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Of Efficient Fragments: Reification and British Aestheticism

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Abstract

This paper utilizes Fredric Jameson's work on the concept of "reification" as a means of considering the artistic movement of aestheticism as the cultural logic of late nineteenth century capitalism. The paper intends to show that Jameson's concept can help us approach this paradoxical relation in a systematic way, where, on the one hand, the aesthetes propounded artistic autonomy, while, on the other, they were actively engaged with market policies. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that fragmentation in aestheticist works through the concept of reification which functions as a means of intensifying emotional response and of increasing the efficiency, and thus the impact of the work, in a manner that is reminiscent of advertising or even market practices, rendering the movement a cultural counterpart of late nineteenth century capitalism.

***Keywords**: Aestheticism, Aesthetics of Fragmentation, Market Economy Reification, Nineteenth Century Capitalism, Fredric Jameson, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Algernon Swinburne, Cultural Studies*

The nineteenth century movement of Aestheticism has recently been the object of much lively interest both "as an object of historical study" and "as a mode of contemporary critical thought," as Nicholas Shrimpton asserts, while discussing the rise of the so called "New Formalism" or "New Aestheticism" in the States (1). As an object of historical study, the interest in aestheticism has resurfaced due to the fact that consumerism and commodification have dominated nineteenth century historiography (Guy 143), resulting in "[o]ne of the more improbable partnerships to have emerged in recent literary history"—the joining of aestheticism with radical social thought (Graff 311). This relation between commodity culture and the nineteenth century movement of art for art's sake has opened up a new field of inquiry, which can provide us with a deeper understanding of this peculiar artistic phenomenon, since its ambiguous association with commodification has always been

a source of anxiety for critics working in the field. How can a movement endorse art's autonomy from the market, yet at the same time promote consumption, fashion, advertising, and decoration? This paradox has long been detected by a series of theorists, such as Lukács, Bürger, Adorno, Benjamin, or critics like Bell-Villada, Freedman, and Gagnier, to name a few, but none of them has either discussed the phenomenon in detail or has accounted for the insurmountable conflicts that this peculiar co-existence engulfs. What is even more significant is that none has suggested a theoretical tool within which this contradiction can be systematically approached or analyzed. This is precisely the gap to which this study aims to contribute.[1]

The situation gets even more perplexing because aestheticism has been used as a "catch-all" word to include within it a heterogeneous group of figures, such as Ruskin, the early Pre-Raphaelites, the Symbolists, the exponents of the Arts and Crafts movement, some early modernists, the Decadents—some of them proto-Marxists, some others conservative (Shrimpton 3–4). So, what is really lacking is a theoretical model able to systematize the study of aestheticism and provide new insights on it as a movement that shared certain characteristics despite the differences within its exponents. In view of this gap in the literature, the goal of this paper is to methodically explore the relation between aestheticism and commodification through a theoretical approach able to embrace the majority of the aesthetes and bring to light how a specific economic structure at a given historical time led to a new cultural logic, a new "structure of feeling" as Raymond Williams would have put it. Taking into consideration the fact that the relation between economy and aesthetics as a rule has been the main focus of Marxist criticism, this study will approach the matter through the notion of reification. Reification has been traditionally utilized by Marxists as the

[1]Bell-Villada discusses the interaction between aestheticism and the market in a rather abstract way, refraining from any detailed analysis, whereas Freedman, in *Professions of Taste*, focuses mainly on Henry James, exploring the co-existence of contradictory trends within the movement which are, nevertheless, only marginally acknowledged. In *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, a thorough exploration of the interconnection between economics and aesthetics, Gagnier illustrates how Marginalism resulted, among others, in the aestheticist hedonic subjectivism, materialism, and the call for the consumption of art (rather than its production), which are regarded as symptomatic of the movement's compliance with consumerism. The present study is heavily indebted to Gagnier's work, yet it suggests the concept of reification as a more effective means of investigating the phenomenon, since the term allows detailed insight into how the aesthetes codified economic and market principles into artistic form, despite their apparent aversion for the commodification or the *vulgarization* of art. In this sense, the term can help us conceptualize the aesthetes' conflicting attitude towards the market, and thus supplement Gagnier's approach by providing a means of accounting for the paradoxes inherent in the aestheticist stance that some critics might—and have—considered as a contradiction in terms.

