3. Brontë, *Villette*, 135; Paul Marchbanks, "A Costly Morality: Dependency Care and Mental Difference in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 1 (2010): 55–71.
4. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
5. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
6. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
7. Fiona Kumari Campbell, "Ability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 12.
8. Campbell, "Ability," 13.
9. Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 95.
10. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 43.
11. Christopher Krentz, "A 'Vacant Receptacle'? Blind Tom, Cognitive Difference, and Pedagogy," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 552–56; Licia Carlson, "Feminist Approaches to Cognitive Disability," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 10 (2016): 541–53.
12. Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).
13. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
14. Anna Hickey-Moody, "Slow Life and Ecologies of Sensation," *Feminist Review* 111 (2015): 140–48, 140; Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 754–80.
15. Brontë, *Villette*, 174.

Aestheticism

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ONE of the curious aspects of the term aestheticism is that it has succeeded—particularly since the 1990s—in defining a thriving area of English literary history that, for reasons that require some

explanation, seldom adverted to the word. Usually thought of (at best) as a set of principles that upholds art for art's sake or (at worst) a voguish movement that the flamboyant young Oscar Wilde iconized, aestheticism has begun to flourish as a resonant keyword that readily identifies recognizable phenomena. A quick look at the spate of recent scholarly articles, essay collections, and academic monographs that address aestheticism indicates that it is inspiring not only innovative studies that embrace the ageing Pre-Raphaelites, Walter Pater and his queer adherents, and fin-de-siècle poets with a penchant for *formes fixes*; its guiding ideas have also assisted in shaping current analyses of such spectacles as modern horror (the vivid title of Geoff Klock's 2017 book summons the term's remarkable potency: *Aestheticism, Evil, Homosexuality, and Hannibal: If Oscar Wilde Ate People*). At the same time, philosophers have demonstrated some interest in styles of neo-aestheticism: an intellectual turn that in part constitutes a reaction against Terry Eagleton's diatribe, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990). Eagleton's Marxist hostility had the virtue of spurring Isobel Armstrong in her *tour de force*, *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), to redefine the false consciousness that he identified with *l'art pour l'art*. Prior to Eagleton's assault, the resources for taking seriously the emergence of a movement that relished—in Pater's words from 1868—"the love of art for art's sake" were somewhat dispersed,[1] with the most heavyweight studies of British *éstheticisme* appearing (as the spelling attests) from two distinguished scholars, Albert J. Farmer and Louise Rosenblatt, who published in French.[2]

As a keyword, aestheticism characterizes the apparent preoccupation that groups of late Victorians (roughly from the 1870–1900 era) had with the necessity and urgency of celebrating beauty in the face of ugly and violent modernity. And given that such prominent aesthetes as Vernon Lee wrote studies with titles like *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (1913), aestheticism appears to enjoy a certain field-defining coherence, one that enables literary historians to explore friendship groups among art-lovers, developments in fine presses, and—especially in the cases of Pater and Wilde—thoughtful engagements with the legacy of German Romanticism (notably Schiller and Hegel) about form, reason, and sense as well as (in relation to Lee) more recent advances in thinking about *Einfühlung* or empathy.

But there is, needless to say, a different history of aestheticism that does not quite live up to the ways in which scholars invoke the term in their current inquiries. If we refer to the 1884 first edition of the *OED*, it tells us that the earliest literary usage of aestheticism occurs in the

Cambridge scholar George Brimley's not terribly complimentary discussion of Tennyson's otherwise well-received two-volume collection *Poems* (1842). Brimley's lengthy essay, which dates from 1855, dwells for some time on Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, revised 1842), which Brimley clearly finds morally objectionable. His main complaint is that this work "carries Tennyson's tendency to pure æstheticism to an extreme point."[3] "It is picture and music," he declares, "and nothing more."[4] Brimley cannot tolerate the luscious atmosphere that the poem conjures for the mental and physical discombobulation of the mariners who, in Book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey*, are washed up on an island where the inhabitants ingest a fruit that has all the qualities of an opiate:

> A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,
> Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;
> And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,
> Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.[5]

Very soon, native peoples emerge from this perplexing but haunting topography:

> Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,
> Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave
> To each.[6]

Once the seamen partake of the fruit, they cannot tell whether they are awaking or in some kind of reverie. At the same time, they hear their heartbeats pounding like music in their ears. Their bodies, it seems, have become living instruments subject to some larger, undefinable force. There is nothing in the "Choric Song," which Tennyson strategically revised in the 1842 text in order to combat the kind of critique that Brimley mounted, that tempers the disagreeable aestheticism of the poem. Even though the voyagers strike a note of troubling irony when they speak in unison of the newfound pleasures of permanent sedation ("slumber is more sweet than toil,"[7] they say), it remains the case for Brimley that the poem belongs to a suspect corpus that reveals a poet who "is trying to live by the outward things about him, and by the enjoyment they afford to his intellect," rather than attend "to God and his fellow-beings" as well as his "spiritual life."[8] In every way, aestheticism exudes a negative quality.

