was bad? Had Caius been in love like that? Could Caius preside at a session as he did? "Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible." (445-446)

The answer in these two cases appears relatively simple. We cannot help but to consider ourselves as extraordinary cases whom what we after all acknowledge to be a perfectly ordinary occurrence like death cannot disturb. The truth of these statements is acknowledged, as it were, from afar, in a manner of curt indifference, but the proximity of those interests and orders under whose spell we are in the moment captured, whose summons and dictates we follow day after day, blind us to a view of the matter in any but the most abstract terms. The truth of the abstract is acknowledged with understanding only in moments of upheaval, when a sense of identity appears cratered and ruined.

In the case of Ivan Ilyich we begin to see a gesture toward what Proust conveys in viewing the characters, ideas, and places one comes across as the constitutive elements of one’s life, but the blinking dumbness of Ivan Ilych does not at all correspond to the prodigal subtlety and skepticism of Proust’s narrator. As a consequence, there is less focus on the manner in which the mind understands and creates the things that interest it.

The narrator, at the end of Le Temps retrouvé, is not terminally ill, but the point is more or less the same. Our whole lives are testaments to our success in evading death, to the point that we forget its pursuit, so we are naturally surprised when we find we have faltered and are about to be seized. Of course, it is not only misleading but untrue to say
that the narrator’s epiphany only comes in the form of the well-worn phrase “Time passes” or “Time is lost,” but it is worth comparing these truisms with what does occur to him, since it allows us to consider the difference in the manner of perception between ordinary life and moments of revelation, and more broadly about the value of the pursuits of social and private artistic ambitions. Epiphanies, of course, do not appear to us in the form of clichés and tautologies. Instead, they appear as upheavals between the ordinarily firm distinctions between appearance and reality. One does not think to oneself, in a moment of shock, “Time passes,” as anything but an attempt to dismiss and suppress the disquiet one feels upon considering the thoughts that really do upset us, ones like, “Has it really been x years since…?” or “Am I really the same age as X was when…?” This is to say that the cliché arrives only as an afterthought in which we seek to dull our senses to their customary inert state, to reassure ourselves that in fact nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, that we have been borne along time’s tide as we always have been. In response to these questions the cliché comes as a welcome shrug of the shoulders. It comes as a welcome retreat to habit. A commonplace does not affect us with the exception of those moments when it impacts us, when it gains the ability to reorient our perspectives. Otherwise it is merely subsumed into the habitual stream of life, in which it is only a minor part of some haphazard momentary interest.

The revelation of death’s approach, we are made to understand, provides the sense of having climbed to a higher vantage point, in which one surveys the strands of life converging onto the present, in which past concerns and their appeal appear with an alienated majesty, their riches freshly aglow with a peculiar luster, since now they appear like cryptic phenomena to the one who is to be presently turned away from them. It
resembles the perspective one gains upon completing a novel, since one’s perspective is quickly turned away from what might happen next to what has happened, in which people and events are reflexively recalled in a harmonious order, in which chronology only functions to provide new shades of meaning. It is a privileged knowledge, which cannot be separated from the experience, since the experience is responsible for the strength of the impression that is able to disclose truths and reconfigure appearances in the manner that it does. It is fitting, then, that the narrator’s story ends with a kind of death, in which we see no more of him besides his commitment to setting in relief the past that has left around him in its flight the work of art it is for him to gather and raise. Just as when we observe the past it is then that life most resembles a work of art, its moments streaming onto the present and edifying it, making of it an aesthetic unity, in which no part recalled does not appear in harmony, since the spirit of recollection is guided by the keenest aesthetic sensibility, so it is that we see these two manners of perception united at the conclusion of Proust’s novel and, like the route of Swann and that of Guermantes, become indistinguishable, since the work of art that is created is also a recollection. However, it is not only a recollection but a recognition of it as such. Recollection is itself an inspired act in which the ordinary person, without effort and with a kind of melancholic pleasure, creates characters and events as rich and wise as any in literature. What is the peculiar role of the artist, and the peculiar distinction, is to demonstrate this, to blur the lines between memory and literature and between art and life.

In looking at the narrator’s epiphany in this manner, in noting in what perspective it could be viewed as a commonplace, and in providing some suggestion about its revelatory potential, I mean to draw attention to the double aspect of epiphany in Proust generally, in
which ordinary appearances, by the influx of a peculiar sentiment that manipulates customary perspective, become laden with associations that draws one to them. What distinguishes the commonplace from the epiphanic is the manner of appearance, which is to say the manner of perspective and the manner of articulation.\textsuperscript{28}

The narrator himself has the habit of remarking upon the double aspect of certain things, the one fantastical and the other commonplace—the Swann who is the father and master of Gilberte and the Swann who is a friend of the narrator’s grandfather and parents, the Duchesse de Guermantes who is a descendant of Geneviève de Brabant and the slightly fatuous and unremarkable Duchesse of the drawing room, the Bergotte of the page and the Bergotte of flesh, the Albertine as yet undifferentiated from her group of friends in Balbec and the Albertine in the narrator’s possession, the idea of a performance by Berma or the idea of the Balbec Cathedral and the initial impression of each, etc. Even the narrator’s own idea of becoming a writer could be seen from this perspective. When the narrator is young he is overawed by the prospect that such a lofty distinction should be applied to such a lowly figure as himself, and when he is ready to write then the brilliance of the conception he had of the activity has faded, and it is rather the accession of the epiphany to his mind that interests him. However, there is this important difference between these cases and the one that I point out: while in those cases a closer contact with the person, idea, place, or object in question serves to despoil it of its fantastical qualities, in the case of the idea of time’s passing it is a closer contact with it that makes it appear fantastical, while distance from it converts it to a commonplace.

\textsuperscript{28} William C. Carter, in \textit{The Proustian Quest}, writes, “Genius is first described as the ability to reflect or mirror, with the quality of the artist’s vision depending not upon the value of the thing reflected but on the reflecting capacity of the mirror, that is, the artist’s power to render correctly his chosen subject… People, places, and names do not in themselves constitute ideal, integral entities; they can only be endowed with such qualities through the artist’s vision (187-188). It is in part Proust’s freely associative style that grants things their unexpected forms, revealing their subtle appeal as things other than what they seem to be. Things are defined in terms of a collection of private impressions that appear to occur in a moment of daydream.
Much depends on the circumstances in which the consideration of the object occurs. When the narrator has become familiar with the Duchesse de Guermantes and a frequent guest of her salon, then only with an effort can he recall his first sight of her in the church in Combray and the associations the name of Guermantes had for him at the time. Here it is the previous fanciful associations that must be reimagined in order to adorn the ordinary woman with the thoughts which her customary presence has divorced from her. On the other hand, when the narrator meets Swann in Paris and thinks of him principally as the father of Gilberte and the determiner of what she is and is not permitted to do or where she is or is not able to go, then it is with an effort that he must convince himself that the Swann who orders the life of the adored Gilberte like a god is the same Swann who in the past was the subject of family gossip and whose visits to the family’s house in Combray were so unremarkable. In this case, the difficulty is to access the period in which the object was mundane and to convince oneself that what appears fantastical is in fact familiar—an effort to despole the still unfamiliar object of fantasy, Gilberte, of those properties that make her appear extraordinary, and to make her capture by the lowly narrator appear possible.

These two examples illustrate some of the sputtering efforts the narrator makes to project the past onto the present. These cases that the narrator discusses establish the idea that the identity of an object depends on the associations which the mind reflexively produces. This thought itself relies upon an estrangement from the mind, an alienated perspective on it, fashioning it into something that is largely unknowable, since its observation of itself relies on just this kind of haphazard formulation and partiality, and as creative, since its attachment to things creates, distorts, elongates, compresses that which it observes.
4.2 The Self-Deception in Self-Knowledge

My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr’d;
And I myself see not the bottom of it.

-Achilles, *Troilus and Cressida*

What seems to me the most interesting aspect of Proust’s novel is the texture of it, as seen within its labyrinthine sentences, and from above, in the architectonic integration of ideas and events. I view the characters and events in the novel as taking the forms of constitutive elements of the narrator’s life and memory, which is to say as those things which are as much perceived as being outside one as they are viewed as forming oneself, establishing the conditions and manners of perception. The characters, places, and events take this form because of the obsessive focus paid by the narrator for long stretches to what could be called our supersensual faculties—those faculties we have for ordering the flow of images, sounds, tastes, etc. into a perceived whole. This the narrator does by analyzing objects and ideas to the point of dissolving entities as things that could be understood as wholes at all, perceiving them as entirely dependent on the manner of perception, artificially applied, while they nevertheless retain a power over him which he is unable to control. Take, for example, this passage where the narrator reflects upon the period in which he will no longer care for Albertine and no longer mourn her death, a period foreshadowed by a relative calm he feels in the present:

As soon as I was conscious of this, I felt within me a panic terror. This calm which I had just enjoyed was the first apparition of that great intermittent force which was to wage war in me against grief, against love, and would ultimately get the better of them. This state of which I had just had a foretaste and had received the warning was for a moment only what would in time to come be my permanent state, a life in which I should no longer be able to suffer on account of Albertine,
in which I should no longer love her. And my love, which had just seen and recognized the one enemy by whom it could be conquered, forgetfulness, began to tremble, like a lion which in the cage in which it has been confined has suddenly caught sight of the python that will devour it. (In Search of Lost Time Volume V, 603)

He attempts to view the present from the perspective of the future, the inevitable period in which he will no longer care for Albertine, a period which is already embedded in the present through the intermittent moments in which he does not mourn her. He often thinks of the other characters in the novel through their first appearances, or the various ways they have been presented to him over the course of time. This makes him skeptical of the truth of present appearances and rather puts the focus on how being in time manipulates his perspective, makes him particularly attached to a certain appearance, a certain presentation of the world, while knowing full well that it will not last, that it will mutate and appeal to him differently.

In order to better understand the distinct manner in which Proust develops his characters and the manner in which his skepticism about the possibility of self-knowledge takes form, I think it is worthwhile to look at some passages from George Eliot, since one often sees in her writing a similar taste for doubt in regard to people’s confidence over their claims to know things about themselves. I will present a rather lengthy group of passages typical of her third-person narrators for the reader to get a relatively clear impression of the style and form of skepticism which characterizes these narrators. Although Proust’s skepticism in regard to self-knowledge is similar to that of George Eliot’s narrators’, in Proust’s novel this skepticism is presented in the form of scraps in the narrator’s interior monologues and broadly forms an account of the people in the narrator’s own life, distending them, turning them into mental phenomena that shift under
his observation, and alienating him from them. They take on the proportions of mere composites of associations and of constitutive elements of his life, while with Georg Eliot these periodic and sharp formulations do not at all reflect the characters’ own thoughts about each other. Take, for instance, this selection of passages from *Middlemarch*:

But anyone watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbor. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand. (85)

Strange, that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights, behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us. (138)

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent…(240)

We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire.
For the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief. (476)

But indefinite visions of ambition are weak against the ease of doing what is habitual or beguilingly agreeable; and we all know the difficulty of carrying out a resolve when we secretly long that it may turn out to be unnecessary. In such states of mind the most incredulous person has a private leaning towards miracle: impossible to conceive how our wish could be fulfilled, still—very wonderful things have happened! (550)

There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men. (566)

But many of these misdeeds were like the subtle muscular movements which are not taken account of in the consciousness, though they bring about the end that we fix our mind on and desire. And it is only what we are vividly conscious of that we can vividly imagine to be seen by Omniscience. (628)

Who can know how much of his most inward life is made up of the thoughts he believes other men to have about him, until that fabric of opinion is threatened with ruin? (629)

Does any one suppose that private prayer is necessarily candid—necessarily goes to the roots of action? Private prayer is inaudible speech, and speech is
representative: who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections? (650)

One hears echoes of these passages in the following passages from Proust:

As I made my way home, I reflected upon the speed with which conscience ceases to be a partner in our habits, which she allows to develop freely without bothering herself about them, and upon the astonishing picture which may consequently present itself to us if we observe simply from without, and in the belief that they engage the whole of the individual, the actions of men whose moral or intellectual virtues may at the same time be developing independently in an entirely different direction. (In Search of Lost Time Volume VI, 212-213)

But the man who can see other people’s errors often succumbs to them himself if sufficiently intoxicated by circumstances. (In Search of Lost Time Volume V, 328)

But my reason, to which, before I knew anything, the only explanation of certain bouts of ill-humor, of certain attitudes, had appeared to be that she had planned to leave for good, found it difficult to believe that, now that her departure had occurred, it was a mere feint. I say my reason, not myself. The hypothesis of a feint became all the more necessary to me the more improbable it was, and gained in strength what it lost in probability. When we find ourselves on the verge of despair and it seems as though God has forsaken us, we no longer hesitate to expect a miracle of him. (In Search of Lost Time Volume V, 584)

Yes, a moment ago, before Francoise came into the room, I had believed that I no longer loved Albertine, I had believed that I was leaving nothing out of account, like a rigorous analyst; I had believed that I knew the state of my own heart. But our intelligence, however lucid, cannot perceive the elements that compose it and remain unsuspected so long as, from the volatile state in which they generally
exist, a phenomenon capable of isolating them has not subjected them to the first stages of solidification. I had been mistaken in thinking that I could see clearly into my own heart. But this knowledge, which the shrewdest perceptions of the mind would not have given me, had now been brought to me, hard, glittering, strange, like a crystallized salt, by the abrupt reaction of pain. (In Search of Lost Time Volume V, 564)

The bonds between ourselves and another person exist only in our minds. Memory as it grows feinter loosens them, and notwithstanding the illusion by which we want to be duped and with which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, duty, we dupe other people, we exist alone. Man is the creature who cannot escape from himself, who knows other people only in himself, and when he asserts the contrary, he is lying. (In Search of Lost Time Volume V, 607)

There is a kind of double-dealing which the mind performs for which it is unable to account. No matter what instruments we develop in our silent reflections and our serious studies, the phenomena for which they are designed will have foreseen their flaws and will as a consequence be too unwieldy or else too subtle to be grasped. The mind is inescapably self-suspicious and changes under the light in which it is observed, seemingly hiding its vital parts. Even skeptical or suspicious remarks seem to be transmitted with the fatal measure of complacency. In these passages there is a kind of psychological plasticity, which attempts to quickly leap beyond the perimeter that the mind, in each of its moments, closes upon itself. There is something vaguely menacing and destabilizing about this perspective. In the suggestion of the partiality of our observation, of some essential points being hidden from us, we see something that the artist is somehow also able to grasp, through the representation of the manner in which we are all trapped, our perspectives limited by a certain inviolable ignorance.
In reading both Eliot and Proust we get the idea that we are helpless purveyors of self-deception, drunk with illusions, but in Proust the idea is usually not sharpened to the form of an epigram. In George Eliot these passages function as rather quick synoptic descriptions of the illusions which the characters have of themselves, as representative of the illusions which all people have of themselves. They exhibit a relatively short departure from the conflicts of the plot, which is primarily conveyed through dialogue and through descriptions of the characters’ attitudes in relation to each other and to various events. In Proust, on the contrary, these passages rarely take the form of epigram, and when they do it is only a short punctuation of the thought amid a broader distention of it. The form of epigram characterizes George Eliot’s third-person narrator as remote, cold, preternaturally wise, ironical, cognizant of the hidden springs of the characters of which they themselves are ignorant—not unlike that “Destiny” of which the narrator speaks. Meanwhile, these kinds of passages characterize Proust’s first-person narrator as pessimistic, since it takes a mental operation of dissociation from one’s attachments, from one’s ordinary manner of participating in the world to see things this way. He does not merely observe actions from a point of view from which he is not affected by them; he is pained by what occurs, and the act of estranging himself from the phenomena is simultaneously an attempt to rid himself of the pain that the world causes, to separate himself from it, as it is a further dose of pain, since attachment to the world is one of the aspects which cannot be avoided, whatever perspective the mind employs to dissociate itself. George Eliot’s narrator is aloof, presenting the characters, for the benefit of the reader, in a manner before which they would shrink. Proust’s narrator is self-estranged. He divides himself, views his own perspective as corrupted, and even when he looks in this manner onto others, it appears to him as if an aspect of the world, the world in which he is involved and in which he has stakes, has been fatally conceived. The attempt at dissociation, the
assertion of estrangement demonstrates the vulnerability of the narrator to that from which he attempts to separate himself.

