Sensational Sentiments

IMPRESSIONISM AND THE PROTECTION OF DIFFICULTY
IN LATE-VICTORIAN ART CRITICISM

During the famous 1878 trial in which James McNeil Whistler sued John Ruskin for his description of *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* as “ask[ing] two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face” (*Works* 29: 160), Ruskin’s defense attorney Sir John Holker attempted to legitimize Ruskin’s claim by discrediting Whistler as a serious painter. Holker’s tactic would have been one familiar to a Victorian audience, as he suggested that Whistler’s paintings were particularly attractive to women and therefore not deserving of either serious critical attention or monetary reward. In an imaginary tour of the Grosvenor for the jury, Holker described Whistler’s works as “surrounded by groups of artistic ladies—. . . . and I daresay we would hear those ladies admiring the pictures and commenting upon them” (qtd. in Merrill 165–66). Holker’s description is of course a fiction, yet it is also a powerful one that belittled not only Whistler’s paintings but women’s critical judgment as well. Equating women’s judgment with frivolity was a stereotype that was repeated throughout the Victorian period. Indeed, the women critics on whom I focus in this chapter, Emilia Dilke and Vernon Lee, were both aware of the stereotype that Holker repeats and able to formulate their own specific criteria for evaluating impressionist art and art criticism.
Dilke’s response to the stereotype of women’s frivolity was to demonstrate her greater commitment to the art fact, especially when compared with male critics such as Walter Pater. I discuss Dilke at some length in this chapter because she both continues the art historical work begun by Jameson and Eastlake and because she provides an approach to impressionist art that differs substantially from more canonical critics. Vernon Lee, though closer to Pater’s approach to art, differed from him by eschewing human emotion in painting. As a result, her influential definition of literary impressionism focused on the genre’s opportunities for escapism. In fact, she is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first writer to use “impressionism” in the literary sense. My point is not to claim that Dilke and Lee were completely different from their more famous male counterparts but that their awareness of gender stereotypes influenced their critical practices. Indeed, despite differences among the critics who are the central figures in this chapter—Dilke, Lee, Pater, Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde—all four register surprisingly similar concerns about impressionist art and art criticism. Following Ruskin’s wish to preserve the difficulty inherent in the best artworks (discussed in chapter 5), all four worry about impressionist works that are too easy to grasp. But these later critics do so in a more elitist way, arguing against artworks that represent lower-class subjects with whom viewers might too easily identify. In other words, they argue against subjects that do not require explanation from an art critic. Instead of directly stating this class bias, their concerns are often masked by an aesthetic complaint about theatricality, or a direct pandering to the audience.

In studying these concerns about too-accessible art, I examine two kinds of aesthetic objects—Renaissance art histories and impressionist paintings—works that at first glance might seem incongruous. The Renaissance, and particularly the high Italian Renaissance, was viewed by many Victorians as the apogee of artistic creation, one to which British art could aspire. Impressionist painting, by contrast, was new, supposedly not based on any venerable artistic traditions, and associated with revolutionary France. But the same problem—the extent to which artworks should engage the sensations of individual viewers—impinged on discussions of both Renaissance and modern art. As Linda Dowling and other scholars have recently demonstrated, the Renaissance was often used by Victorian writers—including Dilke, Pater, and Lee—as a celebration of individualism (77–78). Lee characteristically remarks that her essays in *Renaissance Studies and Fancies* (1896) are “the outcome of direct personal impressions of certain works of art and literature” (vii). By their uncharacteristic treatments of the period,
these writers further subvert the stereotype of the Renaissance as canonical. Dilke discusses France, not Italy, and Pater examines such lesser-known figures as Pico of Mirandola and Luca della Robbia. While some scholars have claimed that Pater’s approach to Western literature and art was conservative, his study of the Renaissance was “congruent down to the level of minute details, with the interests of the painters associated with art for art’s sake and Aestheticism” (Prettejohn, “Walter Pater” 47). Yet Pater, similarly to the other writers I examine, hopes to limit a too-easy understanding of the artwork, primarily through historical distance. Despite the political connotations of the Renaissance, history was a safer, more distanced subject than the contemporary life treated by many modern painters. For all of the critics discussed here, impressions are useful for putting distance between the viewer and artwork, but they become dangerous when they allow viewers to identify with artistic subjects, particularly when these subjects question contemporary notions of class and gender.

