

Art's Undoing

Art's Undoing

In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism

Forest Pyle

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK 2014

Copyright © 2014 Fordham University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Fordham University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Fordham University Press also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pyle, Forest, 1958–

Art's undoing : in the wake of a radical aestheticism / Forest Pyle. — First edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-5111-7 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8232-5112-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Aestheticism (Literature) 3. Art and literature—Great Britain—History—19th century. I. Title.

PR468.A33P95 2014

820.9'357—dc23

2013015249

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

To Susan, to Jack, to Kiko

from whom I learn that

“Love alone should one consider”

C O N T E N T S

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction: “From Which One Turns Away”	I
Aestheticism and Its Radicality, I The Insistence of the Aesthetic, 6 “Our Romantic Movement,” II Scene of Shipwreck, 21	
1. “A Light More Dread Than Obscurity”: Spelling and Kindling in Percy Bysshe Shelley	29
“Frail Spells,” 29 “Wholly Political,” 35 Kindling and Ash, 47 “A Shape All Light,” 57	
2. “I Hold It Towards You”: Keats’s Weakness	67
“Consumed in the Fire,” 67 Weakness, 70 Threats, 81 “On He Flared,” 92	
3. What the Zeros Taught: Emily Dickinson, Event-Machine	105
“The Plunge from the Front,” 105 “A Word Dropped”: The Dickinsonian Event-Machine, 111 “A System of Aesthetics,” 123 “Bright Impossibility,” 132	
4. Hopkins’s Sighs	145
“Let Him Oh! With His Air of Angels Then Lift Me, Lay Me!” 145 Hopkins’s Breathturns, 149 “The Fire of Stress,” 158 “The Fire That Breaks,” 165	

5.	Superficiality: What Is Loving and What Is Dead in Dante Gabriel Rossetti	171
	On the Surface . . ., 171 “One Face Looks Out,” 176	
	“A Blunder of Taste”; or, What Would Clement Greenberg Say? 181 “Love Is Addressed to the Semblance”; or, What Would Jacques Lacan Say? 187 The Promises of Glass, 192	
6.	“Rings, Pearls, and All”: Wilde’s Extravagance	209
	The Soul of Man Under Aestheticism, 209 Christ the Romantic, Christ the Dandy, 215 The Cost of a Kiss, 223	
	Covered with Jewels, 241	
	<i>Notes</i>	245
	<i>Index</i>	303

ILLUSTRATIONS

Géricault, <i>The Raft of the Medusa</i>	<i>facing page 1</i>
Cornell, <i>Toward the Blue Peninsula (for Emily Dickinson)</i>	27
Leonardo da Vinci (attributed), <i>The Medusa</i>	28
Joseph Severn, <i>Keats on His Deathbed</i>	66
Caravaggio, <i>David with the Head of Goliath</i>	103
Dickinson, Fascicle 32, "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes"	104
Dickinson, "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes" (detail)	143
Hopkins, Journal page, June 30	144
Rossetti, <i>Giotto Painting Dante</i>	170
Rossetti, <i>The Beloved</i>	207
Moreau, "Salomé dansant"	208

P R E F A C E

It is fitting that this book begins with Shelley, because it originated with Shelley. More precisely, my understanding of “art’s undoing” arose from my repeated efforts to understand what was happening in certain crucial moments of Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. More precisely still, this project began from what I felt to be the shortcomings of my previous book’s attempt to come to terms with what happens when Shelley’s last poem addresses the relationship between aesthetic and political judgment. Despite my attempts to use the most supple and nuanced notions of ideology at my disposal, I felt that *The Ideology of Imagination* came up short when trying to reckon with the poetics of aestheticization in *The Triumph*. That undoing led to *Art’s Undoing*. By this title I mean to identify the capacity of certain literary representations of art and the aesthetic experiences they elicit to undo the projects (political, ethical, theological, and so on) to which they have been enlisted. For example, the poetic representation of art and aesthetics is often understood by Shelley as the “Power” that “wouldst free/This world from its dark slavery”; and yet at certain moments in certain texts—as in *The Triumph of Life*—the figuration of this same artistic “Power” *undoes* the prospect or “hope” of political liberation. At the same time, the affirmative values and humanizing roles traditionally assigned to art itself are also undone in this process: powerful though they are, the aesthetic experiences elicited in these examples get us nowhere. These instances of art’s double or compound undoing are the results of what I call a “radical aestheticism.” I am not using the term “radical” to mean something culturally advanced or politically avant-garde, though it is no coincidence that this derivation of “radical” begins to circulate in the period this book addresses. Instead, I am interested in how the literary representations of aestheticization can in certain circumstances result in an aestheticism powerful