fundamental theoretical concept in their analyses of the interconnection between economy and aesthetics. The objective is to show that through the concept of reification aestheticism's association with commodification, and by implication capitalism, can be highlighted in an illuminating way. The term facilitates our understanding of how the movement formally appropriated certain market principles by codifying them into aesthetic form despite an apparent aversion for capitalist materialism and can thus account for, in a very comprehensive way, the movement's conflicting response to it. Furthermore, as we shall see, the highly versatile character of the notion of reification will allow us to trace its workings in nearly all exponents of the aesthetic movement, bringing them together without any subsequent abstractions.

Before exploring in detail the representation of reification in the work of certain aesthetes, let us consider very briefly the origins and definition of this term. Reification, "that special bugbear of Hegelian Marxism," as Jay puts it (267), is a central concept of Marxist thought even though Marx himself never used the term (Pitkin 264). It was originally developed by Marx in the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867 163–77), while analyzing commodity fetishism to consider capitalist production, within which labor is stripped of its social or human qualities and acquires the status of a *thing*—of a commodity to be sold, circulating autonomously in the market according to laws beyond human control. In other words, Marx claimed that the mechanization, division, and specialization of labor power actually lead to its reduction into an abstract figure subjected to the quantitative measurements of the market, where social relations are replaced by relations between things.

Later on, Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1971) identified Marx's notion with Max Weber's concept of "rationalization" extending its scope. Following Marx's thread of commodity fetishism, Lukács holds that the mechanization of work results in people losing their capacity for independent, creative agency and, in the face of a mystifying process they cannot control, they adopt the attitude of a contemplative observer (98, 97, 204).[2] Commodity production, in this sense, grows to be "the model for all the objective forms of bourgeois society, together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them" (170), and reification becomes for Lukács the basic structural characteristic of capitalism (177) as "the necessary and immediate reality of every person living under capitalism" (87). The overcoming of the separation between object and subject that the capitalist mode of production has brought about is what modern philosophy and literature are unsuccessfully engaged with, Lukács

[2]As Lukács puts it, "people's own activity, their own labor confronts them as something objective, independent of them, dominating them through an autonomy alien to human beings" (87).

claims (104–49), since in their attempt to resolve the conflicts and contradictions of capitalist economy they actually end up promoting and legitimating it by reproducing its form (83–97).

Nevertheless, as Gartman points out, Lukács does not "deal systematically with the extension of reification into the realm of material culture and its effects upon the consciousness of the proletariat" (169). This task is subsequently followed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who, drawing on Lukács' notion, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argue that culture in modern consumer capitalism has been transformed into an industry, subordinated to the reifying, dehumanizing, and abstracting logic of mass production, where culture ultimately functions as a form of an antidote to the alienation that this very same mechanism has brought about. Later on Herbert Marcuse extends Lukács' analysis of reified culture and claims that the reifying logic of abstraction, quantification, and manipulation results in a one-dimensional society dominated from top to bottom by technological rationality.

Fredric Jameson appropriates the Lukácsian category of reification throughout his work in order to analyze culture in contemporary capitalism and postmodernist thought, thus, reviving the interest in an old Marxist concept by modernizing its use. The term occupies a preeminent role in Jameson's critical vocabulary since reification remains for him "one of the most pressing theoretical, philosophical and political concerns today" (Homer 166). Even though Jameson uses the term in a highly versatile way, reification for Jameson, just like his Marxist predecessors, invokes the fragmentation of the social web as a means of achieving more and more efficiency, but it also implies that there is inherent in it a process of aestheticization as a form of compensation, since it engenders a re-ordering of experience, a new aesthetic distribution of reality, which replaces any former unity as an outdated way of engaging with the world. The older sense of unity is thus substituted by the aesthetics of modern autonomy (or semi-autonomy).[3]