As one searches for further Victorian recurrences of the term, we learn that aestheticism—as the *OED* also reminds us—enjoyed a broader

range of reference than to an unwarranted literary indulgence in sensuousness. Still, on each of these rather different occasions the word also assumes a pejorative tone. The term designated, for example, a deviation from Anglican doctrine when the controversies surrounding Ritualism in High Church practices troubled ecclesiastics across England. In 1867, just to take one instance, the *Bath Chronicle* reported on the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol's second visitation to Gloucester Cathedral where he addressed a group of sixty churchmen. When it came to countenancing the elements of Catholic ritual that had crept into some Church of England services, the bishop began by conceding that those priests who had originally imported such practices—such as employing a thurible for the diffusion of incense or ringing bells during the elevation of the Eucharistic host—may have done so in good faith. Now, however, it was clearly the case that such ritualistic excesses had gone too far. "Innocent æstheticism," the writer remarked, "or simple and unmixed desire to do honour to the nearer coming Lord, had now merged into what was far, far different, and had become absorbed by desires and feelings that were at variance with the principles of the Reformation, and were incompatible with an honest recognition of the national church."[9] Here Catholic ritual is both implicitly sensory, creating sensations that confound doctrinal judgment, and equally treacherous, making the nation liable to a wholesale return to Rome.

Such information suggests why, in the very the period that it is supposed to delineate, aestheticism had few sponsors. The word does not appear in Pater's writings. Nor does it make its presence known in any of Wilde's published works. Yet it was Wilde who was arguably the first to transvalue the much-abused term not long after he arrived in New York City, where he began a year-long lecture tour that aimed to spread the word about art for art's sake across the Continent. No sooner had he informed the journalists who were crowding the docks to greet him that the Atlantic had been a great disappointment than he gave an interview to the *New York World*, which wanted him to define the term that they thought identified his intellectual standpoint. "You spoke just now of aestheticism as a philosophy," an intrigued reporter stated to Wilde. "Is that your classification of the science?"[10] "Assuredly," Wilde confirmed. "It is a study of what may be found in art and in nature. It is a pursuit of the secret of life. Whatever in art represents eternal truth expresses the great underlying truth of aestheticism."[11] This is, I believe, the first occasion when a literary figure sought to characterize aestheticism as an ideal. But in the rather sporadic life-cycle that the term underwent from the 1870s to the time of Victoria's death, aestheticism never

transformed into a developed theory, even in Wilde's finest pieces of criticism. By 1895, when Max Beerbohm looked back on the young Wilde's debut as an "ultra-aesthetic[al]" young man in "1880," the term conjured "purely aesthetic fads," such as the outdoor plays that Lady Archibald Campbell hosted in the grounds of her estate at Coombe Wood: "It was the very Derby day of Æstheticism."[12] In the face of such good-humored trivializing, this keyword remained for decades in a state of definitional suspension before whatever it truly was—or really could or should have been—became self-evident in modern literary history.

Notes

1. [Walter Pater], "Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review* 34 (1868): 312.
2. See Albert J. Farmer, *Le Mouvement esthétique et "decadent" en Angleterre (1873–1900)* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931); and Louise Rosenblatt, *L'Idée de l'art pour l'art dans la littérature anglaise pendant la période Victorienne* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931).
3. George Brimley, "Tennyson's Poems," in *Essays*, ed. William George Clark (Cambridge: Macmillan; London: J. W. Parker, 1858), 25. Brimley's discussion first appeared in *Cambridge Essays for 1855: Contributed by Members of the University* (London: John W. Parker, 1855), 226–81.
4. Brimley, "Tennyson's Poems," 25.
5. Alfred Tennyson, "The Lotos-Eaters," in *The Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Harlow: Longman, 1987), 1: 469.
6. Tennyson, "The Lotos-Eaters," 1: 469.
7. Tennyson, "The Lotos-Eaters," 1: 476.
8. Brimley, "Tennyson's Poems," 28.
9. [Anon.], "The Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol on Church Questions," *Bath Chronicle*, 31 (October 1867): 7.
10. [Anon.], "Oscar Wilde's Arrival," *New York World*, January 4, 1882: 1, quoted in *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Cary Scharnhorst (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 14.
11. "Oscar Wilde's Arrival," 14.
12. Max Beerbohm, "1880," *Yellow Book* 5 (1895): 279, 280.