In the passages of George Eliot we begin to get a view of the definition of character as dependent on the partiality of observation, and a conviction that some essential points will always remain hidden from us. It is this idea of the partiality of observation as necessarily corrupting any idea we may have that becomes elaborated at great length and in many different ways by Proust’s narrator.

In these passages we also get the idea that we are somehow fundamentally mistaken about ourselves, not merely ignorant of some superfluous aspect but of something that, were we able to perceive it, would alter our self-definitions altogether. In Proust we see the struggle for expression enacted, rather than merely observing the fruits of revelation. In paying so much attention to this idea, in developing it in numerous ways, and in enacting it, as it were, in style, in breaking down ideas and characters to a number of associations that comprise them, unify them as aesthetic phenomena, Proust manages to turn this aspect of the lengthy departures from narrative into a reconstitution of the characters as the constitutive elements of the narrator’s life and memory; he renders them for himself as aesthetic phenomena, as they appeared and developed in the world for him.

4.3 Perspectives of the Mind and Dissolution of Character

The question of an epiphany centered around time and the reorientation of experience necessarily hinges on the manner in which time and experience are defined and represented. To present the epiphany as anything but the culmination of the novel in which it is included seems already to distort it. Its role as an epiphany depends on its place in the novel, the crystallization of itself in its own words. To artificially extract it, to talk about it as if it retained its identity
when classified as a mere thing of this sort, something that could be casually referenced, appears presumptuous. I will try to convey something of the strangeness of the task of presenting the epiphany outside of its proper place through various perspectival manipulations, attempts to shake the reader from the customary perspective through which we generally look, in which we do not recognize the strangeness of our own perspectives.

A thought exists in a certain moment in time. It persists, changes (in subject, focus, intention, emotional appeal, etc.) and is somehow particularly directed and contained, so that an individual does not simultaneously have present in mind and to observation, however loosely defined these things are, everything he or she has experienced, has ever considered, or could imagine. We are subject at any given moment and for all our lives to a kind of jealous regard, fitful enthusiasms, a severely limited perception, a condition to which we typically pay no heed since even the awareness of this restriction does nothing to overthrow it, and instead merely makes this idea the object temporarily uppermost in our thoughts. Every thought, for as long as it lasts, is a fixation. Its presence in one’s mind precludes other ideas from being considered. It prevents us, except for certain moments of seeming revelation, from observing the pattern in which it is enmeshed and in which we–our characters, our lives–become defined. The self, in this view, insofar as it could be described as persisting over a stretch of time, takes the form of a kind of reflexive generation of associations and a set of relations among them.

This is often how Proust’s narrator conceives of himself and of the people that populate his life. This level of scrupulous analysis in defining oneself and this kind of ostensibly detached theorizing plays the role of corrupting one’s attachments, turning them into objects which, upon adopting this perspective, lose a firm identity and become atomized, with a value contingent on the adoption of a too-easy perspective that might be deemed naive and simplistic. As habit
dictates attachments, since the things we orbit fix the range of our observation and our thoughts about the world, we also see a fatalism in recognizing the destructive power of time, as the submission to analysis of this sort alienates us from those monuments whose persistent and recurring presence has fashioned the selves we have come to identify with—an alienation which at the same time allows for the reconstitution of those things, the creation of oneself, in a new form.

Near and far are, as it were, equally enchanted—near with the enchantment of proximity and far with that of distance. I do not mean this as merely a bit of pleasant nonsense. I will try my hand at illustrating what I mean. I suppose everyone is in some manner familiar with fairly regular periods of intense concentration upon some matter—the close scrutiny of an object in one’s grasp or some task that presently occupies one’s attention. Likewise, I suppose everyone is familiar with the pleasant removal of this fixed gaze, where a relaxed mood seems to arrange what we have perceived into a broader context. This is the weft and warp of life, the submergence and emergence that allows for new vantage points upon what has passed, and the integration of what we have learned upon our understandings of ourselves and our visions of the future. Who does not think in some moment of pain that its present disappearance is an impossibility? The desire to leap beyond the limits of the pain imposed by time makes us conscious of those limits and how we are bound by them. Who does not think, after the pain has disappeared, that the pain could well have been an illusion? We cannot see beyond our present concerns and attachments, so the failure to see again, experience again, what was all we could at one point see, strikes us as absurdly incongruous.

However, one does not move from one of these states of mind to the other with difficulty. It is a routine that occurs constantly and the transition is so smooth that it is hardly recognized—so much so that an articulated distinction of this sort seems like a crude misrepresentation. I say
this to draw attention to the manner in which our perspectives are manipulated from one moment to the next, and to the manner in which we are unwitting accomplices to the distortions we necessarily apply. In the heat of experience we cannot tell what the experience will mean for us because we are too engrossed in its unfolding. When it has passed or when it is yet to come it borrows its value, its place in narrative, from the present perspective. A work of literature seems to me to affect its reader on both of these registers. Indeed, this tautology forms a considerable part of the enjoyment of the conclusions of novels generally, where, provided no instruction, we harmonize the earlier parts with the later ones and see, ranging over the events, the idea of the unity of a character’s life and of a story.

I have found this elaboration of perspective necessary to convey something of the strangeness in the manner we experience the world in the present and the manner in which we assimilate that experience, how we create our ideas of ourselves and of the people who orient our vision of the world. I find this perspective reflected in what Roger Shattuck, in Proust’s Binoculars, talks about concerning Proust’s desire to give form and definition to the idea of time:

Proust set about to make us see time. But the telescopic figure is not so apt as that of the stereoscope. To see anything in temporal depth, we need at least two impressions of it. One image, one present, is not enough, because a single event or impression isolated in the consciousness cannot sustain itself, has no dimensionality in time, remains “flat” to the mind; it can be kept alive only by voluntary memory or the sheer uncreative repetition of habit. In the final reassembling of all the characters, Marcel recognizes them one by one—that is he succeeds in slipping side by side into his “interior stereoscope” the different images of, say, Odette. She is, simultaneously, cocotte and fashionable hostess, wife and widow, mother and grandmother, and newly acquired mistress of the senile Duc de Guermantes, who in the past refused to admit her to his wife’s receptions. Memory, in its alternate form of recognition, progressively sets one
image beside other chronologically separated images and sees in them not change (though this is the comical “masked ball” aspect of the final scene, which precedes recognition), not trompe l’oeil, but revelation of true identity, the “optical view.” Odette is all that. At last Marcel knows who the characters are that he has encountered all his life, different each time, and classified by necessity and habit under names. Multiplicity now brings not confusion but dimensionality and depth. Memory in Proust’s sense designates a stereoscopic or “stereologic” consciousness which sees the world simultaneously (and thus out of time) in relief. Merely to remember something is meaningless unless the remembered image is combined with a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects. Like our eyes, our memories must see double; those two images then converge in our minds into a single heightened reality.

...The act of ultimate recognition removes all images from the stream of time to set them up temporally equidistant in Time, equally available to our consciousness. And then we are no longer pinned to the present looking backwards, we are no longer bathed helplessly in the Heraclitean flux or the Bergsonian durée. The act of involuntary memory, fleetingly, and the act of recognition more permanently, wrench themselves free of clock time to find a perspective vast enough to hold all our experience. (46-48)

Shattuck provides an excellent metaphor to describe the manner in which Proust seeks to convey a sense of time, but I find it at the same time somewhat misleading. The image of a kind of temporal stereoscope establishes the notion of depth in time, viewing separate images and

\[\text{image from page 107}\]

29 Gérard Genette, in \textit{Narrative Discourse}, provides a brief discussion of this representation of time, writing, “We know with what ambiguity—to all appearances unbearable—the Proustian hero devotes himself to the search for and the ‘adoration’ of both the ‘extra-temporal’ and ‘time in its pure state’; how he wants himself, and with him his future work, to be both together ‘outside time’ and ‘in Time.’ Whatever the key to this ontological mystery may be, perhaps we see better now how this contradictory aim functions in and takes possession of Proust’s work: interpolations, distortions, condensations—the Proustian novel is undoubtedly, as it proclaims, a novel of Time lost and found again, but it is also, more secretly perhaps, a novel of Time ruled, captured, bewitched, surreptitiously subverted, or better: \textit{perverted}” (160). Any narrative necessarily involves a representation of time, an attempt to capture it, and consequently a corruption or perversion of the manner in which it actually passes. In making this struggle the central part of his work, along with the perspectival distortions he employs, Proust sets in relief the manner in which memory already corrupts and aestheticizes time passed.
disjointed moments as continuous, but I think Shattuck overstates the novelty of the application of this kind of vision. By limiting his discussion to the novel itself he fails to notice how common this manner of perception really is, along with its potential as yet another example in which Proust sets in relief a more general characteristic of art and life.

We do not need a device to see things in this manner. We only need Proust to recognize that we do indeed habitually see them this way. It is rather familiar to everyone who habitually surveys their past or who thinks, upon the conclusion of a novel, of a character from it. It is Proust’s recognition that this manner of perception is so common to both art and life that constitutes, as it were, a discovery.

When we remember past events we attribute to them depth unselfconsciously. The spirit of recollection is a recollection of different selves, the reflexive juxtaposition of which implies narrative and irony, ironizes the present, provides lightness and depth. When I say that it implies narrative I mean to say that it also implies a certain aesthetic understanding of time, the rough material from which art is to be made. Contrary to a work of art, which requires some understanding of the material to perceive it as a unified whole, one looks upon the past—that is to say one’s life—from whichever present it happens to be, as a unified aesthetic phenomenon, its parts understood reflexively as contributing to a certain formal whole. We perceive continuity between our past selves and our current self. We perceive time as if reflecting upon a work of art, and a work of art involves the self-conscious setting-in-relief of a certain understanding of time.

The presentation of an aspect of psychology in fantastical terms focuses onto that aspect a certain speculative, skeptical perspective. The characters and events are habitually soaked in a solution that breaks them apart, so that we often see their component parts—which are, after all, the impressions of the narrator, the various associations that occur to him to make—and come to
think of them, as he often does, as not only concrete things that order his interests and attachments in the world, but also as powers that marshal those interests and attachments, powers that break apart into a thousand strange things upon close scrutiny. Attention, moreover, is habitually paid to their contingent presence, their contingent appearances, and they are frequently considered in the various manners in which they have appeared. In Proust things take a kind of double aspect and are constantly thought of in terms of their original appearance—Swann’s initial indifference to Odette, the narrator’s first fascination with the Duchesse de Guermantes and with the name Guermantes, his first sight of Gilberte and of Albertine, his first impression of Berma, his initial meeting with Odette in his uncle’s apartment, etc. The narrator considers this very idea when he first hears that Mme de Villeparisis’s nephew, Robert de Saint Loup, is in Balbec and he will soon meet him; he imagines their first introduction and how strange it will seem in hindsight, when they will be close friends. These potent associations lay scattered over one’s past and their discovery, their contingency on a thousand circumstances and their seeming impossibility when considered in such a manner provides a richness and grandeur to the fate that has arranged them. These considerations endow fate with a fantastical power, in ordering interests and attachments, and make the sights one has seen, the people one has met, things molded in one’s unconscious conspiracy with fate.

4.4 Conclusion: Art, the Reconstruction of Time, and the Monumentalization of Character

When near and familiar an object’s relationship to oneself is more rigidly defined. One discovers its subtleties, and these soon cease to impress upon one a pleasant charm. One does not observe the furnishings of one’s house over and over with curiosity but merely seeks a
comfortable place to sit. What is near acquires its enchantment when seen again from a distance. One is then able to contextualize the sentiments to which one was in thrall, and the force of their intoxication is understood, if not in sobriety, yet in the sight of new landscapes of thought and feeling to which one is borne. The narrator arrives at his account of Albertine and his love for her after she has died. He is able, in some measure, to examine the change in himself. He attributes his love for her not to any special feeling or to an exalted idea of the relationships to which people enter, but rather to the fact that she becomes a habitual presence in his life. She becomes a kind of background setting upon which his life is played out, a permanent presence that makes certain demands upon him, makes of him a creature with certain expectations, which, if they ceased, would make him a creature of different habits and expectations, and consequently a different creature. The fact that she is, according to him, as an aside, I think some of Robbe-Grillet’s writing arrives at a vision in the manner in which our customary orbit around certain objects accrue to us, something that we remain ignorant of but for the manner in which Robbe-Grillet demonstrates this as revelation. The level of detail and the coldness of tone with which he describes objects seem, at first glance, unaccountably extravagant, but these in fact reflect the manner in which the details in the perceptions of the objects we perpetually orbit accrue to us. Robbe-Grillet passes over minute details over and over again and, by doing so, describes the labyrinth of images and actions that comprise much of life, as dictated by routine, in which orderings of before and after are largely beside the point because the same little fragments occur thousands of times. He does not always present his descriptions of objects as having come from routine observation, but this is how we reconcile their apparent insignificance with the level of detail attached to them. The things we see countless times appear much clearer to us, and indeed provide us our ideas of definition, and these are often objects that play a role in routines, shutting us up in a maze of perceptions, actions, and expectations that define much of life. We see the same bed, the same threads that compose it, the same sink, turn on the same faucet, with the same curved handle, etc. These are details which a “realist” writer may note here and there but the psychological state in which they compose one’s ever-repeating and ever-revolving perceptions is lost entirely in the work of the “realist” writer. As a realist writer filters out these details, or only mentions them in order to establish a certain predictable environment in which characters interact, so Robbe-Grillet filters out character from the world of routine perception and observation, the growing definition and familiarity with objects, in which time hardens the bindings of our thoughts.