[3]Jameson comes close to defining reification in *The Political Unconscious* (1981): "[the term] is a complex one in which the traditional or 'natural' […] unities, social forms, human relations, cultural events, even religious systems, are systematically broken up in order to be reconstructed more efficiently; in the form of new post-natural processes or mechanisms; but in which, at the same time, these now isolated broken bits and pieces of older unities acquire a certain autonomy of their own, a semi-autonomous coherence which, not merely a reflex of capitalist reification and rationalization, also in some measure serves to compensate for the dehumanization of experience reification brings with it, and to rectify the otherwise intolerable effects of the new process" (62–3).

By incorporating elements from nearly all movements of contemporary thought, Jameson "has rigorously and persuasively sought to produce a sophisticated, non-reductionist, non-mechanistic form of Marxism" (Homer 5), which, in its breadth and flexibility, will prove to be invaluable in our consideration of the complex relation between aestheticism and commodification. Moreover, Jameson explores the historical development of capitalism, which produces in each one of its stages (free market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, late capitalism) a different cultural logic (realism, modernism, post-modernism), providing us through this dialectical viewpoint with the necessary theoretical tools to explore the interrelation between the aesthetics of aestheticism as a cultural logic and the economic, psychological, and phenomenological structures of capitalism. In this sense, the notion of reification can be strategically employed as a means of sketching the imprint of the economy of the time on aesthetic form as "a mode of experiencing the world" (Dowling 27) and of illustrating the way this was ideologically codified in an artistic movement in which society, politics, and history were deliberately and persistently blocked off. Given the manifested Marxist aversion for aestheticism (Shrimpton 4), Jameson's deviation from the rigidity of a "vulgar" Marxism and his re-engagement with certain writers and thinkers who have so long been considered an anathema for traditional Marxist thought can provide fertile ground for novel associations that can prove to be mutually beneficial.

Aestheticism developed in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century against the backdrop of an overpowering reorganization in industrial production. Late nineteenth century, the age of monopoly capitalism, was a time when industrial systems sought the achievement of the greatest and quickest possible efficiency through the breaking down of production and distribution into smaller and more manageable units. This systemic instrumentalization of "the internal organization of a factory" was soon extended beyond the realm of industrial production to include the whole of the social, since, as Lukács remarks, "it contained in a concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society" (90). The society of the time thus experienced a profound form of rationalization and reification that was structured along the lines of factory production, which brought about "the exact breakdown of every complex into its elements," where "the parts, the aspects of the total process […] have been broken off, artificially isolated and ossified," so that it was possible "to predict with ever greater precision all the results to be achieved" (Lukács 88). Indicative of this remodeling of the social whole according to the structural composition and form of industry production or the commodity was the fact that in the late nineteenth century we also have the proliferation of the aesthetics of fragmentation.

The fact that the aesthetes were highly aware of the publishing market and appropriated their way of writing to the givens of this market and to the demands of their reading public has long been established by a series of critics.[4] As this paper attempts to illustrate, this appropriation of market policy and commodity structure can nevertheless be detected *formally* in the way the aesthetes handled language, narrative, plot, diction, and imagery in their work. As Marx has remarked while discussing the enigma of commodity fetishism,[5] it is after all in the form that the secret of the mystery lies. This "secret" in our case involves the fragmentary organization of the aestheticist discourse, which evidently replicates the fragmentary form of the commodity.