and extreme enough to deliver us to the roots of the aesthetic, its constitutive elements reduced to ashes or to sighs.

As for the images that accompany the beginning of chapters and, on occasion, their conclusions, sometimes I have chosen an image because it prompts one of the texts I am engaging. This is the case with my opening chapter's use of the painting of the "Medusa," long attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, about which Shelley wrote an ekphrastic poem after visiting the Uffizi. In other instances, these prefatory images function as illustrations and even provocations of the relationships between literary and visual art that the chapters address. For example, Dickinson's manuscript page becomes the visual evidence for the commitment to a poesis of an only imaginary ekphrasis. By contrast, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems are so saturated by the ekphrastic impulse that his paintings and poems become a strange Möbius strip of the chiasmic relationship between the two forms of art: the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti paints a picture of the "pre-Raphaelite" artist Giotto painting a picture of the poet Dante. I have chosen Moreau's watercolor version of "The Apparition" for the book's cover in part because of its depiction of Salomé and, by way of Huysmans's account of the painting in *À rebours*, its associations with Wilde's aestheticism. But I have also chosen this image because I think it is a painting that powerfully conveys the strange miraculating but undoing capacity of art that I am exploring throughout this book. Huysmans believed Moreau was representing a vision *after* the beheading had been performed; but the picture has always struck me as an astonishing compression of the biblical narrative into a lyric image of the fiat of art's glittering, if terrifying, "apparitions." With the disengaged Herod reduced to an oblique sculpted background, Salomé is no longer dancing for anyone; and, now artist herself, she points at the suspended head of John the Baptist within a luminous and radiating, if bloody aureole. In this version of Moreau's painterly obsession with Salomé, the princess conjures the Saint's head into appearance and, in the process, offers us a vision of art as beheading, as an act of severing that offers nothing in return but this glorious image.

Art's Undoing was a long time getting done, and I am grateful for the engagement, support, and provocation of many of my present and former colleagues: Lara Bovilsky, Ken Calhoun, Mai-Lin Cheng, Ian Duncan, Lisa Freinkel, Warren Ginsburg, Jeff Librett, Enrique Lima, John Lysacker, Dawn Marlan, John McCole, Randy McGowen, Alex Neel, Paul Peppis, Mark Quigley, Dan Rosenberg, Bill Rossi, George Rowe, Steve Shankman, and Irving Wohlfarth. I also want to acknowledge three colleagues whose contribu-

tions to my project—as readers, responders, mentors, cajolers—have been indispensable: without Karen Ford, Dick Stein, and Harry Wonham, I cannot imagine what—or when—this project would have been; and I am profoundly grateful to them that I don’t have to imagine that any longer.