Imagine, for example, four golden tassels hanging from the four corners of a pillow, each below the binding diffusing into innumerable fine threads, and above, brought together into firm winding chords. It is a proclivity of idleness to absorb oneself in such trivial details, pressing the threads together, pulling a few apart, observing the play of light, studying the texture of now one part and now another. Such careful and careless observations, from which the slightest call to action will deliver us, comprise a much greater part of our lives than do the great acts of life, those to which in memory we direct the flow of our emotions, and are perhaps no less important in characterizing us, even if they often lack emphasis in our memories and in the narratives we read and construct for ourselves.
completely unremarkable makes her an object endowed with a new remarkable quality—the quality of being, and of making him also, the plaything of chance, the fateful object around which his thoughts revolve. She is unremarkable, and therefore her like is virtually ubiquitous, but she becomes singular because of the curious operation of initial attraction and attachment, and later of habitual presence. Initially perceived from distance she becomes an object of fanciful speculation, later in proximity a habitual presence like a piece of household furniture, and then finally one of the monuments of the past, endowed with new associations and ideas. The fact that she is unremarkable, or could even be described this way by the person for whom she bore so much importance, is itself a stunning admission, and only one that could be made from distance. Even if this quality is observed in the throes of his actual obsession, it is seen more clearly, and becomes more remarkable when he is past it.

Meanwhile, what is distant enchants through the vagueness and multiplicity of its promises for when it nears us or when we imagine ourselves arriving at it. Our departure for a new destination involves fantasies of what will await us upon arrival, the construction of new relations and attachments that will draw our eager attention and will circumscribe the range of our actions. The arrival seems to disenchant us by delivering into our presence stuff of the same rough material, and not the gauzy mists we imagined.

On first thought it would seem that Proust is very much interested in ordinary life, and indeed he is, with his discussions of social gatherings and vacations, of experiences at restaurants and at theaters, even of his after-school routine of going to the Champs Élysées with Françoise or with his grandmother and there playing with Gilberte. On the other hand, these simple activities and experiences that do indeed reflect, if not in their particulars, yet in their general application, much of ordinary experience, nevertheless also become monumentalized in the story as the
constitutive elements of the narrator’s memory and life, the objects and events that, with their accidental necessity, drew him to them, changed appearance as time passed, and formed his character, the horizons of his thought. The style also, in its easy drift, in its resemblance to an almost absent-minded, even if inspired, reflection, also bears this dual significance. It resembles the quality of daydream, which arrives in a mist of associations, rather than in concrete sentences, and it becomes the work of the second sight of the artist to recognize the value of these impressions and arrange them into a distinct whole, to make a form of that mist that arrives equally to everyone—to make of them a sentence, a paragraph, a novel. Through the mist arrives the conceit, the sign of the self-consciousness that circumscribes associations and binds them. Thus, at the level of the sentence we see, from the first pages, the arrival of the artist who will only be heralded in the last pages, as prophets are foretold centuries before they begin their earthbound journeys. If particularly distinctive of leisure rather than of the harried insinuation of ourselves into a web of affairs that strain our efforts towards aesthetic pleasure, and reflective therefore of the narrator’s habitual departure from the narration of events and into a scrupulous analysis of various ideas, as it is of the narrator’s own workless life, the style also conforms to and idealizes the quiet reflection that is often such an overlooked part of ordinary experience.

But this perspective of daydream, if especially reflective of much of experience—since we see it in our own lives not only when presented with a fine view of a landscape or when we find ourselves alone and reclined in a comfortable chair, but also in the midst of drudgery or of routine activities—has the ability to distort objects in a manner that is alien to what we

31 See, for example, Berthe Morisot’s painting of a young girl braiding her hair. Who does not read on this face the forgotten moments of life, the thoughts that carried and carry us still through tedium and that evaporate as soon as they pass? These moments demonstrate their force in their number and ubiquity, in their providing a distinct flavor to life and to memory, indeed by providing the mode, as also the setting, in which we perceive these things as unities at all.
customarily associate with ordinary life. So it is that, if on the one hand the characters and scenes become monumentalized in the novel and in the narrator’s recollection, on the other hand they become analyzed to a degree that they break apart and lose a coherent and unified identity, lose their resemblance to what we ordinarily conceive of as persons, places, or events, and resemble in their forms the fleeting impressions that are the usual products of this manner of reflection. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of the narrator himself, who thinks of himself according to the interests and attachments he has, and imagines, under the influence of an almost extravagant scrutiny, that he becomes a different person upon the transfiguration or replacement of an interest or attachment.

When I describe these characters as the constitutive elements of the narrator’s life I mean to draw attention to the way that they form ideals of various sorts, to the way that he thinks of them often from multiple perspectives, seeing them in various moments in time, in which they are different people for him, and the manner in which these also become synthesized under names and ideas, as aesthetic phenomena of great complexity, not merely the repositories of sentiment but the imaginative creation of it. The work of art has been stored, as it were, all along, carefully prepared unconsciously by countless interactions that become monumentalized in the relatively few scenes in which each of the characters appear, these scenes having absorbed from countless others their myriad lusters, described as being habitual actions. Initial fantasies persist in a different manner.

One could say that any novel of any depth represents people in this way, but this is not the case. Proust’s habitual characterization of his characters as aesthetic phenomena, his extreme fastidiousness, where characters dissolve into impressions, associations and reemerge as concrete forms, prepares for them to be apprehended in this manner.
The exalted enthusiasms where one believes that one perceives the ends of life streaming in and out of the particular moment punctuate our course. The objects that surround us are not merely the repositories of sentiments and ideas but also the creations of them. They prompt sentiments and forever afterwards become associated with them. They awaken and develop emotions and thereby determine the strands of experience and the contours of life.

This fact that the past is past, that the piecemeal change becomes noticed upon some incident, never ceases to shock the narrator. He records his surprise again and again that time should transform him. He declares that he will stake out his feelings and then ambush fate at the moment of its appearance, but its work goes on invisibly, and our alertness is blind. Proust never tires of drawing attention to all of the ways in which our strongest convictions and our most cherished self-definitions are the products of ignorance. He does this most forcefully with the narrator’s love of Albertine and in his grief over her death. At first it is not at all Albertine whom the narrator loves, but rather the group of girls in which he finds her. She is merely representative of the group, which in turn represents a spirit of youthful frivolity against the backdrop of the sea, this group, this idea and its associations sealed in the word whose pronunciation allows these genies to escape—Balbec. The confluence of circumstances and the associations she happens to adopt from them are entirely accidental in the meaning she gains in the narrator’s mind. When Albertine in the train mentions in passing her friendship with Vinteuil’s daughter, at a point when the narrator intends to part from her, and later on when she leaves the narrator and soon after dies, again at a point when the narrator has resolved to break off their relationship, the narrator becomes shocked to learn how much he cares about her, who, when they are together, inspires in him a mixture of boredom and disgust. However, owing to her continual presence in the company of the narrator over a period of months, Albertine comes
to seem to him to be a necessary part of his life. Her presence in the narrator’s life has become, to his mind, such an implicit foundation of it that it seems to have become an indispensable element to it, and the question of her whereabouts has become such an overwhelming obsession that her removal from his life strikes the narrator as an impossibility.

Such an abrupt upheaval in what has, in a piecemeal fashion, become the unacknowledged backdrop of one’s thoughts—the presence of Albertine—strikes the narrator as absurdly incongruent. It is another instance of a tautology—the dead Albertine will not return—that stuns. One’s attachments, the result of silent invisible stitching done over a long period of time, away from the observation and the much exaggerated powers of the self-conscious will, when quickly rent, bear proof of the flimsiness of our complacent self-understandings as self-determining agents who are typically credible witnesses to the phenomena occurring within our minds. The narrator postulates, upon the death of Albertine, that he will have to die in order to overcome his grief over her death. Soon enough, as time removes him from his initial incredulity over her death, and as disbelief has added days to its ledger, this disbelief becomes, in time, converted to the new reigning belief of his life—that Albertine is dead—while the idea that she was ever alive and with him comes to sound increasingly incredible.

This transformation of beliefs, under the stewardship of habit, serves as a kind of death and rebirth of an indeterminable date. The process is observable; the narrator even has some foreknowledge of the success of this laceration of his care for Albertine through his previous operation to rid himself of his feelings for Gilberte, but a familiarity with the instruments of grief does not inure one to the pain caused by their renewed application. If the process is predictable and observable, then the precise moment of the death of the previous self—the self who loved Albertine—is not. As the foreknowledge of the upheaval to occur within oneself does not fortify
against its ravages, so the observation of the mind is unequipped to view and take account of the subtle gradations of feeling necessary to locate the moment of transformation.

This admission of ignorance is also an observation of the subllest kind of a psychological fact—sketching the range and limits of human perception, and performed with a daintiness of observation that is peculiar to Proust’s style. After a time, the narrator frequently observes that he no longer feels any love for Albertine or any grief over her death, which becomes linked in his mind to his indifference to his grandmother’s death. These repeated observations, which the narrator makes use of to note his surprise at the transformations to which one is susceptible, also indicate his ambivalent relationship to his own impulses. He regrets, at least occasionally, what he takes to be the cruelty of his lack of remorse over their deaths, but this apparent honesty, in its bluntness, condemns these figures to an existence as curiosities, whose primary interest lies in their no longer holding any interest—some of the principal specimens in the fascination of time’s destructive force over his own affections. If the narrator is no longer troubled by the deaths of his grandmother and of Albertine, he is nevertheless sufficiently disquieted later on to recognize the ease with which affections, attachments, and all those successive selves who harbor them are washed away, so that this idea of an impersonal fate that continually acts upon one takes the place of the grief no longer felt. Indeed, this apparent indifference instead takes the form of a persistent masochistic self-scrutiny, a desire to submit to the vaunted power that will nevertheless conquer, enumerating its powers, resentfully eulogizing its implacable domination.

The frequent application of the idea of death to these periodic transformations of the self reflects the masochistic impulses of the narrator. The narrator indulges a morbid fascination with the splendor of the ruins to which everything succumbs, and these he paints again and again in marvelous and various colors, viewing them in new places and people. Charlus succumbs to his
wanton—according to the judgment of the novel—inclinations and, once proud and domineering, is diminished to a pathetic and hobbled state at the end, before these inclinations seize hold of the otherwise pure-hearted Saint-Loup, whose courage only leads to his early violent death in war. The Duchesse de Guermantes, once the most sought-after woman of fashionable society, becomes at the end a subject of mockery for the wit for which she was once championed, and endures the humiliation of seeing her husband openly flaunt his passion for a woman whom in the past she would not condescend to meet. Earlier, Swann, the husband of that woman, Odette, and close friend of the Duchesse, fails to receive the solicitude of a true friend, and instead is made to feel a want of tact, when he admits to the Duc and Duchesse that he has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, as they hurry off to a party in the wake of a relative's death. When a member of the Verdurins’ group dies they feign unbearable grief at the mention of the name so that they do not have to trouble themselves with the annoyance of others’ mourning. At the end, the petty and cruel Madame Verdurin—as much of a villain, along with Morel, as the novel possesses—has finally achieved for her salon the glory which in the past she pretended to despise. After Swann’s death, and after her mother marries M. de Forcheville, Gilberte is careful to hide the fact that her father who cherished her was of any relation. Towards the end of the final volume, the narrator looks away from the party where he finds himself and briefly turns to describe a competing event at the house of Berma—that name which inspired wonder in his youth at the idea of the theater—where the old actress finds herself alone, bereft of friends, apart from the daughter for whom she is sacrificing her health and her son-in-law, both of whom soon abandon her in favor of pleading entry from Berma’s rival to Mme. Verdurin’s party.

What a range of peaks and valleys, what prolonged tectonic violence raises some and levels others, of a sort that operates variously within the individual and in the circumstances in
which she finds herself. What a labyrinth of posturing and pettiness. If in the illumination of all this strife, this tracing of conquest and defeat, there is the fiery voice of a prophet, warning of the decadence, the narcissism and vindictiveness of these philistines, no less do we see the passive acceptance of this state of affairs as a state of nature. It is a vision of humanity as subject to pain, guilt, grief, shame, disease, death which occur in such impressive variety and appear with such regular and destructive force as to inspire our awe. In the long passages commenting on the surprise the narrator takes in observing the consequences of aging in the people he once knew, we recognize a kind of masochistic pleasure in registering the varieties of destruction in which time completes its work as well as the variety of futile efforts in which people attempt to oppose it. Not only do we see faces and bodies cratered and ruined; we also see certain ideal types despoiled of their authority--the Duchesse de Guermantes, Charlus, Saint-Loup, Swann, Gilberte, Berma. We even see the perishing of affections--of the narrator’s love for his grandmother and later of his love for Albertine.\footnote{32 Even in the case of the narrator’s mother, whose love for the departed grandmother and grief over her death does not diminish over time, we can notice a kind of self-destruction in her devotion to the loved one’s memory, a feverish and incessant sacralization which entirely displaces her own concerns.}

The combination in the narration of the novel of what is habitual, what is described as having habitually occurred, together with the specific events narrated, and these along with the various meditative diversions--and these meditations themselves providing a fantastical aspect, through their abundant use of metaphor--on the influence of one or another emotion or aspect of life, such as habit or names, all of these intermingled as they are, gives the specific events a representative function akin to the manner in which I described memories above, that is, as expressive of one or another period of life.
In Proust one sees the emergence from some particular occasions an undercurrent of thoughts and feelings that form the contours of life, the kinds of attitudes that mark a period of life or that mark a distinct kind of personality, and in the attention paid to the variety of impressions one perceives the treasuring of this disclosure. It is a cherishing for the kind of self that one discovers oneself to be at a particular time and place, both of which are incidental--the narrator’s incidental initial contact with Albertine and her friends at Balbec, for instance, the perception of what he takes to be their exultant youthful cruelty, the unrestrained exuberance of life he sees in their actions, running around unconcerned, jumping over the old and wheelchair-bound man--that marks the kind of wisdom that arrives to each: the kind of wisdom that implies the acquisition of the knowledge of what it means to be of one age or another, the kinds of scenes that invite one’s fancy, the kinds of impulses, desires, attractions that guide one. In the incidental one finds the particular that serves as the measure one uses in reflection for the general, for the assessment of others. In Proust we see that the moment one is able to fasten one’s gaze on a period of life, to form an understanding of it, is the moment one recognizes that one no longer lives by those impulses and desires. The moment of understanding, with its happiness of having captured the taste of a period of life, to have seemingly trapped it in a thought as one captures a scent in a bottle of perfume for later reuse, is the moment of one’s first recognition of alienation from that period, the recognition that one is being pulled irretrievably from it. The moment that period comes to life as a separate entity in the mind is a moment whose other side is one of mourning for it having passed, and so beauty takes a melancholy aspect. In this sense, what is
beautiful is tied to a ritualistic remembrance and mourning, a habitual influx of masochistic longing. 33

At times a resurgent chord of a kind of plangent ecstasy arrives to close a reflection. So it is with the end of the first volume, with the narrator bitterly remembering the beauty of Odette, amid the pomp of passing carriages and crowds of onlookers outside the Bois de Boulogne. So it is with the narrator again remembering Odette midway through the second volume, as she strolls imperiously through the streets, flanked on either side by Swann, the narrator, and other admirers. So it is with the conclusion of the second volume, with the narrator convalescent in bed at the Grand Hôtel Balbec, while beyond the darkness of his shuttered windows, with only some hapless rays of golden light stealing into his room, he imagines he hears Albertine and her friends calling to him amid their mischievous games.