In the essay, "Style" (1888), Walter Pater, the writer who laid the philosophical foundations of Aestheticism in Britain, alludes explicitly to an economic discourse in order to discuss what he considers to be a successful form of writing. Pater begins his essay by defining "progress" as the "resolution of an obscure and complex object into its component aspects" (5). Drawing on Flaubert's "tardy and painful" type of writing (32), who used to work his style "like a true working man […], with sleeves turned up, in the sweat of his brow, beat[ing] away at his anvil" (29), Pater repeatedly stresses throughout his essay the need for "self-restraint, a skillful economy of means, ascesis" (17) in order for "surplusage" to be avoided. Such discipline, the critic argues will result in "that absolute accordance of expression to idea" (34), in "expressing a thing, in all its intensity and colour" (37), so that the reader will enjoy "an aesthetic satisfaction in that frugal closeness of style which makes the most of a word, in the exaction from every sentence of a precise relief, in the just spacing out of word to thought, in the logically filled space connected always with the delightful sense of difficulty overcome" (17).

[4]See for example Regenia *Gagnier's Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde & the Victorian Reading Public*; Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History*; Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*; and Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990.*

[5]Freud follows a similar pattern in his writings on the dream structure some years later. While analyzing the fragmentary character of dream imagery, Freud claims that the meaning of the dream can be accessed through analysis of its form, that is, by focusing on condensation and displacement, on metaphor and metonymy, which are the mechanisms responsible for the unexpected dream imagery. Both thinkers, in more or less the same period, were, therefore, engaged with fragmentation, drawing attention to the fact that, either socially, economically, or psychologically, this new form of organization entailed a novel form of engaging with experience. In this sense, both thinkers implicitly contributed to the aesthetics of fragmentation that were gradually on the rise and that would prevail with Modernism.

Pater is here explicitly adopting the economic rhetoric of efficiency as if he is applying the rules of successful market production to the writing of literature.[6] Alluding to Flaubert, whom Jameson calls "the privileged locus of this development, which the term reification in its strictest sense designates" (*Unconscious* 209), Pater suggests a process of instrumentalization and compartmentalization as a means of capturing these "unstable, flickering, inconsistent" impressions (*Renaissance* 151–2), of intensifying the impact of the text, of rendering it more effective for the reader. For Pater, such a process involves the utilization of the full capacities and potentials of the basic structural fragments, the fundamental units of literature, the word and the sentence,[7] in a spirit and language borrowed from production policies of the time.

This well-wrought, rationalized form of writing, nevertheless, will also have to result in an "impersonal" sense of style, so as to counterbalance the threat of personal "caprice," Pater claims (37). It is precisely this "depersonalization of the text," this "laundering of authorial intervention" that Jameson considers to be the source of Flaubert's reification (209). The effacement of authorial presence, Jameson implies, leads to the surfacing of the materiality, the "thingness" of language. In a similar fashion, Pater finishes his consideration of literary style by confessing that "the tendency of what has been here said is to bring literature […] under those conditions, by conformity to which music takes rank as the typically perfect art" (37). It is the materiality of the musical signifier, where "it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression" (37) that Pater wishes literary language to conform to.[8] It is thus that he, like the rest of his followers, the aesthetes, aimed to liberate writing from any (moral) constraints and, subsequently, emancipate the language, the rhythm, the music, the form of literature from any sense of limitation (or even didacticism).

Fragmentation and musicality are evinced in Pater's own literary writing as well. In *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of*

[6]Gagnier even claims that Pater was influenced by Jevons, the mathematical economist, in his "promotion of subjectivism, individualism, consumption, and ultimately formalism" (54).

[7]Referring to Flaubert, Pater commends, "[p]ossessed of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he gave himself to the superhuman labour for the discovery, in every phrase, of that word, that verb, that epithet" (29).

[8]"If music be the ideal of all art whatever, precisely because in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter, the subject from the expression, then, literature, by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import, will be but fulfilling the condition of all artistic quality in things everywhere, of all good art." ("Style" 37–38)

the Word (2007), Angela Leighton discusses prosody and the formal aspects of Pater's work and she concludes that this well-wrought prose rhythm, this "sense of music […] crosses and distracts from its sense of sense" (50). "[O]ne finds so often in Pater the isolated cadence or sentence making its impact by itself; one must pause after every sentence to adjust oneself to a new rhythm" (42), Fletcher claims, arguing that "the sustaining interest of reading [Pater] will be less the impetus, the sense of design, than the sudden recurring felicity of image or cadence" (45). Ohmann, in his turn, regards Pater's paragraph-length sentences and complains that he "fills his prose with syntactic interruptions and interpolations, almost to the point of affectation" (643).

