

Autonomy

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IN *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Walter Pater writes that “the chief factor in the thoughts of the modern mind concerning itself is the intricacy, the universality of natural law, even in the moral order.” What “modern art” must do in response to this development, he says, is “rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom.” The question for Pater is whether art can now “represent men and women in these bewildering toils so as to give the spirit at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom?”¹

The “sense of freedom” he refers to has had something of a bad rap for the past century or so. Individual self-determination is frequently associated with the Enlightenment notion of sovereign subjectivity and the liberal, capitalist, and imperialist projects of the nineteenth century to which it helped give rise. What he calls “the universality of natural law” names then-recent scientific advances revealing how our uncontrollable physical impulses, heredity, and genetics compromise any sense of our being independently self-directed; the realization that, as Benjamin Morgan states, “the self is . . . on the verge of dissolving outward into its material surroundings, or inward into individual nerves and organs.”² Twentieth-century cultural theory has shown this to be true of social as well as biological forces. This has been articulated most strongly in the writings of Michel Foucault, who presents the self as always and inevitably discursively constructed. Yet aspects of what Fredric Jameson has called the “death of the subject” can be found in all manner of discourses—Marxism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, etc.—whose genealogies can be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche’s imperative to expose individualism as a bourgeois myth.³

As Pater’s comments suggest, considerations of the subject’s autonomy are inseparable from considerations of art’s autonomy—that is, the notion that aesthetic works exist (or should exist) in a realm

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unattached to social and political life as the material equivalent of the transcendently free human subject. A version of this idea can be found in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) but is perhaps most famously associated with the "art for art's sake" aestheticism embodied by such figures as A. C. Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper), and Pater himself. Indeed, Pater's questioning of art's ability to grant human beings a "sense of freedom" anticipates Jameson's comments regarding the "aesthetic dilemma" that arises from the death of the subject: "if the experience and ideology of the unique self. . . is over and done with," he says, "then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing."⁴ For Jameson, the answer to Pater's question seems to be a definitive "no," which eventually leads to the postmodern situation where artistic productions are indistinguishable from commodities and drained of any socially oppositional power, just as the supposed depths of human subjectivity are revealed to be no more than the shallow freedoms of mere consumer choice.

Yet key to Pater's question is the notion of art giving "at least an equivalent for the sense of freedom," rather than restoring a superannuated notion of individual autonomy. Although the Kantian ideal of sovereign subjectivity may no longer be justified scientifically, socially, or spiritually, Pater suggests that art can still offer a viable alternative by providing a venue where the subject can, at the very least, feel an attenuated sense of freedom by resisting dominant cultural norms. This is a humbler, but more tenable, version of autonomy, one aligned with Theodor Adorno's claim that "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. . . . [I]t criticizes society by merely existing."⁵ As Jackson Petsche explains, art that presents itself as autonomous "at once both opposes society and exists as a product of society. . . . The autonomy of art is thus a lie that art tells itself, which paradoxically contains a truth. Art, according to Adorno, can never be truly autonomous and yet it must take on that status in order to criticize society."⁶ Pater's comments suggest that we can draw upon art to enact a similar process regarding our subjectivities: one does not need to aspire to the impossible goal of liberating one's mind entirely from social authority to be able to see the world differently. Instead, aesthetic experience allows one to gain a sense of independence while still enmeshed within oppressive structures, by granting access to a domain where such laws are not always strictly enforced.

In this way, Victorian aestheticism challenges what Mari Ruti calls “a form of poststructuralist ‘essentialism’ that forecloses certain conceptual possibilities, such as the idea that autonomy might sometimes be a desirable part of human life.” Although the fantasy that there exists a sovereign, unified, immaterial core of self has been definitively exploded, the fact that “we are not fully autonomous creatures” does not mean “we have no capacity for autonomy whatever. . . . [I]n the same way that having an unconscious does not erase the conscious mind but merely complicates its functioning, our lack of seamless autonomy does not render us entirely devoid of it.”⁷ Although the material and intellectual conditions Victorian authors responded to are, obviously, different from those of our current era, the writings of aesthetes nevertheless show that it is possible to imagine a subject who gains some measure of freedom through engagement with art.

For this reason, aestheticism might provide a surprising resource for countering the oppressive Western “myth” that critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter refers to as “biocentricity”: the notion that humankind is wholly subject to intractable laws of nature and thus incapable of self-determination.⁸ According to Wynter, biocentricity justifies colonial and neocolonial conquest by manufacturing “natural” justifications for racial hierarchies, imperial violence, and uneven distributions of power by casting certain groups as inherently less than human, and thereby not appearing to violate liberalism’s promise of universal emancipation. By affirming an attenuated version of autonomy, one that belongs to all of humanity as a collective rather than to the isolated liberal subject, Victorian aesthetes affirm humankind’s capacity to depart from biocentric liberal humanism and create our own self-definition via the aesthetic, breaking away from laws that govern the rest of the natural world and asserting control over our sociopolitical order. This version of autonomy suggests that we can create a future where humanity is not synonymous with whiteness and universality is not synonymous with empire.

NOTES

1. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (The 1893 Text)*, edited by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 186.
2. Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 22.

3. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1998), 1–20.
4. Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," 6–7.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225–26.
6. Jackson Petsche, "The Importance of Being Autonomous: Toward a Marxist Defense of Art for Art's Sake," *Mediations* 26, nos. 1–2 (2013): 146.
7. Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 58.
8. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