In these instances memory arrives as a kind of cruel, mocking god, drunkenly bellowing that what was, an ideal that seems present and alive, permanent because it can be recalled anywhere and at anytime, like a genie that appears instantly if one just steps on the right brick or says the right talismanic word, is in fact past and will never return. One is surprised that time would be so less generous in returning than it was in giving, that after its initial profligacy it would grow so miserly, that it would refuse to provide again what it has already given once. We mistake the perfectly commonplace banality that the past is past, in recurring moments of surprise that vividly accompany any vivid recollection, with a pathos that then invents a cruel fatalism for the world, and we retreat from our own melodrama by making the world melodramatic, inventing a cunning fate that steals and hoards our pleasure. Yet to focus so much

33 The aesthetic activity of restraining, of capturing a moment, of defining an idea in relation to oneself arrives with the splendor of epiphany but with the harshness of renunciation, since it implies estrangement from it—“Into my heart an air that kills from yon far country blows,” as Housman writes, with the irony of life-giving air also killing.
on the painful aspect of memory, which the narrator perhaps deceives himself at the end of the novel in not addressing, so committed does he become to the task of representing and reconstituting his past—as the aesthetic whole in which it appears to him—, is also not entirely correct, since the influx of pleasure that memory provides cannot be admitted without the pain it engenders.
Chapter 5 Bellow Between Art and Artless Experience

“All choice of words is slang. It marks a class.”
“There is correct English: that is not slang.”
“I beg your pardon: correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays. And the strongest slang of all is the slang of poets.”

-Middlemarch, George Eliot

….as some men gaze with admiration at the colors of a tulip, or the wings of a butterfly, so I was by nature an admirer of happy human faces.

-The Vicar of Wakefield, Oliver Goldsmith

Oh heart, how long these fancies weave?
How long illusions vain conceive?
I’ll quit these false imaginings
And turn my thoughts to better things.
-Haft Paykar, Nizami

Vain longing that vain longing go.
-Worstward Ho, Samuel Beckett

5.1 Introduction

To begin with Bellow, it would be worthwhile to go back briefly to Gautier in order to draw some conclusions regarding the different treatments of the same theme in the two writers.

The opening of Le Capitaine Fracasse begins with a several pages-long description of the Baron de Sigognac’s dilapidated estate. After surveying the grounds and the various parts of the castle’s exterior we are brought inside, where we read the following:

In the middle of the room stood an immense dining table of dark, polished wood, much worm-eaten, and gradually falling into decay. Two tall buffets, elaborately carved and ornamented, stood on opposite sides of the room, with only a few odd
pieces of Palissy ware, representing lizards, crabs, and shell-fish, reposing on shiny green leaves, and two or three delicate wine glasses of quaint patterns remaining upon the shelves where gold and silver plate used to glitter in rich profusion, as was the mode in France. The handsome old chairs, with their high, carved backs and faded velvet cushions, that had been so firm and luxurious once, were tottering and insecure; but it mattered little, since no one ever came to sit in them now round the festive board, and they stood against the wall in prim order, under the rows of family portraits…

… In these two rooms were the latticed windows seen in the front of the chateau, and over them still hung long sweeping curtains, so tattered and moth-eaten that they were almost falling to pieces. Profound silence reigned here, unbroken save by occasional scurrying and squeaking of mice behind the wainscot, the gnawing of rats in the wall, or the ticking of the death-watch.

From the tapestried chamber a door opened into a long suite of deserted rooms, which were lofty and of noble proportions, but devoid of furniture, and given up to dust, spiders, and rats. The apartments on the floor above them were the home of great numbers of bats, owls, and jackdaws, who found ready ingress through the large holes in the roof. Every evening they flew forth in flocks with much flapping of wings, and weird, melancholy cries and shrieks, in search of the food not to be found in the immediate vicinity of this forlorn mansion. (8-9)

At the opening of Herzog, we are similarly introduced to the decrepit state of the protagonist’s house:

It was the peak of summer in the Berkshires. Herzog was alone in the big old house. Normally particular about food, he now ate Silvertown bread from the paper package, beans from the can, and American cheese. Now and then he picked raspberries in the overgrown garden, lifting up the thorny canes with absent-minded caution. As for sleep, he slept on a mattress without sheets—it was his abandoned marriage bed—or in the hammock, covered by his coat. Tall bearded grass and locust and maple seedlings surrounded him in the yard. When he
opened his eyes in the light, the stars were near like spiritual bodies. Fires, of course; gases--minerals, heat, atoms, but eloquent at five in the morning to a man lying in a hammock, wrapped in his overcoat.

When some new thought gripped his heart he went to the kitchen, his headquarters, to write it down. The white paint was scaling from the brick walls and Herzog sometimes wiped mouse droppings from the table with his sleeve, calmly wondering why field mice should have such a passion for wax and paraffin. They made holes in paraffin-sealed preserves; they gnawed birthday candles down to the wicks. A rat chewed into a package of bread, leaving the shape of its body in the layers of slices. Herzog ate the other half of the loaf spread with jam. He could share with rats too. (3-4)

Gautier’s description, characteristically elaborate, drawing attention to the fineness of the perspective, exaggerates, luxuriates in the poverty of the mansion by making it picturesque. Bellow’s, on the other hand, is made sentimental by integrating the character into the scene, demonstrating the level to which Herzog has succumbed to and accepted his pathetic state, his poor surroundings, lost the ability to be taken aback by them. In the case of the Baron de Sigognac, the estate, along with his title, represents the entire inheritance of his ancestors. So, too, in the case of Herzog, as the protagonist, we learn, has bought this house in the Berkshires using all the money that his father left him when he died.34

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34 It’s worthwhile to briefly go over an aspect of style that differentiates Bellow from Gautier. When a specific object appears in Gautier it is the distinction of the author and narrator to know its name and origin. In reading Gautier one recalls his fervent reading of dictionaries and his approval of Baudelaire, upon meeting him, when the latter admitted that he also read them. Specificity reflects the daintiness of observation, the comprehensiveness and precision of the imagination; it seeks to persuade us that the inner eye does not merely see things as if they were wreathed in a haze, as if simple descriptions would suffice, but that it sees the invisible with a keen awareness of detail. When specific objects appear in Bellow it is an indication of the commonness of the object. Even when we do not see “Silveercup bread,” as in the opening pages of Herzog, but rather rich Lalique crystal glasses, as in Ravelstein, it is a familiar brand name that is used, and not an intricate description of the material and form of the glass and its provenance. The narrator does not seek to impress the reader with a demonstration of very specialized knowledge, but uses a language with which the reader is familiar, relinquishing the authority of the narrator and writer in matters of taste that is so apparent in Gautier.
The important difference between the two is that while in *Herzog* the state of the house is used to indicate the mental disrepair of its now sole human inhabitant, in *Le Capitaine Fracasse* the dilapidated mansion in no way reflects the psychology of its affable, young, handsome owner. It merely equips him with a strong desire to repair his fortunes, which he does by joining a theatre company that presently seeks refuge at his castle from a storm. Among the troupe he finds adventure and love, performs on stage and fights duels, and eventually regains his family’s former wealth. No such luck appears for Herzog, for whom a pursuit of art has indirectly led him to make the bad investment of buying this house, his oversensitive nature having made him emotionally dishevelled and impractical. Rather than finding love, he broods over how his ex-wife spurned him, left him for his best friend, and he spends the course of the novel manically writing letters he never sends--to friends, to his psychiatrist, to Eisenhower, to Nietzsche, and to others. His relatively wealthy, well-meaning siblings who suggest at the end of the novel that he stay for a while at an asylum, appear less like a fortuitous resource than as human outcomes to be compared with Herzog, examples of the well-adjusted, satisfied human types that are produced upon accepting contemporary society on its own terms, that is, as approaching it with some measure of practical cunning, cold maturity, and self-interest.

This latter posture, however, if periodically the object of envy, is never seriously pursued, much less fully endorsed. Philip Roth has perceptively written that Bellow “[closes] the gap between Thomas Mann and Damon Runyon.”35 This implies a taste for lofty theorizing and

35 This description, however, does not capture the form of Bellow’s novels, which could be likened to the narrative forms pioneered by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, albeit in a much less radical fashion than in those earlier writers--the use of free indirect discourse, a creeping present intermingled with flashing memories of the past. The subject matter of anxiety, neuroses, and desperate searches for cures, meanwhile, recalls Italo Svevo’s *Zeno’s Conscience*, although Svevo engages in burlesque and treats these subjects with untroubled lightness, while in Bellow’s novels, if often mocked, these subjects nevertheless retain a threatening power.

Frank Kermode, in an essay on *Herzog*, writes, “There is one famous compliment to a novelist that nobody is ever going to offer Saul Bellow, and that is to say that his books are the product of a sensibility so fine that no idea could violate it. It seems doubtful whether any interesting writer, even James, really fits that formula, in any
frenzied action, and with philosophical speculation amid mad capers involving big city lowlifes we see a broad comedy of ideas. The strange combination of tones--the integration of spontaneous syntheses of, commentaries on intellectual history, with frantic and earnest searches for feelings of fulfillment, amid often farcical events--almost ensures that any character or idea appears under the harsh glow of the grotesque. One gets an idea of the city, the modern American city, as hulking, titanic, composed of steel, glass, brick, and soot, sprawling with ignorance, together with its corresponding human types, bloated personalities that accommodate cunning and buffoonery--proud lawyers, oily conmen, and others crazed and deluded by ambition. In this context, the admiration for a certain posture, the envy of a certain talent for navigating the human storm and securing a comfortable social position, can only be fitful, amid all the other theorizing about the state and direction of human civilization, the preoccupation with criticism, the fundamental grounding of the perspective of Bellow's novels in the taste for the richness of sense experience, for feelings of longing, the pursuit of an interpretive framework, to varying degrees personal and socio-historical, that will lead to general contentment with life.

That poetic faculty, in consideration of which--as we see so clearly in the preening of Gautier--one might judge oneself superior to another, in no way aids in the navigation of circumstances, in no way establishes a foundation upon which happiness may flourish. The wit and wiles of the poet, of the intellectual, chase each other, but to no end. In Bellow one gets the impression of ordinary life as the great and vulgar interchange of human needs and desires. Its demands over life are imperious and cannot be avoided. Success is achieved not according to an
internal standard of taste, gleaned from wide reading, and later applied to oneself, but rather to one’s dexterous management of affairs, one’s insinuation into the practical concerns of the mass of humanity. Without its place at the summit of society or at least near it, a life of art has lost its meaning, since the broad recognition of it as a meaningful activity has ceased. Nevertheless, art is understood as having had a role in forming and expressing the meaning of a society, in orienting people towards a commonly understood good, and with this former position surrendered, Bellow turns to diagnosing the ailment of a lack of meaning in the society. He turns, not entirely unironically, to the language and manners of thought of psychology and sociology.

In *The Curtain*, an essay on the history of the novel, Milan Kundera writes of the novelist as a kind of “playful theorist” who “holds jealously to his own language, flees learned jargon like the plague” (6). In the case of Bellow this is only partly true, as the value of learned jargon—the use of those tools for creating interpretations (the various disciplines, made up where such divisions among interpretations seem to make sense—economy, history, sociology, biology, etc.), their relevance or purpose apart from satisfying certain needs and accommodating oneself into the structure of society—becomes the subject matter of his novels. Thus, it is altogether fitting that the protagonists of Bellow’s novels are variously either writers or academics, particularly since it makes little difference which of the two they happen to be. In *Humboldt’s Gift*, as in *Ravelstein*, the protagonists are writers, while in *Herzog*, in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, they are academics. Regardless of whether they are one or the other, the manner of talking, the encyclopedic references, the problems faced are the same. We do not see these characters doing their jobs. We see them trying to articulate some meaning in their lives, using countless other writers to make their points or to criticize them, while struggling to keep their affairs in order. However, rather than elevating physicists or sociologists to the level of the poet, as Richard
Rorty does in talking about their powers for redescribing the world in compelling terms, as Thomas Carlyle may have done if he were not so viciously hostile to learned jargon, dismissing it all as “hearsay” that threatens the continued perception of sublimity in the phenomenon of existence, Bellow instead drops the poet, the creative artist to the level of the mere intellectual, harried by life’s mundane concerns, the learning and the erudition only serving to confound one in a world where they play no special part, where they are even scorned and viewed with suspicion. Thus we see that Charlie Citrine in *Humboldt’s Gift* imagines that his divorce lawyers view him as “eccentric and snooty” and as “an idiot with a knack for stringing sentences together” (220, 221-222). The talent for subtlety and deliberation, for scrupulous analysis, for generating eloquent interpretations, becomes harmful when turned upon oneself, in times of distress a kind of masochistic nervous compulsion.