What all these critics share in common is that Pater's model for the efficiency of the word or the sentence actually results in a fragmentary form of writing, manifested through the separation of signifier from signified, through the reified autonomization of rhythm "making its impact by itself," and through its lack of cohesion. Expounded within a discourse that explicitly alludes to the economy of efficiency, Pater's rationalizing technique of abstracting, fragmenting, and reifying language, via his association of literature with the material-like texture of the non-representational language of music, can be seen as an instance of the ideological coding of aesthetic means. It also marks his appropriation of the fragmentary structure of the commodity, which is reflected in his use of word and sentence, and the secret it holds in its form: the hiding of human labor; the effacement of authorial presence in this case.

Aestheticist fragmentation becomes even more explicit in the case of Swinburne, who was one of the first in England to employ the term "art for art's sake" and promote its ideals, deeply influencing the rest of the aesthetes. Such fragmentation is firstly noticed in the non-unified, polyphonic character of Swinburne's poetry, which can be seen as a collection of varied rhythmical bits-and-pieces, and poetic allusions. As Fletcher notes, his writing is fused with "many men's styles" and "numerous forms" (19), rendering Swinburne an "accomplished pasticheur" (7), whose style is "so deliberate[ly] a literary mosaic" (8). The fragmentary character of Swinburne's poetry, is, nevertheless, formally amplified through his use of musicality. To a much greater extent than Pater, Swinburne's poetic eloquence, his varied and accented rhythms, his obsessive abuse of alliteration, and love of repetition, his 'echolalia' results in an over-lush musical surface, which, as many critics acknowledge, lacks depth.[9] Grierson claims that

[9]Musicality in Swinburne's poetry takes over and, in many instances, the poet's elaborate sound patterns are performed at the expense of meaning. In this prioritization of sound, content or the speaker as a subject position are no longer foregrounded, but

Swinburne "sang always of the same themes, in the same high strain" but there was "'no progress" in his poetry "for there was no thought" (23). Fletcher argues that Swinburne "moves toward music" (5), Pekham talks of "a non-expressive aesthetic" (quoted in Fletcher 19), and T. S. Eliot of "the hallucination of meaning" in his works (149). Cassidy, in his turn, associates his "experimentation with meaning that may be extracted from the sounds of words" with James Joyce's work, and concludes that Swinburne "demonstrated that words have not only meanings but sounds which may be combined into music and rhythm to achieve a higher meaning than any lexicographer can express or than any message-hunting reader of poetry can ever comprehend" (162).

In its prioritization of form and rhythm at the expense of meaning, Swinburne's efficient use of musicality, which is actually a proto-modernist foregrounding of the materiality, of the texture of language, of aesthetic form rather than content, signals the separation of signifier from signified. Stemming from his materialist and atheist ideological goals that aimed to undermine Victorian morality in a manner similar to Pater's paganism in the *Renaissance*, Swinburne's repeated allusion to the senses throughout his work highlighted the role of the signified as a means of intensifying its sensual impact.[10] Within the context of aestheticist polemics, this separation of signifier from signified, nevertheless, can also be seen as a subversion of the instrumental cause-and-effect, means/ends organization of middle-class rationality, where the signifier is autonomized and becomes an end in itself in order to reach the full scope of its efficiency without being restricted by the burden, the "surplusage" of meaning. Such prioritization of form, thus, does not only reveal the subjection of literary discourse to a reifying textual economy modeled along the dictates of production, as in the case of Pater, but it also marks its structural kinship to the form of the commodity, where use-value of meaning, is absorbed and replaced by outward appearance as a new type of cultural capital.