One of the real pleasures of the protracted gestation of this book has been its extensive and productive vetting in undergraduate classrooms as well as graduate seminars. Many of those moments are collective experiences, shared events in the development of an idea or the cultivation of a reading. I want to acknowledge a number of my present and former students for their invaluable contributions to this rewarding and exacting pedagogical engagement, the richly collaborative flip-side of the more solitary undertaking of scholarship: Bradley Butterfield, Anna Carroll, Erin Connor, Katherine Cook, Amanda Cornwall, Evan Dresman, Chris Hitt, Russell Durvenoy, Craig Franson, Jen Hammond, Alex Hunt, Kate Jenckes, Alison Lau, Jacob Leveton, Chet Liseicki, Mita Mahato, Mark Merrit, John Motley, Julia Mullen (who also worked to help me obtain permissions for the book’s images), Kaila Fromdahl Nichols, Amy Novak, Virginia Piper, Stephanie Rowe, David Sandner, and Karen Shaup. And in the long course of this project there have been a few students whose thinking and engagement—whether by an elective affinity or the lucky alignment of stars—became a teaching all its own: I have learned so much from Ryan Dirks, Alastair Hunt, and Max Novick in the two-way street of intellectual exchange that the roles of student and teacher no longer apply.

The long and mostly solitary mode of composition of this book has been punctuated by sometimes brief and partial, but often decisive engagements with many members of the profession, whether as editors, readers, interlocutors, respondents, or inspirations. I’d like to acknowledge Marshall Brown, David Clark, Libby Fay, Neil Fraistat, Mike Goode, Jerry Hogle, Colin Jaeger, Jennifer Jones, Charles Mahoney, Mona Modiano, Jonathan Mulrooney, Thomas Pfau, Fred Pfeil, Marc Redfield, Dermot Ryan, Steve Shaviro, Michael Sprinker, Karen Swann, Mick Taussig, Rei Terada, David Wagenknecht, Orrin Wang, and Deborah Elise White. I doubt that my most influential teachers will recognize in what follows the form or content of their teaching; but this project is unthinkable without the intellectual examples and instruction of Ramon Saldivar, Charles Sherry, and—above all—Gayatri Spivak.

I’d like to acknowledge another category of professional debt that spills over into something much more, something on the order of a deep intellectual friendship. The forms it takes are too various to enumerate here; but the support, engagement, and encouragement of Michael Clark, Sara Guyer,

and Jacques Khalip have been indispensable. Ian Balfour and Anne-Lise Francois also belong in this category, not only because they read the manuscript for Fordham, but because their deeply insightful and beautifully written responses are the stuff of dreams. And, once again, I feel honored and privileged to call Helen Tartar my editor.

Pretty much everything I know about theatrical performance in general, and certainly everything I know about playing Salomé, I learned from Susan Tate. Beyond that, I wish I could say that my family helped me write this book; but in fact I hold Susan, Jack, and Kiko partially responsible for the length of time it took me to finish the project—which, in the end, at least as I see it, has been all to the good. One of the implicit arguments of the book revolves around the question of value, specifically the value of aesthetic experience and the value of the works of art that give rise to that experience. If my family did little to teach me about the worth of any poem's representation of art and aesthetics, they have taught me everything I know and feel about the meaning of value.

Early versions of some portions of the book were presented at annual meetings of the Marxist Literary Group's Institute for Culture and Society, the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, the Modern Language Association, and most often at the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism. And I am grateful for the invitations to present portions of this book as lectures at the University of Toronto, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Maryland, Willamette University, and Portland State University.

An earlier version of part 1 of the Introduction appeared in "Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley," *Studies in Romanticism* (Winter 2003): 427–59.

Portions of earlier versions of Chapter 1 appeared in "Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley," "'Frail Spells': Shelley and the Ironies of Exile," *Romantic Praxis*, special issue: "Irony and Clerisy" (Spring 1999): 1–17 (reprinted in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat [New York: Norton, 2001], 663–69), and "Letter on an Aestheticist Education," *Romantic Praxis*, special issue: "The Sublime and Education" (Fall 2010): 1–25.

Earlier versions of parts 1 and 4 of Chapter 2 appeared in "Kindling and Ash: Radical Aestheticism in Keats and Shelley."

A much earlier version of part 3 of Chapter 6 appeared as "Extravagance; or, Salomé's Kiss," *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 7 (1998): 39–52.