Writing could be redescribed as a compulsion, perhaps looked upon favorably if there are a suitable number of people who derive pleasure from it. It is not, as in Carlyle, a transcendental value from which one can judge one or another society or epoch. Its value, Bellow suggests, is historically contingent. The poet is cast as an intellectual, that is, as a figure belonging to a particular class, a social type, maladjusted, often rather delusional, and neurotic. The poet is a peddler of a vision, of a system of values, outmoded in the self-assured, anti-intellectual culture of the United States.

5.2 The Joys of Epiphany and the Fall of Art

I have so far talked broadly about the value that a pursuit of art takes in Bellow’s novels. Much is gained from this synoptic perspective; one sees the panicking heroes with their assortment of troubles in the loud, bustling, brawny United States, with its hundreds of millions of people, its thousands of billions of dollars, its swaggering ignorant bureaucracy and its vast
managerial designs--business, technology, politics. The role of art in Bellow’s novels is thus juxta-posed to these interests that deal with the livelihoods of people across the world. These forces themselves are typically vague, alluded to as circumstances that demand urgent consideration, socio-historical fascinations encountered in thought, far enough away, yet whose representatives (in terms of the kind of life they create and prioritize) are ever-present. We see the role of art, under the pressure of these considerations, turned into a problem for the artist and intellectual to solve, its apparent insignificance drawing attention to the question of meaning in contemporary American society. We see the issue presented rather starkly in the following passage from *Humboldt’s Gift*:

Was this art versus America? To me Bellevue was like the Bowery: it gave negative testimony. Brutal Wall Street stood for power, and the Bowery, so near it, was the accusing symbol of weakness… And poets like drunkards and misfits or psychopaths, like the wretched, poor or rich, sank into weakness--was that it? Having no machines, no transforming knowledge comparable to the knowledge of Boeing or Sperry Rand or IBM or RCA? For could a poem pick you up in Chicago and land you in New York two hours later? Or could it compute a space shot? It had no such powers. And interest was where power was. In ancient times poetry was a force, the poet had real strength in the material world. Of course, the material world was different then. But what interest could a Humboldt raise? He threw himself into weakness and became a hero of wretchedness. He consented to the monopoly of power and interest held by money, politics, law, rationality, technology because he couldn’t find the next thing, the new thing, the necessary thing for poets to do. Instead he did a former thing. He got himself a pistol, like Verlaine, and chased Magnasco. (155)36

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36 One passage that very well describes the atmosphere of perceived anti-intellectualism in which *Humboldt’s Gift*, especially (with its imagined turning point being the failure of Adlai Stevenson’s presidential campaign), takes place, appears in Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*: “[McCarthy’s] sorties against intellectuals and universities were emulated throughout the country by a host of less exalted inquisitors.”
In a tone of resignation, poets here are described as social outcasts, almost anachronistic, wretches who cannot come to terms with art's place in society. Compare this passage to the following encomium of poets from *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*:

The hero listened to their songs, and the conqueror of the earth did reverence to a poet; for he felt, that, without poets, his own wild and vast existence would pass away like a whirlwind, and be forgotten forever. The lover wished that he could feel his longings and his joys so variedly and so harmoniously as the poet's inspired lips had skill to show them forth; and even the rich man could not of himself discern such costliness in his idol grandeurs, as when they were presented to him shining in the splendor of the poet's spirit, sensible to all worth, and exalting all. Nay, if thou wilt have it, who but the poet was it that first formed gods for us, that exalted us to them, and brought them down to us? (74)

On the one hand, in Wilhelm Meister’s speech, we see representations of the world valued above all else, since they last longer than and therefore subsume entirely in people’s thoughts whatever deeds in the real world they are meant to represent. Moreover, the poet, in this passage, enriches whatever is of value to anybody; the rich man and the lover go to the poet to have a greater experience of wealth or love; they are made to feel through poetry the worth of what they

Then, in the atmosphere of fervent malice and humorless imbecility stirred up by McCarthy’s barrage of accusations, the campaign of 1952 dramatized the contrast between intellect and philistinism in the opposing candidates. On one side was Adlai Stevenson, a politician of uncommon mind and style, whose appeal to intellectuals overshadowed anything in recent history. On the other was Dwight D. Eisenhower, conventional in mind, relatively inarticulate, harnessed to the unpalatable Nixon, and waging a campaign whose tone seemed to be set less by the general himself than by his running mate and the McCarthyite wing of the party.

“Eisenhower’s decisive victory was taken both by the intellectuals and by their critics as a measure of their repudiation by America. *Time*, the weekly magazine of opinion, shook its head in an unconvincing imitation of concern. Eisenhower’s victory, it said, ‘discloses an alarming fact long suspected: there is a wide and unhealthy gap between the American intellectuals and the people.’ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in a mordant protest written soon after the election, found the intellectual ‘in a situation he has not known for a generation.’ After twenty years in which the intellectual had been in the main understood and respected, business had come back into power, bringing with it ‘the vulgarization which has been the almost invariable consequence of business supremacy.’ Now the intellectual, dismissed as an ‘egghead,’ an oddity, would be governed by a party which had little use for or understanding of him and would be made the scapegoat for everything from the income tax to the attack on Pearl Harbor.” (3-4).

37 This passage, translated by Carlyle, could well have been the inspiration for his book on heroes, where poets, and Shakespeare in particular, are the heroes of heroes—those most capable of replenishing humans’ need for wonder and worship.
possess. In this manner, they are instructed in reverence, so it is appropriate that the poet also serves as creator of the divine and as intermediary between the divine and the human, providing humans acquaintanceship with and knowledge of the divine.

This, one could say, is all very fine and true enough, but it is only apparent upon reflection and, indeed, seems truer after one is cleverly guided to the idea by the eloquence of a poet. On the other hand, the appeal of an airplane or of a rocket ship is immediate and abrasive. These do not need the ponderous consideration of a poet to aid in the perception of their utility or power. In fact, insofar as the talents of a poet in creating values and representations are to be seen in the products of these transnational firms, it is through advertisements. One problem that Wilhelm does not anticipate is the diminishing appeal of aesthetic perception or of critical judgment, so that a farce of a movie that Citrine and Humboldt write together with little effort, becomes, years after Humboldt’s death, a worldwide hit. The poets find success, but only in what they consider hack work.

In Bellow we see a focus on mass psychology and the institutions that command and direct mass attention. These are often seen from a historical and sociological perspective, as the lenses that most clearly formulate accounts of the existence of these phenomena. The poet and intellectual cannot but find themselves dazzled by the “interest” of these things-- finding themselves as single cells in the broad mass--and, often finding them insipid and boorish, define themselves in opposition to them. This in turn accounts for a kind of bitterness towards not only the dominant cultural strains of society, and a definition of oneself as outcast, but also a bitterness towards those aspects of oneself that seem to encourage a definition of oneself as outcast.
This discussion of poetry’s apparently dubious claims to a special power brings us to the role of epiphany in Bellow’s novels, both through the epiphanic impressions that speckle his fiction as well as the more theoretical discussions involving epiphany and the modern “disenchanted” or “fallen” world. Bellow’s characters often exalt epiphany and seem to value the kind of gnostic knowledge it provides the individual above all else. On the other hand, they do this in a manner that is remarkably restrained stylistically; these passages are more coolly theoretical than visionary and sublime. They do not revel in the ability to create a vision, as do the elaborate descriptive passages in Gautier, nor are they conveyed with a lofty sense of the power of art. In fact, those epiphanic impressions that do occur in Bellow’s novels, delightful as some of them are, do not proliferate to the extent that one would expect from a properly aestheticist writer; they occur here and there, but not in quick succession, and never for very long before further deliberations on the state of culture, the influence of history, and various psychological musings. This is to say, in spite of the occasional exaltation of epiphany that we encounter, the role of these epiphanic impressions in Bellow’s novels is often subservient to the “bigger questions,” and that even the form in which epiphany is exalted is itself ambivalent, not the kind of full-throated or softly trilling endorsement of epiphany one would expect from a true believer. Another way to interpret the relatively infrequent occurrence of these epiphanic impressions and the reluctance to create elaborate pictures using this technique is to suggest that their infrequency reflects the herky-jerky nature of big-city and big-empire life and the pressing concerns of this life restrict the extent to which one is willing or able to sit back, observe, and draw a scene. These concerns, viewed through the constant formulation of interpretations of history, culture, politics, crowd out epiphany in the novels.
I will first look at a few instances where the value of epiphany is elevated. One of the
difficulties in quoting these passages and conveying their sense appropriately in context is that
contradictory examples are found just as easily, so that the reader must always be aware of the
impulsive nature of these theoretical emissions on the part of the characters, and the dissonant,
perpetual seesaw nature of the perspective. For instance, in contradicting the above quote from
*Humboldt’s Gift* on the apparent weakness of poetry in postwar America, we could quote the
following:

“A poet is what he is in himself. Gertrude Stein used to distinguish between a
person who is an ‘entity’ and one who has an ‘identity.’ A significant man is an
entity. Identity is what they give you socially. Your little dog recognizes you and
therefore you have an identity. An entity, by contrast, an impersonal power, can
be a frightening thing. It’s as T.S. Eliot said of William Blake. A man like
Tennyson was merged into his environment or encrusted with parasitic opinion,
but Blake was naked and saw man naked, and from the center of his own
crystal. There was nothing of the ‘superior person’ about him, and this made
him terrifying. That is an entity. An identity is easier on itself. An identity pours a
drink, lights a cigarette, seeks its human pleasures, and shuns rigorous conditions.
The temptation to lie down is very great. Humboldt was a weakening entity. Poets
have to dream and dreaming in America is no cinch…. The world had money,
science, war, politics, anxiety, sickness, perplexity… the world has power and
interest follows power. Where are the poets’ power and interest? They originate in
dream states. These come because the poet is what he is in himself, because a
voice sounds in his soul which has a power equal to the power of societies, states,
and regimes. You don’t make yourself interesting through madness, eccentricity,
or anything of the sort but because you have the power to cancel the world’s

38 The epithets used to characterize Tennyson are certainly much more appropriate for describing Bellow than are those used to describe Blake, which presumably have to do with his mythmaking and his sense of the sublime.
distraction, activity, noise, and become fit to hear the essence of things. I can’t tell you how terrible he looked last time I saw him.” (311-312)³⁹

The central question of Bellow’s novels could be put as the following: how and by whom are things to be judged? Who is to say what is valuable and meaningful? In the passage we looked at describing the weakness of poetry, we see an ascendant technocracy administering marvels that baffle the public, and we see poets as anachronistic, outmoded. We also see the protagonist who makes this judgment—an unhappy, neurotic, manipulable person who could be dismissed as an embittered individual who is really just bemoaning his sputtering career. Here, we see something of a reversal, in which the pursuit of becoming an “entity” is understood as a worthwhile, if especially difficult, struggle. Moreover, we see the outside “real” world dismissed as a “distraction”—inessential, bewildering, tempting, to be avoided. This “distraction” confers upon one an “identity”—an insubstantial and accidental thing, in contrast to an “entity,” something of grander proportions, self-reliant instead of reliant upon prevailing society. “Dream states,” the inner life of the individual, to be contrasted with the outside “real” world, are responsible for the production of substantial “entities.” An entity possesses an admirable authenticity, which is established through contact with the “essence” of things.

This passage, if still pessimistic in regard to poetry’s role in the United States, now places the poet on an equal footing with all of those managers of superpower, not entirely unlike Wilhelm Meister or Thomas Carlyle. We could also see the idea of the special artistic “personality” that we see in figures like Pater or Proust, in which the artist possesses the singular

³⁹ John Jacob Clayton, in his book, *Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man*, views this tension between the social self and the inwardly developed self as central to Bellow’s fiction, writing, “These two opposed worlds are expressed in two opposed voices: the external world of distraction is given to us with comic energy; it is idiosyncratic, demonic, oppressive. Bellow pours out lists, creates a wonderful jazzy, idiomatic language. The inner world, the world of love, is given to us lyrically. It is full of quiet mystery. It is as if Bellow’s protagonists were in exile from a Platonic world of the real, enmeshed in a shadow world of distractions” (262).
ability to form an original personality, or, in Citrine’s words, to become an “entity.” This special ability, which lies in the capacity for aesthetic perception, in offering a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of existence, is again opposed to the loud and bustling world that would wake the poet from her dream states. The idea of the self-sufficiency of the poet, of being what one is in oneself, without need of a place in society, is seemingly endorsed, but is nevertheless undermined by the abrupt last sentence in which Citrine recalls seeing the crazy and violent Humboldt in the streets of New York, and further undermined by virtually everything else in Bellow’s novels, this one included. While the outside or “real” world is defined as distraction, it nevertheless has the power to penetrate through Citrine’s idle chatter by means of the grim memory of Humboldt after his breakdown. The admiration for the achievements of art is tempered by the vivid memory of how madness and eccentricity, if not responsible for inspired works of art, could be the outcome for the individual pursuing a life of art.

In another discussion of the value of art—now more distinctly localized in the form of epiphanic perception—, this time in Ravelstein, the narrator, Chick, places the sense of the world one gets from poetic inspiration above the mundane world he inhabits:

In children this impression—real reality—is tolerated by adults. Up to a certain age nothing can be done about it. In well-to-do families it lasts longer, perhaps. But Ravelstein might have argued that there was a danger of self-indulgence in it. Either you continue to live in epiphanies or you shake them off and take up trades and tasks, you adopt rational principles and concern yourself with society, or politics. Then the sense of having come from “elsewhere” vanishes. In Platonic theory all you know is recollected from an earlier existence elsewhere. In my case, Ravelstein’s opinion was that distinctiveness of observation had gone much further than it should and was being cultivated for its own strange sake. Mankind had first claim on our attention and I indulged my “personal metaphysics” too much, he thought. His severity did me good. I didn’t have it in me at my time of
life to change, but it was an excellent thing, I thought, to have my faults and failings pointed out by someone who cared about me. I had no intention, however, of removing by critical surgery, the metaphysical lenses I was born with. (97-98)

For all the apparent value placed on epiphanies in this passage, on gnostic wisdom and personal revelation, the thoughts expressed are more laid back and coolly restrained than one would expect. For instance, compare this passage with the end of Emerson’s “Illusions,” which provides the reader with a vivid vision of the “real reality” of which Bellow speaks:

It would be hard to put more mental and moral philosophy than the Persians have thrown into a sentence,--

“Fooled thou must be, though wisest of the wise:

Then be the fool of virtue, not of vice.”