Swinburne's politics of fragmentation can also be noted in the representation of the body, and especially the female body, which is, as a rule, objectified, reified, and commodified in aestheticist literature. In "Laus Veneris," a poem from the highly controversial *Poems and Ballads: First Series* (1866), Swinburne revisits the medieval legend of Tannhaüser, which was a recurrent motif in the works of the *fin de siècle*

are rather regarded as implications of form. In this sense, it could be argued that Swinburne also celebrates new forms of subjectivity, which deviates from traditional and Christian conceptions of the self as an entity with depth, but rather considers the self as surface, as matter.

[10]See, among others, Jerome McGann's *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* and Thais Morgan's "Swinburne's Dramatic Monologues: Sex and Ideology."

aesthetes.[11] The myth involves the poet Tannhaüser's unsuccessful effort to be absolved by the Pope for the sin of the service he offered to Venus, and his eventual return to her. Despite the fact that Venus comprises the main focal point of the poem as the protagonist's object of desire, the reader is unable to visualize her, due to the fact that she is evasively represented through fragments of her body: "neck," "limbs," "eyelids," "hair," "mouth," "lip," "hands," "bosom," "breast," etc. Pearce links this fragmentary presentation to fetishism:

> In line with the codes of fetishization, we note that Venus is never seen in her entirety. Instead, her various bewitching parts are itemized and catalogued.[…] Despite this, the sum total of her parts refuses to add up to a physical entity.[…] Swinburne's Venus is an effectual photo-fit reconstruction of the 'ideal' sexual woman; an artful configuration of all the desirable elements. (132–3)

These autonomous body parts that fail to "add up" to a totality draw attention to their own seductiveness in the fragmentary manner of commodity fetishism. Swinburne's portrayal of Venus' desirability, in other words, draws on the technique of the representational fragment, a consummate piece encapsulating the essence of the whole, revealing not only a new economy of representation, but a new economy of desire as well, which are both tightly interlinked as a means of promoting consumption, of marketing beauty, and aesthetic form.

In his 1872 pamphlet, *The Fleshy School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*, Robert Buchanan attacks Pre-Raphaelite and aestheticist poetry through a peculiar image, the "Leg." This fragment of the human body, which is meant to parody the prevailing strategy of representational fragmentation in current poetry, is furthermore linked to consumer culture: "[i]t has penetrated into the very sweetshops; and there, among the commoner sort of confectionary, may be seen this year models of the female Leg, the whole definite and elegant article as far as the thigh, with a fringe of paper cut in imitation of the female drawers and embroidered in female fashion" (3). Buchanan's comment highlights not only the predominance of autonomous fragments as the basic characteristic of aestheticist poetry, but also explicitly links this trend to commodity form, revealing its reifying policy, as a fetish displayed to be consumed in the market.

Oscar Wilde, probably the most prominent of the aesthetes, was implicated in the market to a much greater extent than Pater, Swinburne,

[11]Baudelaire defended Wagner's opera on the legend in 1861. See also, among others, Pater's allusion to the myth in the unpublished sections of *Gaston de Latour*, Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhaüser*, Herbert E Clarke's *Tannhaüser and other Poems* (1896), and John Davidson's "A New Ballad of Tannhaüser" (1897).

or the rest of the aesthetes. Being one of the first celebrities, he not only developed a pose and persona as a means of marketing himself, but he also edited *Woman's World* from 1887 to 1889, a magazine through which he actively shaped taste and fashion, participating, thus, in the commodity culture of the time. Even though Wilde did not share Pater's form of authorial modesty, he, nevertheless, shared his teacher's vision of textual economy. Like Pater, in *De Profundis* he confessed that he wanted his "words" to be "an absolute expression" of his thoughts that had nothing to do with "surplusage" (642). Such textual economy through a meticulous utilization of the rhythm of the word or sentence nevertheless did not result in beautiful musical fragments, as in the case of Pater or Swinburne but rather in Wilde's famous epigrams. As Basil tells Lord Henry Wotton, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "You cut life to pieces with your epigrams" (126).