Art's Undoing



Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (© RMN–Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY)

Introduction: “From Which One Turns Away”

Aestheticism and Its Radicality

This book is about something I am calling a radical aestheticism, the term that I believe best describes a recurring event in some of the most powerful and resonating texts of the British Romantic literary tradition. A radical aestheticism offers us the best way to reckon with what takes place at certain moments in certain texts by P. B. Shelley, Keats, Dickinson, Hopkins, D. G. Rossetti, and Wilde when aestheticized representations reach their radicalization. I will go on to argue that this aesthetic radicalization, however isolated or rare, has profound consequences, not only for the specific texts in which it occurs, but for our understanding of the ambitious literary project undertaken by each of these writers and, finally, of our conception of the legacy of Romanticism.

We associate the term “aestheticism” with those nineteenth-century movements in England and in France that celebrated or promoted what Pater called “the love of art for art’s sake,” or what Cousin called “*l’art pour l’art*.” The philosophical inspiration for this movement is often attributed to Schil-

ler or to Schelling; but it is invariably if unjustly Kant who offers the philosophical authorization. There is certainly no inherent reason that the *critique* of a certain form of judgment—one that judges something made available to the senses without the stability or ground of a law or concept—should result in the *celebration* of the judgment or the sensation. And yet, in Marc Redfield's elegant formulation, “through a sleight of hand that has always threatened to make aesthetics as suspect as it is seductive, aesthetic judgment claims simultaneously to produce and to discover the essential harmony of the perceiving mind and the perceived world, sensation and idea, phenomenality and cognition.”¹ This “sleight of hand,” this surreptitious metalepsis, this “sub-reption” is not only *constitutive* of the aesthetic, but a boundless resource for aestheticism. Moreover, it is certainly impossible to imagine the claims and goals of any aestheticist tradition without the *Third Critique's* delineations of the specificities of an aesthetic judgment and its founding claim that “the judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (either theoretical or practical)” and that the “satisfaction” derived from a judgment of beauty “is alone a disinterested and *free* satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason, here forces our assent.”² And while the Kantian legacy of artistic autonomy has been mobilized for any number of arguments and causes, from the most conservative humanism to the most radical Marxism, it has never been invoked with more extravagance than by nineteenth-century aestheticism.

Throughout this book I will have occasion to examine in detail some of the relevant and intricate relationships among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical aesthetics, the various strains of nineteenth-century aestheticism, and twentieth-century critical theory. These relationships have been the topic of a rich and contentious critical literature, to which I will turn both as resource and as object of study. But there remains one feature of this relationship that, though obvious enough, tends to pass without commentary. I believe that without any exception of which I am aware, aestheticism is presented by its principal proponents—in the specific tradition I am considering, Pater and Wilde—as something to be *espoused*. The forms of this espousal are immediately recognizable and, given the considerable rhetorical resources of its purveyors, remarkably limited. “Love art for its own sake,” Wilde declares in his first New York lecture, “and then all things you need will be added to you.”³ Thus is Kant's painstaking critical analysis of the nature of an aesthetic judgment transformed by way of a claim for the autonomy of art into an extravagant creed, a dandy's refrain. Indeed, the tone and tenor of Wilde's lecture makes the extent of aestheticism's ambitions clear: whether

as a collective mission or a personal disposition, aestheticism is offered as an *ethos*, one that can be professed, learned, cultivated, and lived.