There is no chance and no anarchy in the universe. All is system and gradation. Every god is there sitting in his sphere. The young mortal enters the hall of the firmament; there is he alone with them alone, they pouring on him benedictions and gifts, and beckoning him up to their thrones. On the instant, and incessantly, fall snow-storms of illusions. He fancies himself in a vast crowd which sways this way and that and whose movement and doings he must obey: he fancies himself poor, orphaned, insignificant. The mad crowd drives hither and thither, now furiously commanding this thing to be done, now that. What is he that he should resist their will, and think or act for himself? Every moment new changes and new showers of deceptions to baffle and distract him. And when, by and by, for an instant, the air clears and the cloud lifts a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones,--they alone with him alone. (The Portable Emerson, 385)

The recognition in both of what constitutes “real reality” is an argument for what demands our attention and our reverence, even if this perception of “real reality” is fitful and fleeting. The
value of these dream states is experienced to such a degree that they eclipse the material world and ordinary experience, in part because they provide a flashing awareness of the “real” nature of the material world and ordinary experience. We can perceive a distinguishing quality in sentiment by the manner in which Bellow chooses to express his conviction. While in Emerson we see a refined vision of that state, in Bellow we only hear it referred to and casually talked about, as if understanding that “real reality” is not in fact real but only a kind of questionable insight that occurs to some. Although Bellow purports to endorse—or else submits to, through habit or by a supposed defect of personality—the special value of epiphany, he is characteristically reluctant to actually do so. In fact, the phrases he uses—“real reality” and “elsewhere”—indicate his ambivalent attitude to the claims of epiphany to a form of gnostic knowledge. These are readily digestible, offhand, common phrases that indicate an informal manner of speaking, not the polishing of an internal vision, not the welcome spontaneous capture of some wayward scrap of beauty. The manner in which the thoughts are expressed does not indicate their utmost value. They are just thoughts, not revelations. They are spoken of in an easy, carefree, casual manner, without a great deal of conviction. The examples chosen are those nearest at hand, not ones divined through poetic inspiration. They promise no salvation. They are

40 I here use “gnostic knowledge” in the manner, more or less, in which Hans Jonas develops that idea in The Gnostic Religion, where he writes, “Gnosis meant pre-eminently knowledge of God, and from what we have said about the radical transcendence of the deity it follows that ‘knowledge of God’ is the knowledge of something naturally unknowable and therefore itself not a natural condition. Its objects include everything that belongs to the divine realm of being, namely, the order and history of the upperworlds, and what is to issue from it, namely, the salvation of man. With objects of this kind, knowledge as a mental act is vastly different from the rational cognition of philosophy. On the one hand it is closely bound up with revelatory experience, so that reception of the truth either through sacred or secret lore or through inner illumination replaces rational argument and theory (though this extra-rational basis may then provide scope for individual speculation); on the other hand, being concerned with the secrets of salvation, ‘knowledge’ is not just theoretical information about certain things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation” (34-35). Specifically, I have in mind the distinction between revelatory knowledge and rational cognition, in which revelatory knowledge is accompanied by a feeling of reverence and gratitude, as well as a conviction in what merits our attention. In Bellow one could say that this gnostic knowledge promises wholeness, satisfaction, but leaves one no better off when one wakes from epiphany. It does not reassemble the relations of the world in a manner for lasting happiness, but only briefly assures one in a kind of hallucination that they are so rearranged.
bittersweet, not ambrosial. They are full of reticence and self-doubt. They are faintly confessional and pleading. The speaker is suspicious of high-sounding rhetoric as another cheap glossy product hawked by hucksters.

The sublime vision of epiphany is subservient to sociological considerations -- characteristic of a certain stage of individual human development, prevalent in a certain economic class. An attitude skeptical of epiphany is hardly less valuable than epiphany itself, not because it sharpens it, but because it contextualizes it among all of life’s other affairs. Indeed, this taste for and capacity for epiphanic perception, is again spoken about as a debilitating psychological peculiarity--a “failing” to be removed by “critical surgery.” With Emerson, on the other hand, all of life’s other affairs are mere illusions, dismissed when one enshrouds oneself in solitude and congregates with one’s cryptic gods. The solemn reverence, the wonder at the sublime--its deep shadows, the iridescence of its polished surfaces--that dresses itself, sees itself expressed in sacred halls, impersonal gods, earnest youths. In paring away the lofty rhetoric, the attitude of unquestioned reverence for art is taken away, and instead replaced by an attitude that incorporates what one has learned in epiphany among all the rest of experience.

Of course, in a broader sense, in a work of art a gnostic vision is inescapable. The abandonment of a lofty style does not indicate the abandonment of a vision; it only graces the common, informal style with a peculiar quality that allows it to retrieve types of beauty that a different style would fumble and drop. It argues for the appropriateness of this kind of style, of these kinds of considerations. If most individual sentences are not iridescent, then the accumulation of them in weaving the events and thoughts they describe endows them with their own peculiar gleam, not to be found elsewhere.
Before the question of art Bellow does not see a fair account being made in moments of intoxication. Apart from Emerson, all of the writers I have looked at so far--Gautier, Pater, Proust--are inclined to become intoxicated by the loftiness of their speech, the ostentation of their visions. The circumspect and critical Pater, who is usually reluctant to write using metaphors, whose tempering clauses would seem to indicate a presiding sobriety of mind, nevertheless, in the fixity and determination of his gaze, in his taste for the subtlest modifications of meaning, unable to part from a sentence before it has acquired a certain luster, reveals a limit of perspective. This limit might be called the self-assurance of the aestheticist writer in the correctness of her language. In using language that is less literary, Bellow removes the aesthete as the judge and beauty as the scale, while setting the question of art in terms that are taken from other disciplines. As another example of what I mean by a change of judge or scale, look at the following passage from *Ravelstein*:

> Perhaps I was still smiling at the Battles and it might have seemed to him that I was dissociating myself from the view that you destroyed an entire world when you destroyed yourself. As if I would threaten to destroy a world--I who lived to see the phenomena, who believe that the heart of things is shown in the surface of those things. I always said--in answering Ravelstein’s question “What do you imagine death will be like?”--”The pictures will stop.” Meaning, again, that in the surface of things you saw the heart of things. (156)

The casual manner of speaking here conveys the felt sufficiency of the explanation. In this way the style mirrors what the narrator says about the surface of things communicating the heart of things. We see a childlike expression--”the pictures will stop”--yet one readily understood, without much need for elaboration, which would only diminish its effect. It is knowingly hackneyed and mawkish, as if it were lifted from a bad Hollywood movie, but there is no contempt or criticism for these qualities. Instead, they are presented sincerely, even as though
they have special claims to sincerity, as if the commonplace expressed best and most sharply those ideas before which we all become childish, helpless, and sad, those ideas the importance and understanding of which are unchanged from the period of childhood. This passage is ambivalent towards art because it seemingly undermines the fineness and authority of poetry while lauding the value and richness of sense-experience. Nevertheless, in choosing to use a somewhat hackneyed manner of expression, the writer makes use of a certain artistic dexterity in framing the ineloquent phrase, thereby paradoxically making it poetical

5.3 Epiphanic Impressions

I have written of the idea of the richness of sense-experience in Bellow’s novels, and we have just looked at a passage where this richness is exalted. This richness is best viewed and understood through the epiphanic impressions that speckle his novels. One of the distinctive features of Bellow’s style is the quick, impressionistic description of sights, sounds, smells, tastes. Very rarely do these flow continuously to create an elaborate picture. Rather, they speckle the careening action between the frenzied philosophical speculations. Take the following examples from Herzog:

Valentine Gersbach, her lover, was a charming man, too, though in a heavier brutal style. He had a thick chin, flaming copper hair that literally gushed from his head (no Thomas Scalp Specialists for him), and he walked on a wooden leg, gracefully bending and straightening like a gondolier. (7)

The avenue was filled with concrete-mixing trucks, smells of wet sand and powdery gray cement. Crashing, stamping pile-driving below, and, higher, structural steel, interminably and hungrily going up into the cooler, more delicate blue. Orange beams hung from the cranes like straws. But down in the streets
where the buses were spurting the poisonous exhaust of cheap fuel, and the cars were crammed together, it was stifling, grinding, the racket of machinery and the desperately purposeful crowds--horrible! (36-37)

He went into a New Haven car, and the russet door closed behind him on pneumatic hinges, stiff and hissing. (39)

“Meanwhile the cicadas all vibrated a coil in their bellies, a horny posterior band in a special chamber. Those billions of red eyes from the enclosing woods looked out, stared down, and the steep waves of sound drowned the summer afternoon. Herzog had seldom heard anything so beautiful as this massed continual harshness. (80)

And these from Humboldt's Gift:

Below the early darkness now closing with December speed over the glistening west, the sun like a bristling fox jumped beneath the horizon… As the tremendous trusses of the unfinished skyscraper turned black, the hollow interior filled with thousands of electric points resembling champagne bubbles. (101)

I saw the healthy grim folds of Tomchek’s close-shaven face. His breath was sourly virile. He gave off an odor which I associated with old-fashioned streetcar brakes, and with metabolism, and with male hormones. (219)

We went out on the boardwalk and as we faced the horrid Atlantic, tamed here to saltwater taffy and the foam like popcorn pushed by the sweeper’s brush… (321)
Over his tall-man’s belly was a shirt of Merrymount stripes, broad crimson and diabolical purple, like the ribbons of the revelers’ Maypole. (322)

And finally these from Ravelstein:

He had so many tics. He was a fidgeting, pipe-digging, pipe-stuffing smoker, pushing wire cleaners into the stem of his briar or paring away at the carbon cake in the bowl. He was short and bald, but he let his back hair grow long; it bushed out over his collar. His scalp, wide-open as an estuary, was heavily veined; it looked congested. Very unlike Ravelstein’s green-oval-melon baldness. (125-126)

Rosamund and I now changed places, and I carried her through the water, the sand underfoot ridged as the surface of the sea was rippled, and inside the mouth the hard palate had its ridges too. (186)

So sitting next to the driver I was taken by the ambulance with lights twirling and throaty sirens sobs to the emergency room. (206)

I quote these little impressions in order to show what form epiphany takes for Bellow. They are quick, intermittent flashes, some of them observations that we struggle to fully understand (“diabolical purple”), but which nevertheless leave their peculiar coloring on our thoughts through their vague associations.41 These impressions--orange beams like straws, “green-oval-melon baldness,” lights like champagne bubbles, etc.--do not function to convey a

41 The style of these impressionistic descriptions is echoed in the novels of John Banville, a near-contemporary of Bellow. Take, for example, the following from The Book of Evidence, “He was stooped, and had a little egg-shaped paunch, and his ashen cheeks were inlaid with a filigree of broken veins” (34). Or, “She was wearing a mouse-grey dressing gown belted tightly about her midriff. Her hair was tied up at the back in a thick, appropriately equine plume. It really was remarkable in colour, a vernal russet blaze” (56). Or, “Above us a coin-coloured sun was stuck in the middle of a white sky” (67). Or, “The sea surprised me, as it always does, a bowl of blue, moving metal, light rising in flakes off the surface” (100) Or, “The ambulance drew alongside, swaying dangerously and trumpeting like a frenzied big beast” (118).
broader idea. They instead reveal the momentary sensitivity of reception, where a person could mistake one thing for another, or perceive one thing as if through a distorting mirror, before one has recognized the thing for what it is, and reorientated oneself to one’s surroundings, settled into received wisdom. We are made to notice how we see things. For instance, with the phrase “green-oval-melon baldness,” although, of course, everybody’s head is an oval, we are made to notice that we notice a shape in our impression of a bald head. Likenesses are perceived in this momentary naivety, which the writer fosters in the reader--before one has recognized one’s familiar surroundings, in a condition of estrangement.

Likewise, we often see several adjectives in succession without commas. For example, we read in Humboldt’s Gift, “He examined me. He also looked tender concerned threatening punitive and even lethal” (186). The omission of commas between the adjectives serves to represent the manner in which various impressions are understood and assembled, even in a jagged manner and with contradictory data, instantly, before the mind has had a chance to form them into familiar ideas.

Mundane, mass-produced things like taffy, or straws, or popcorn--things very peculiar and striking in their color, texture, shape, use, taste, that are full of associations--strangely and surprisingly appear in place of ocean water, giant beams, and rolling foam. The grand and sublime in these cases are cleverly and surprisingly defanged, domesticated, played around with like toys, while the small, trite, common, and mass-produced objects are made pretty through these new associations.

Ultimately, these impressions are touches, flashes that occur here and there, as I have said, but not with great regularity and not in quick succession. The focus, in which the role of art is contextualized, is the pursuit and definition of “meaning.”
5.4 The Circular and Circuitous Search for Meaning

I have written previously of what might be called the search for meaning in which Bellow’s characters are engaged. Bellow’s characters find themselves unsettled, dissatisfied, full of regret and full of resentment toward a society that seems to neglect art. Art, while valued, is not sufficient. The outside world, ordinary troubles, memories, history, ideas, assail one and cannot be ignored. The characters also resent the fact that they have internalized the perspective that ridicules what they find important and meaningful. They respond by formulating criticisms of the society they find themselves in, which could be described (and which they themselves occasionally view as) a kind of vain and petty defense mechanism. To an extent, these characters acknowledge their pathetic states, but even these occasional acknowledgements serve less as moments where they commit to reversing their fortunes than as forms of rueful self-derision, or masochistic prodding--”to hurt the pain,” as Nathanael West writes in Miss Lonelyhearts. Citrine, himself a milder case of the madness that consumes Humboldt, says of his mentor, “he could never come up with enough enchantment or dream material to sheathe himself in” (240). Ultimately, Citrine views Humboldt’s struggle as a noble one, struggling to lift the spiritual/cultural level of the United States, even while suffering from grandiose delusions of becoming Secretary of Culture in an Adlai Stevenson administration. This is to say that if from one perspective the reader is encouraged to admire Humboldt’s dreams, ambitions, and integrity, other perspectives are offered in which characters like Herzog, Citrine, and Humboldt are objects of ridicule or pity, oftentimes self-ridicule and self-pity. The characters are caught in a series of contradictory perspectives and interpretations, and are unable to escape this condition of perpetual criticism. They are self-aware, but this is of little help. In order to illustrate this point it
would be worthwhile to first look at some passages. For the purposes of what I will presently say
the specific parts of the plot do not matter, and I will only briefly contextualize the passages.