Wilde's renowned aphorisms involve, in nearly all cases, statements of paradox. As Balfour argues, the paradox "at once demands and resists translation" (52), since the tension that it creates involves "a discrepancy between literal and figurative, letter and spirit" (54), where "one is momentarily halted […], wondering what it means" (55). Being instances of intensified elaborate meaning, Wilde's aphorisms act as little shocks that shatter the flow of the narrative, like Pater's alternation of rhythm, and force the reader to pause and contemplate by triggering a series of subversions of logic and common sense. As Lesjak states, "the epigram functions to tear things out of context while simultaneously maintaining the very concept wrenched out of place in an altered state" (189). Indicative of their fragmentary character is the fact that these aphoristic statements of paradox hold a semi-autonomous relation to the narrative they originate from, since they have the ability to maintain a life of their own outside it as self-reliant semantic wholes, as reified entities. The presence of countless collections and anthologies in the market of Wilde's sayings, of these "perfect instants," to borrow Roland Barthes' term, indisputably attests to that.[12] Very similar to the slogan-like language of advertising, which was on the rise during Wilde's time, these aphorisms manifest a striking economy of efficiency where the dynamics of a limited range of means (words) is fully exploited as a device that can achieve the greatest possible intensity—"the greatest possible yield of meaning" (70–3). As such, they also become "perfect instants" of a reified type of language, where fragmentation and efficiency go hand in hand in the market place.

Fragmentation as a means of efficiency can, furthermore, be noted in Wilde's treatment of authorial presence in his texts because, as

[12]Barthes calls "perfect instant," a carefully chosen moment, extracted from a narrative whole and "promoted into essence, into light, into view" (70–3).

noted already, Wilde—his ego was too far too pompous to be deliberately effaced from his texts—did not share Pater's modesty as a writer. Yet, by abandoning "the Victorian convention of the critic speaking directly to the audience as a sage," Wilde resorts extensively to the dramatic convention of dialogue throughout his work, adopting different masks within a work in order to dramatize the presence of antithetical possibilities within a speaking voice (Sussman 115). This way, he also stages "the fragmented nature of the self," the "multiplicity of the individual psyche," as Sussman puts it (115). The conflicting views of Cyril and Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" and of Gilbert and Ernest in "The Critic as Artist," on the one hand serve as dramatic devices that facilitate the flow and efficiency of Wilde's argument, suggesting, on the other, the presence of a counter-argument within the main argumentative line itself, making it hard for the reader to clearly identify the author's position because of the ambiguous rhetoric of fragmentation. Such a treatment was also, in its turn, very much efficient for Wilde himself, since it functioned as an implicit mitigation of his extremist and controversial views in the publishing market.

To sum up, aestheticist representation is dominated by fragmentation, the fundamental principle of reification. As a matter of fact, our understanding of aestheticism and its reception is conditioned by such fragmentation. What else comes to one's mind while considering aestheticism: Pater's often-quoted purple extract about Mona Lisa; some scattered phrases from the "Conclusion" to the *Renaissance* (1873); Wilde's and Whistler's well-shaped, autonomous aphorisms; Flaubert's depersonalized, perfectly-wrought sentences and his constantly shifting point of view; Swinburne's patchy music; the fragmented bodies in Beardsley's paintings and in Gautier's stories! These fragments were generated through the transubstantiation of the capitalist logic of efficiency into an aesthetic form that, very much like laissez-fare economy, would emancipate it from any kind of moral interference or constraint and set it autonomous. It comes then as no surprise that aestheticism, the movement that the Marxists traditionally feel an ideological aversion to, appears to paradoxically provide the most fertile ground for Marxist research, since either by distancing itself from the market or by complying with it, the movement appears to be closely defined by it.

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