What I am calling a *radical* aestheticism is not that which Pater or Wilde espoused. Nor is it the aestheticism that is often—and, I believe, mistakenly—attributed to the chiasmic intertwining of truth and beauty in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Nor is it the *politically* radical declaration of a poetic “legislation” with which Shelley concludes his ambitious *Defense of Poetry*. We will examine the extent to which the poems of both Keats and Shelley consistently reflect upon—praise, mourn, describe, conjure, parry—aesthetic experience; but neither poet commits his project to a radical aestheticism. While there are many poetic images and prose statements in both Dickinson and Hopkins that demonstrate how deeply the problem of the aesthetic permeates their poetry and poetics, no responsible critic would suggest that either of these poets is undertaking an aestheticism, radical or otherwise. The examples of Rossetti and Wilde are at once more straightforward and more complicated. When Wilde celebrates the work of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in his New York lecture, for example, he does so on the basis of an aestheticism that Rossetti would not only resist, but treat as an incriminating “charge.” In the case of Wilde, of course, aestheticism is explicitly identified as the foundation and the goal of his artistic undertaking. But, as we shall see in Chapter 6, the effect of this identification is a curious one: far from dispelling the crisis posed by the radicalization of that aestheticism, it only brings the crisis closer to home.

There are, as I see it, a number of conditions that must be met before a text can be said to arrive at what I am calling a radical aestheticism. In the first instance the text must *reflect* on art and its effects, either literature itself or its “sister arts” of music and painting or the relationships between them. Or, as is the case in many of the examples we will consider, the text aestheticizes the object of its reflection, makes it into a work of art (even if it isn’t). Thus the prominence of ekphrasis in the tradition I will be considering; and thus the many poetic reflections on music and measure. Taking the aesthetic as its subject matter, the text must pose or present questions about art’s relationship to history or to knowledge, and on the relationship between art’s sensuous aspects and its ethical, political, or theological responsibilities. Of course, such questions do not of themselves constitute an aestheticism: one need only to think of “Ozymandias” to demonstrate that poetic reflection on art can produce unrelenting critical and demystifying effects. But such a poetic reflection on the workings and effects of the aesthetic is a necessary condition

for a genuinely radical aestheticism. In the broadest sense an aestheticism can be attributed to a text when the *performance* of its aesthetic reflection (which is necessarily a self-reflection) effectively severs the relationships (whether analogous, homologous, preparatory, supplementary, or complementary) between art and knowledge by subsuming the latter into the former. And finally, a text can be understood as *succumbing* to a *radical* aestheticism the moment it finds itself and its representations of the aesthetic at its vacating radical. Paradoxically, this is also the moment that the text registers—and we might even say *experiences*—“aestheticization” as the undoing of any claim to an aesthetic autonomy or self-reflexive totality. What I am describing as the radical aestheticism encountered in these writers is that which in the course of its very extremity takes us to the constitutive elements—the figures, the images, semblances—that are at the root of any aestheticism, an encounter registered as undoing, as evaporation, as combustion.⁴

A *radical aestheticism* offers no positive claims for art (either those based on ethical or political grounds or on aesthetic grounds, as in “art for art’s sake”): it provides no “transcendent or underlying ground” for their validation. In this sense a radical aestheticism is the experience of a *poesis* that exerts such a pressure on the claims and workings of the aesthetic that it becomes (or reveals itself to be) a kind of black hole from which no illumination is possible.⁵ The analogy of the black hole is relevant in another sense: like the black hole that bends and warps any body that enters into its dark gravitational pull, the sites of a radical aestheticism in these texts absorb all the elements of the text into its sphere and, consequently, engulfs the trajectory of the text’s “desires.” But the analogy of the black hole only serves us so far. In a sense it is what a radical aestheticism looks like from the outside, how it appears from the perspective of a text’s or an author’s “project,” from the perspective of its ethical charge in Keats, its political ambitions in Shelley, or its theological mission in Hopkins. On its “inside,” a radical aestheticism does not appear as a black hole of imagelessness, but, in Shelley’s version, as “a shape all light” or “a light more dread than obscurity,” light without illumination, a preponderance of untethered images, the concatenations of figures so “overwrought” that there no longer appears to be any “outside” and nothing “real” or reliable on the inside.

Each of these authors represents this experience of radical aestheticism and the crisis it manifests in forms and figures that are specific to his or her poetic idiom. In Shelley, for instance, radical aestheticism is registered as something on the order of self-immolation, as when the very “kindling” that serves as