At one point in *Humboldt’s Gift* Charlie Citrine says to his friend and business partner (in
all likelihood a conman by whom he is being duped, although this is never definitively
established),

“Thaxter, I told you how I took my little girls to see the beavers out in Colorado.
All around the lake the Forestry Service posted natural-history placards about the
beaver’s life cycle. The beavers didn’t know a damn thing about this. They just
went on chewing and swimming and being beavers. But we human beavers are all
shook up by descriptions of ourselves. It affects us to hear what we hear. From
Kinsey or Masters or Eriksen. We hear about identity crisis, alienation, etcetera,
and it all affects us.” (268)

The rather trite and homely comparison between beavers and humans here tinges the idea with a
maudlin aspect. The plainspokenness of the language removes what in a different writer might be
transmitted with a gloss of the sublime, with what is especially clever or beautiful, of what would
ennoble human life and provide the struggle and suffering with a sense of tragic splendor. The
frank, unlofty tone of the language renders the human condition pathetic, the speaker
disillusioned with high-sounding rhetoric. The passage suggests a somewhat consciously
inelegant perplexity. Humans are described as keenly, even naturally susceptible to the
plausibility of interpretations of themselves. This susceptibility functions as the burden with
which humans are born, a burden, as we will see, that must be mollified through various
methods, a burden that the intellectual, in weighing and examining different interpretations,
bears more than others. The burden could be described as an uncertainty to which the intellectual
wilfully submits, and the average person ignores.
Earlier in the novel the petty gangster Renaldo Cantabile who torments Charlie Citrine is with him in Citrine’s apartment, picking up books at random and asking Citrine about them:


For reasons of my own I wasn’t unwilling to be treated in this way. I actually did read a great deal. Did I know what I was reading? We should see. I shut my eyes, reciting, “It says that psychotherapists may become the new spiritual leaders of mankind. A disaster. Goethe was afraid the modern world might turn into a hospital. Every citizen unwell. The same point in *Knock* by Jules Romains. Is hypochondria a creation of the medical profession? According to this author, when culture fails to deal with the feeling of emptiness and the panic to which man is disposed (and he does say “disposed”) other agents come forward to put us together with therapy, with glue, or slogans, or spit, or as that fellow Gumbein the art critic says, poor wretches are recycled on the couch. This view is even more pessimistic than the one held by Dostoevski’s Grand Inquisitor who said: mankind is frail, needs bread, cannot bear freedom but requires miracle, mystery, and authority. A natural disposition to feelings of emptiness and panic is worse than that. Much worse. What it really means is that we human beings are insane. The last institution which controlled such insanity (on this view) was the Church. (175-176)

In this scene Citrine is lying on a couch and is being questioned by Cantabile, the two occupying the roles of patient and therapist. However, rather than plumbing the depths of memory, delivering for the expert consideration of the psychoanalyst some assortment of childhood scenes, Citrine instead is asked about, summarizes, and contextualizes the contents of books to someone who simply sees him as, in this instance, a spectacle, and otherwise as a weak and easily exploitable fool. While Citrine sees this lack of meaning, uncontrolled insanity as a global
phenomenon of great socio-historical and even biological importance, it is only he, the “human beaver,” and not the masses, nor even Cantabile, who understands and is troubled by it.

For the heroes of Bellow’s novels the problem could more or less be put in the following way: in the contemporary United States (and the United States, we understand, is quickly making the rest of the world like itself in this regard) the life offered does not satisfy one’s desire for a higher meaning, but the pursuit of a higher meaning through art leaves one an outcast, a neurotic, a ridiculous self-styled martyr. Is it better to cast aside one’s desire for higher meaning (to struggle to suppress it), or to pursue it regardless of the likely outcome; to wish for a state of ignorance in regard to the question, or to diagnose oneself and the society at large? The trouble is that all of the answers are unsatisfying, so the protagonists go in a circle between them, variously blaming themselves (either their neuroses or their lack of ignorance) or the society around them. Citrine asks himself at one point, “But this early talent or gift or inspiration, given up for the sake of maturity or realism (practically, self-preservation, the fight for survival), was now edging back. Perhaps the vain nature of ordinary self-preservation had finally become too plain for denial. Self-preservation for what?” (178). Here, the issue is the kind of life offered to a person like Citrine in the United States. The society is unable to answer the question of what sort of meaning it is offering, at least unable to satisfy what Herzog calls “the intellectual’s desire for higher meaning, depth, quality” (67). A result of this is to bring into question the value of this desire. A similar problem is noticed by Herzog when he thinks to himself, “Yes, I was stupid--a blockhead. But that was one of the problems I was working on, you see, that people can be free now but the freedom doesn’t have any content. It’s like a howling emptiness” (44-45). Here, the issue is not only the society, but the character of the person who is able to perceive the “emptiness” on offer, able to view the world from a nuanced historical perspective. In
Ravelstein, meanwhile, Chick puts it this way: “The challenge of modern freedom, or the combination of isolation and freedom which confronts you, is to make yourself up. The danger is that you may emerge from the process as a not-entirely-human creature” (132). This is an articulation of the problem all of Bellow’s characters face: the difficulty of remaining a normal functioning member of society while engaging in the project of self-fashioning. The problem of one’s own character is more forcefully stated when Citrine says, “As if I could shoot my way out of my perplexities--the chief perplexity being my character!” (174). Finally, the bleakness of the problem of character is highlighted when Chick says in Ravelstein, “Maybe an unexamined life is not worth living. But a man’s examined life can make him wish he was dead” (34).

The impulse for diagnosis presupposes a lack or a problem for whose remedy the diagnosis ostensibly provides a guide. The impulse is in part developed under certain personal circumstances, which are variously and never-altogether-clearly influenced by larger socio-historical circumstances and by individual psychological ones--by the doings and writings and sayings of the mass of humankind, together with more localized phenomena and the biological facts of one’s own mind. The “search for meaning” is self-defeating for two broad reasons, each of which lead to a kind of circular reasoning. The first is that because the problem of a lack of meaning could be defined from a countless number of perspectives--each with its peculiar vocabulary--each interpretation or diagnosis will be insufficiently total since it can always be redescribed from a different perspective. The clever construction of one could be seen as proof of having fallen into the trap of another, so the learned protagonists go on catching themselves, admonishing themselves for their own shortcomings, while delighting in demonstrating the guile at having been able to perceive those shortcomings. Moreover, the manner in which the interpretation is articulated and the form that it takes are themselves largely determined by socio-
historical circumstances and by various cultural strains and influences; this circumstance of a traceable development itself appears to impinge on the claims to truth of any single interpretation, thereby making toys and trinkets of these tools. In any case, the proliferation of interpretations does not satisfy the prevailing lack, but instead creates a countless number of conditions that apparently must be met—the desire for, or what Herzog calls the “delusion of total explanations.”

The second reason that the “search for meaning” is circular and self-defeating has to do with the psychological conditions that appear to explain and undermine the value and validity of any kind of diagnosis or interpretation. The impulse for generating interpretations is perceived as itself a problem, which no interpretation or diagnosis can cure, as they arrive only in the appearance of symptoms. Diagnosis involves the description of a set of circumstances the articulation and acknowledgment of which cause some measure of pain to the individual, since they force him—Citrine, Herzog, etc.—to disruptively reorient himself to the world. Because it involves some measure of pain, diagnosis is liable in itself to become a masochistic activity, or else to be viewed as a kind of narcissistic fantasy-domain in which the clever theorist vanquishes upsetting circumstances by exhibiting the farsightedness to perceive them to their roots. Thus, a practice whose purpose is ostensibly to cure, and which ostensibly describes relatively dispassionately a state of affairs in the real world, is clouded with interest, with scarcely perceived, protean impulses. However, the eagerness to find blame in interpretation could itself be viewed suspiciously; it could be perceived as the struggle of a recalcitrant ego against the acknowledgment of certain realities—masochism, narcissism, paranoia, etc. Thus, the fact of the

42 Of course, this explanation itself could be presented as just one of the insufficient explanations that I talk about in the paragraph above, just as the impulse for creating all of those interpretations could be subsumed under the psychological condition I talk about here.
individual generating explanations and diagnoses becomes part of the problem that that same individual must solve, but because the solution must presumably occur through another interpretation, it must be subsumed once more into the category of sickness rather than cure. The delusion that some greater eloquence, some greater scrutiny—that ideas—will ever in themselves be sufficient, is set in relief, but the mind, left alone, self-infected, nevertheless has nothing to do but talk, to wind itself into new quibbles and amusements.

To lay all of this out in this way misrepresents, however unintentionally, the manner in which all of this is made evident in the novels. These points do not occur in this setting-forth of arguments, deliberating over weak spots, before the relatively clear perception of knots. Rather, one sees this all develop over the course of the novel, as one sees a variety of interpretations brought forth, a variety of lenses created, each one ultimately found unsatisfactory. What is especially interesting about Bellow's protagonists is that they are more or less aware of all of this. They endlessly propound interpretations and diagnoses, from one discipline and set of terms to another, all the while maintaining an eye on their own supposed psychological dysfunctions. They know that they are caught in this circular and self-defeating search, and so they vacillate between excitement and despair, frantic activity and desultory resignation, while commotion, disorder, and unhappy calm variously reign in the mind. Thus, interpretations variously become instruments of torture, puzzles, tools, trinkets, toys—a reflection of the relationship one has to them from moment to moment, the apparent freedom one is able to have in relation to ideas. An acknowledgment of the maze-like habits of thought in which Bellow’s characters are immersed occurs in Herzog, where we read the following, in free indirect discourse,

All work and no play is bad medicine. Ike went trout-fishing and played golf; my needs are different. (More in Herzog’s vein of wide-eyed malice.) The erotic must be admitted to its rightful place, at last, in an emancipated society which
understands the relation of sexual repression to sickness, war, property, money, totalitarianism. Why, to get laid, is actually socially constructive and useful, an act of citizenship. So here I am in the gathering dusk, the striped jacket on my back, sweating again after my wash, shaved, powdered, taking my underlip in my teeth nervously, as if anticipating what Ramona will do to it. Powerless to reject the hedonistic joke of a mammoth industrial civilization on the spiritual desires, the high cravings of a Herzog, on his moral suffering, his longing for the good, the true. All the while his heart is contemptibly aching. He would like to give his heart a shaking, or put it out of his breast. Evict it. Moses hated the humiliating comedy of heartache. But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total explanations. (181-182, emphases in original)

We see the more or less usual discussion of history and politics, the influence upon them of certain patterns of behavior and certain aspects of mass psychology. We see the problems of the protagonist set upon this backdrop, the protagonist defining himself upon an infinitely mutable (because the lenses and their manner of application are infinite) background. This accounts for the inability to accept any one self-understanding because the relationship to the world could be phrased in an infinite number of ways. We likewise see the mixture of bitterness and complacency in this theorizing. We are meant to see this casting of blame in different places as not necessarily a realistic search for solutions, but as a symptom itself of what is wrong. Bellow’s characters themselves are sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge that their restless questioning and doubting is a kind of psychological malady, but this discovery only leads to further casting of blame, since the ultimate root of the problem might be articulated in various historical, sociological, personal, or psychological forms. Even the idea that there is no absolute interpretation of oneself or of the world becomes fodder for more interpretation.
The search for meaning with Bellow’s characters could be said to have two aspects. The first aspect is the frenzied application of one’s learning in order to define and thereby gain a sufficient hold of what is happening, both in personal and historical terms, and the second is the idea that, if it were not for the perceived insufficiency of one’s own interpretations of what is happening, a condition in part nurtured by one’s alienation from the dominant cultural strains of society and by the reassessment of qualities like deliberation, reflectiveness, and scrupulousness as neurotic fastidiousness, then one would be happy, cured. There is a search for a cohesive sufficient moral perspective, the desire for the removal of what could be described as a view from the outside from which oneself and one’s way of life, one’s values could be criticized or ironically redescribed. However, the characters of Bellow’s novels recognize, to some extent,

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43 I take this as a desire for a state of moral affairs roughly similar to that which Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, describes as prevailing before the Enlightenment, in which the idea of the good was not so circumscribed, did not merely aspire to describe a set of actions or motivations, but was thoroughly integrated and taken for granted within a community, reflected a set of qualities and a peculiar understanding of human flourishing, in which there was not the kind of fact/value distinction so apparent in our own society. At one point, in discussing the virtues in Homeric Greece, MacIntyre uses the metaphor of chess for describing the internal coherence and sufficiency regarding explanations for actions in the society: “The rules which govern both action and evaluative judgment in the *Iliad* resemble the rules and the precepts of a game such as chess. It is a question of fact whether a man is a good chess player, whether he is good at devising end-game strategies, whether a move is the right move to make in a particular situation. The game of chess presupposes, indeed is partially constituted by, agreement on how to play chess. Within the vocabulary of chess it makes no sense to say ‘That was the one and only move which would achieve checkmate, but was it the right move to make?’ And therefore someone who said this and understood what he was saying would have to be employing some notion of ‘right’ which receives its definition from outside chess… The self of the heroic age lacks precisely that characteristic which we have already seen that some modern moral philosophers take to be an essential characteristic of human self-hood: the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint or point of view, to step backwards, as it were, and view and judge that standpoint or point of view from the outside. In heroic society there is no ‘outside’ except that of the stranger” (125-126). Bellow’s characters are never comfortably “inside” any point of view, and this is what distresses them. Citrine exhibits that modern philosophical position which MacIntyre describes when he says, “The educated speak of the disenchanted (a boring) world. But it is not the world, it is my own head that is disenchanted. The world cannot be disenchanted. 2) For me the self-conscious ego is the seat of boredom. This increasing, swelling, domineering, painful self-consciousness is the only rival of the political and social powers that run my life (business, technological-bureaucratic powers, the state). You have a great organized movement of life, and you have the single self, independently conscious, proud of its detachment and its absolute immunity, its stability and its power to remain unaffected by anything whatsoever--by the sufferings of others or by society or by politics or by external chaos. In a way it doesn’t give a damn. It is asked to give a damn, and we often urge it to give a damn, but the curse of noncaring lies upon this painfully free consciousness. It is free from attachment to beliefs and to other souls. Cosmologies, ethical systems? It can run through them by the dozens. For to be fully conscious of oneself as an individual is also to be separated from all else. This is Hamlet’s kingdom of infinite space in a nutshell, of ‘words, words, words,’ of ‘Denmark’s a prison’” (203). This lecture is ironic because the speaker, Citrine, constantly theorizes about how society, politics, and external chaos affect him, and this idea of the independent, antiseptic ego that he briefly propounds clearly torments him.
that this view from the outside cannot merely be wished away. The desire to take some interpretation as definitive leads to a kind of feverish embrace of a way of life or of a crackpot promise of deliverance—for instance, Charlie Citrine’s embrace of Rudolf Steiner’s mysticism as his life falls apart. To try to put this all more simply, the desire to diagnose and cure is already a symptom of what needs to be cured. This recognition, despite whatever temporary palliative “Aha!” occurs, is nothing but a further diagnosis that creates panic, unrelenting because no solution occurs that is not a symptom of the original problem. If the generation of interpretations is a symptom of a lack of meaning or psychological distress (and psychology is one of the lenses more persistently employed), and the wish is for no outside, ironical perspective to be possible, then the solution of a monomaniacal plunge into one interpretation, that of Citrine’s obsession with Steiner’s theosophy, for example, or Humboldt’s belief that his position in an Adlai Stevenson administration will bring poetry to the summit of world-historical power, or any of the protagonists’ obsession with sex, represents a decline, and in the context of the novel a comic failure.

Another, more frequent, solution appears in Bellow’s novels, which is the desire to forget oneself in one’s emotions and actions, a state of being akin to childhood (a desire itself ironized in the novels, described as an excessive sentimentality that lamentably persists into adulthood). Bellow’s characters, in spite of their frequent desperate attempts to articulate some kind of sufficient perspective and their many lamentations at their failures to do so, nevertheless do possess an idea of what would constitute a position in life immune from the doubts and questions that torment them. This position is not one in which all of one’s questions are answered but instead a position in which it does not occur to oneself to ask certain questions; because one is
comfortably integrated into a society the answer to the question of meaning is self-evident. These positions typically involve a vision of middle-class domestic happiness--far away from the cruel mockery of their desire for higher meaning--or else the temporary gratification of sexual desire. In any case, these desired positions involve some kind of consistent form of occupation of mind--so that one's thoughts do not endlessly wander and tie themselves into knots--and a form of social integration. As much is suggested when in Herzog we read the following:

He reached for the instrument, therefore, and heard Ramona--the cheerful voice of Ramona calling him to a life of pleasure on the thrilling wires of New York. And not simple pleasure but metaphysical, transcendent pleasure--pleasure which answered the riddle of existence. (164)

The riddle of existence--a vague phrase, yet one whose meaning we know well enough. A riddle which appears as a kind of nagging dissatisfaction rather than as a highly reasoned thing full of articulated postulates and conclusions. The expectation and thrill of company wards off pestering unanswerable questions. To lose oneself in one's emotions means to happily lose sight of the question of one's place in the world, or to have those emotions and impulses to action authoritatively satisfy that question.

Much the same idea is presented when Charlie Citrine thinks about his highschool sweetheart from decades earlier:

When I loved Naomi Lutz I was safely within life. Its phenomena added up, they made sense. Death was an after all acceptable part of the proposition… I couldn't help thinking what a blessed life I might have led with Naomi Lutz. Fifteen thousand nights embracing Naomi and I would have smiled at the solitude and boredom of the grave. I would have needed no bibliography, no stock portfolios, no medal from the Legion of Honor. (76-77, emphasis original)
This idea is repeated several times in the novel, even to the daughter of Naomi Lutz, whom the protagonist meets at one point, so it is difficult to take entirely seriously. The idea is always brought forth in the maudlin confessional manner of a drunkard--full of regrets, romanticizing a state of affairs in the past. Nevertheless, the idea of being “within life” is a state of affairs in which the question of the purpose of it all does not occur and would perhaps only be met with an unconcerned shrug. An unreflexive knowledge of where one fits socially, of one’s obligations and expectations--shared hopes, a sense of self-worth derived from an estimable and widely-accepted useful position, etc.--fulfills the need for meaning. This is most sharply stated in Herzog, where we read,

Isn’t it mysterious how I love the child of my enemy? But a man doesn’t need happiness for himself. No, he can put up with any amount of torment--with recollections, with his own familiar evils, despair. And this is the unwritten history of man, his unseen, negative accomplishment, his power to do without gratification for himself provided there is something great, something into which his being, and all beings, can go. He does not need meaning as long as such intensity has scope. Because then it is self-evident; it is meaning. (315, emphases original)

Here we see most pointedly the idea that the answer to a state of pained befuddlement, a state of shipwreck and questioning of purpose, is not greater eloquence, not schematizing and theorizing, but an unreflexive satisfaction and assurance regarding one’s place in the world.

5.5 Conclusion

In a passage in The Sovereignty of Good which perfectly expresses the backdrop of acknowledged gloom in Bellow’s characters, and which in style and range of thought could just as well have come from one of Herzog’s letters or Citrine’s monologues, Iris Murdoch writes,
I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point or telos. That human beings are naturally selfish seems true on the evidence, whenever and wherever we look at them, in spite of a very small number of apparent exceptions. About the quality of this selfishness modern psychology has had something to tell us. The psyche is a historically determined individual restlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity. The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. I think we can probably recognize ourselves in this rather depressing description. (76-77)

Thoughts of this sort are ever-present in Bellow’s protagonists. They are all widely read and they all compulsively reel off interpretations of people and their place in the world in more or less exactly this manner. Even the laconic invitation to the reader to consider in what manner the description applies in her own case retains something of the deflating turns of phrase at the end of some passages in Bellow. We could say, as if for anecdotal proof in favor of the argument of the “psyche” being “historically determined,” that the thoughts expressed above would never occur to Gautier or to Pater (or to any number of writers before the 20th century). If we could find many of these thoughts expressed in Proust, or imagine Proust saying as much, the pace at which they would be expressed, and the thousand scruples and narrative and metaphorical layerings that would attend the expression, would soften its blow, remove the air of blunt truth-telling, or else exalt the apparent truth of this pessimistic reading of ourselves into a kind of fantastical demon of fate to which we all must inevitably submit. This is to say that the clear and
direct language here—together with the employment of a few jargon terms like “psyche”—

ostensibly serves as a kind of “transparent glass” through which we could view the truth of the statements. The apparent sobriety is only another kind of intoxication, one which a different, less somber moment, a new vision of human nature might dispel. Take, for example, this alternate view of human nature, presented through a view of human flourishing, from Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society*:

Only in him who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being, the originator of others or the generator of products and ideas—only in him may gradually ripen the fruit of these seven stages. I know no better word for it than ego integrity. Lacking a clear definition, I shall point to a few constituents of this state of mind. It is the ego’s accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning. It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for. It is the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions: it thus means a new, a different love of one’s parents. It is a comradeship with the ordering ways of distant times and different pursuits, as expressed in the simple products and sayings of such times and pursuits. Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes. The style of integrity developed by his culture or civilization thus becomes the “patrimony of the soul,” the seal of his moral paternity of himself.
In the first part of this passage we recognize something of the fairytale hero who has endured his trials and is rewarded with a bride and a kingdom, but under the reign of an ampler providence, from a point of greater abstraction, these become transmuted into tender thoughts for the world and easy relations within it, fortified by the serene assurance that one has done well in that domain of action that draws one’s attention and favor. Contrary to Murdoch’s statement that there is no telos to human life, we see that the shrewd psychologist, with his stages of psychosexual and psychosocial development, has discovered the mould of the ideal and salutary “life cycle,” as formed by quasi-divine accident. The language of the psychologist—as with any jargon-laden language—is a language whose use is characterized by an ambition to demystify and by the confidence that it does so. Words like “ego,” “psyche,” etc. signal that one is speaking with a kind of truth-seeking deliberateness. Whether these hounds catch the right scent, according to Bellow, is almost beside the point, since the authority they claim, with the impressiveness of their classificatory schemes, overawes the poet in an environment where the accomplishments of science and industry reign. At the same time, part of the reason why his characters are attracted to psychology is because it is new; it has grand promises, and is part of the culture into which they throw themselves into, with a love of the passing moment, even as they view themselves outside of it.

44 Robert R. Dutton, in his book, Saul Bellow, presents an interesting discussion of Bellow in relation to Alfred North Whitehead’s Adventure of Ideas. While I have not read Whitehead’s book I find Dutton’s discussion of it illuminating in terms of Bellow’s ideas on the ego’s self-gratification as being potentially in opposition to a broader social flourishing. He writes, “When Whitehead comments on the nature of peace in a civilized society, he discusses one of the adjuncts of success, the desire for fame. He maintains there can be no peace within a society whose aims are not beyond the personal, that peace is only possible through a transcendence of the personal. He speaks of this desire for fame as an ‘inversion of the social impulse’...” (156). More specifically, Bellow’s characters are often drawn to fame and view it as a corrupting force, against that sincere innocence in which they feel themselves to have discovered the lost meaning of life.
I set these passages against each other and describe them ironically in order to show how such confident descriptions could be undermined. Descriptions of this sort are created and undermined constantly in Bellow’s novels. In this passage, too, we recognize something of Bellow’s voice—his style and the ideas that appear throughout his works. We hear the echo of the idea that “death loses its sting” in the repeated declarations by Citrine that if he had married his high school sweetheart, Naomi Lutz, then he would never have feared the grave, that death would be an altogether acceptable part of life, since the pinched morbidity that arises from a sense of dislocation—and even of “identity crisis”—would never have developed. This ideal of Erikson’s is echoed repeatedly in Bellow’s novels—an ideal type which it is no longer possible for the characters to become, since they are so afflicted with neuroses and regrets.

In one of the epigraphs to this chapter I quoted from The Vicar of Wakefield, where the merry fool of a vicar says, “...as some men gaze with admiration at the colors of a tulip or the wings of a butterfly, so I was by nature an admirer of happy human faces.” Although art plays little role in this novel, we may for this very reason look to the vicar’s statement as in some manner suggestive of the attitude towards which Bellow’s characters aspire, one in which the spirit digests hardships with unwitting ease, retaining its naivety, that naivety which is perhaps such an auspicious condition for the development of the eager sociability which prolonged isolation and reflection diminish. We do not look very closely at happy faces, as we do at tulips

Jeanne Braham, in A Sort of Columbus, writes, “Humanity’s struggle, as seen through the lens of Herzog’s experience, does not have to be given a systematic meaning: it is richer, more complex than any meaning man could assign to it. Reality instructors try to assign such a meaning because they fear endorsing ‘ordinary life’; they hope for official sanction because they fear living in the here and now. Their inflated models of life are caricatures of the real thing because ‘the soul lives freely, expansively, in modalities we may not know.’ Herzog discovers his own peculiar treasure by coming to terms with himself through the memory of his father, his divorces, and the courtroom drama at the end of the book” (66-67). I think Braham is overly optimistic regarding the ending of Herzog, but I think she is right in noting Bellow’s skepticism (and not just in Herzog) in regard to those he calls “reality instructors,” those who seek to reduce the phenomena of the world into certain patterns. There is a seeming paradox in that the artist seems to be a reality instructor while simultaneously being one whose work is opposed to theirs in that the artist seeks to indicate the breadth of experience.
and at butterflies and at paintings and at poems, or as we do, even, at less happy ones, where, anxious and embarrassed, we try to determine what sort of impression we make. Of course, the irony here is that the enjoyment we derive from looking at beautiful objects is not at all similar to the happiness we derive from making others happy and in being in cheerful company. Pretty things are less important than simple human happiness, and they are apparently not needed when the real conditions for happiness have been fulfilled. This persistent skepticism towards the value of art (as a mode of thought, an experience, a pursuit, a practice, etc.) is, I think, Bellow’s great contribution to this tradition of aestheticist writing. He occasionally reframes art as mere intellectual discourse and theorizes about the historical and social conditions that have led to this idea—for instance, the development of a class for whom leisure activities are possible. This idea is reflected in the form of his novels that often include long discourses on ideas gathered from various disciplines. Most often, however, and most emphatically (taking place in the climactic moments of his novels), Bellow’s skepticism regarding the role of art in creating meaning in one’s life takes the form of juxtaposing its pursuit with the irreflective dignity and value of ordinary relationships. We see, for example, at the end of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Sammler’s epiphany, not concerning art, but rather the moral order of the world, one in which ordinary life and meaning are combined:

The attendant pointed to the wheeled stretcher on which Elya lay. Sammler uncovered his face. The nostrils, the creases were very dark, the shut eyes pale and full, the bald head high-marked by gradients of wrinkles. In the lips bitterness and an expression of obedience were combined.

Sammler in a mental whisper said, “Well, Elya. Well, well, Elya.” And then in the same way he said, “Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death was coming was eager, even childishly
perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him. At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and the degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As we all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.”

(316)

This claim of knowledge, repeated over and over, seems to be the answer to the search for an irrefutable framework. It is a framework that is the inheritance of each person, but fractured into countless corrupted articulations. Here the focus, as we see in the writers we have looked at throughout this dissertation, is on articulation and the manner of articulation, although we see no triumph attributed to the act. Rather, any effort is bound to disfigure the knowledge purported to be native to each of us. The language in which these questions are written, the terms which they use, are too specific to ever capture the entirety of the problems they can only partially observe. The syntax, again made to appear haphazard, simple, unpretentious, oral, is meant to communicate the sincerity of the sentiment, a condition for the acceptance of the truth of the statement, even as a reader may recall in the breaking language—a repetition that suggests a nonverbal emphasis, a failure of language—something of Joyce or Beckett. The lasting paradox is whether such a thought could appear as true outside of its position as revelation, that is, as art.

While Bellow could be considered as a diagnostician of what he would consider the failed attempt of the grand vision of aestheticism in synthesizing ordinary life and art, his diagnoses themselves, in their narrative construction, in the layered meanings they gather from a wide range of disciplines, in their containment in works of fiction, develop an artfulness, a peculiarity in their ability to make apparently divergent perspectives cohere. While he
occasionally lauds the poet in a manner that would be familiar to the full-throated tributes of Gautier, Bellow does so soberly and with circumspection, and does so without denigrating the manner of life of the person who is not at all or only superficially interested in art. He does not view art as opposed to ordinary life, as a kind of pest that cannot be shaken off, or as an unwelcome reality from which the reprieve can never be eternal, in the manner of Gautier. Nor does he view it as a vague domain from which fanciful speculations and philosophical concepts are disinterestedly gathered and to which they are applied, as Pater does. Proust settles the artist more concretely in the world of ordinary life and makes the artist, in the world of society, seem unremarkable, even neurotic and out of place, as we see in the examples of the narrator, Vinteuil, and Bergotte. In the end, however, Proust’s style is so dainty and in such regular communication with the sublime, and his condemnation of society so vehement, in contrast to his final exaltation of art as being able to recapture life, that he isolates the artist, and makes the artist stand apart from and above the world of ordinary affairs. Bellow, as the last of this line of aesthetes, is never conclusive in elevating art nor in denigrating it, although he is more assured in his attribution of distinct value to ordinary pursuits and desires. They are not redeemed merely as vehicles to or objects worthy of artistic representation, but as full of meaning in themselves, meaning in which the artist has as great a share and no greater than the average person.
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