**IMPRESSIONISTIC HISTORIES OF THE RENAISSANCE**

In his 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater famously describes Leonardo da Vinci’s completion of an angel in the corner of his master’s painting: “The pupil had surpassed the master; and Verrocchio turned away as one stunned, and as if his sweet earlier work must thereafter be distasteful to him, from the bright animated angel of Leonardo’s hand. The angel may still be seen in Florence, a space of sunlight in the cold, laboured old picture” (80). Reviewing Pater’s 1873 text for the *Westminster Review*, Dilke wrote, “This story has long been exploded as having no foundation, nor even verisimilitude, and the angel, which may still be seen at Florence, shows not a trace of special beauty nor even a sign that it has been touched by a different hand to that which painted the rest of the picture” (640). Dilke omits Pater’s admission that “the legend is true only in sentiment” (80), which seems to suggest that she fails to grasp his notion of history as based in ideas rather than facts. However, Dilke shared with Pater a belief that objective facts alone could not adequately represent history and its artworks. For both Dilke and Pater, histories of the Renaissance involved a necessary filtering through the consciousness of the art critic. That is, both writers believed that Matthew Arnold’s project to “see the object as in itself it really is” (616) was impossible. The only way to approximate reality was, in Pater’s words, “to know one’s *impression* as it really is” (*Renaissance* xix).
Part of Dilke’s motivation in criticizing Pater was to differentiate his method from her own supposedly more factual art histories. Dilke was conscious of the common notion that women’s judgment lacked substance. Her approach was not without costs, as she has been criticized by both contemporaries and modern scholars as too devoted to facts. A Victorian reviewer representatively remarked on Dilke’s “undue parade of the virtues of research . . . or . . . the actual belief that some burrowing among forgotten archives is an achievement so valuable that it makes literature unnecessary and original thought of nothing worth” (qtd. in Israel 258). Modern scholars have read Dilke’s critique of Pater as similarly neglecting his contributions to literary technique. But in her 1873 “Contemporary Literature: Art” that critiques Pater’s Renaissance, Dilke demonstrates that she understands literary imagination as well as historical facts. Dr. Alfred Woltmann’s Architectural History of Berlin, for example, lets “us know something of the character of each succeeding architect as a man”; in so doing, it “ceases to be a purely technical account . . . and becomes a living history of human effort, and its imperfect outcome” (639). Woltmann recreates the lives of artists without divorcing them from factual knowledge about the period: “It must not however be supposed that Dr. Woltmann has treated his subject from a purely literary point of view, he has not neglected to give the reader an ample measure of technical criticism and information” (639, emphasis mine). In her complaint about criticism that takes this “purely literary point of view” (639), Dilke presages Whistler’s famous “Ten O’Clock” lecture, in which he lampoons critics who interpret art “absolutely from a literary point of view” (87). But while Whistler lumps all writers together as mere storytellers, Dilke defines ideal criticism as that which contains both the literary and the historical fact. For Dilke, some art histories are simply too literary—that is, merely based on the critic’s imagination. For example, Theodor Simons’s book on ancient Rome is a “highly dramatic account” of “the most sensational character” (641). Not only is this bad history, as Dilke’s references to drama and sensationalism suggest, but Simons’s account is also motivated by a desire to please readers for profit rather than to instruct. Following other mid-Victorian writers on the arts, Dilke establishes a hierarchy for art criticism similar to that found in literature, with the sensational and theatrical clearly at the bottom.

While Pater’s Renaissance avoids such a low classification, it strays in Dilke’s view away from the material facts of the period: “Mr Pater writes of the Renaissance as if it were a kind of sentimental revolution having no relation to the conditions of the actual world. Thus we . . . feel as if we were wandering in a world of unsubstantial dreams. We do not feel that the
writer has that intimate possession of his subject which alone can convey the impression of reality” (640). Rather than in Pater’s subject matter, the threat for Dilke resides in Pater’s emphasis on “sentiment” (640), or a kind of feeling too accessible for his readers. Although Dilke hoped to democratize the arts in Britain, she here indicates the undesirable possibility of “revolution” (640) if individual sense impressions are taken too far. Despite disagreeing with Pater’s overall treatment of the Renaissance, Dilke approves of his ability to identify key ideas about the period: “Mr Pater possesses to a remarkable degree an unusual power of recognizing and finely discriminating delicate differences of sentiment. . . . In this respect these studies of the sentiment of the Renaissance have a real critical value” (640). In contrast to her fear of Pater’s “sentimental revolution” (640), Dilke here praises his more refined use of “sentiment” as “an emotional thought expressed in literature or art” (OED, s.v. “sentiment”). The Oxford English Dictionary notes that this intellectual use of “sentiment” was developed by authors such as Samuel Johnson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—and was thus also familiar to a fairly broad audience (s.v. “sentiment”). This sort of sentiment could also appeal to lower tastes as well as higher ones; Samuel Johnson writes in The Rambler in 1750, “Either the sentiments must sink to the level of the speakers, or the speakers must be raised by the height of the sentiments” (qtd. in OED, s.v. “sentiment”). Throughout the Victorian period, artists and art critics including Dilke worried about the lower form of artistic sentiment—that is, that writers and artists were lowering their thoughts to appeal to the masses. In his 1885 “Ten O’Clock” lecture, Whistler asserts that the masses have become incapable of appreciating good art because “sentiment is mistaken for poetry” (81) in the popular imagination. Like many other Victorian writers, Whistler opposes the highest form of artistic expression, or “poetry,” with the lower, too-accessible form of sentiment.

This concern with lower forms of sentiment was expressed much earlier in the period, especially in regard to social realist painting. As Judith Stoddart demonstrates, reviewers from the 1840s on began to differentiate between two different kinds of sentimental painting: an intellectual art that made no demands on viewers and a more popular, “essentially nonaesthetic” type that asked readers to sympathize with the subject (210). Richard Redgrave’s The Sempstress (1844), which encourages viewers to empathize with the feelings of a lower-class woman, was considered a primary example of “nonaesthetic” art. William Thackeray complained in 1844 that Redgrave’s painting was demonstrably in bad taste because of its public admiration. Moreover, notes Stoddart, reviewers criticized Redgrave’s painting by associating it specifically with women’s taste. Thus,
Thackeray writes that Redgrave’s depiction of “small sentiment” took the “manliness” out of Thomas Hood’s poem “The Song of the Shirt.” The Athenaeum of 1844 wrote that the work was “too sentimental” and “cherished by the namby-pamby taste of fine ladies” (qtd. in Stoddart 204). In her own art criticism and in her writings on other critics, Dilke seems both aware of this critical heritage and eager to dissociate herself from the more popular and supposedly female type of sentiment.

As a result of this awareness, Dilke’s histories are a careful balance between interesting readers in artworks and limiting their engagement with the period under discussion. In her own writings on the French Renaissance, Dilke makes clear that she agrees with Pater’s celebration of the individualism and innovation associated with the period. In Volume 1 of her first book, *The Renaissance of Art in France* (1879), she characterizes the ideology of the period as “the new gospel of self-development, in the world of art” (70–71). Dilke begins her second volume of the book by noting, “When the imprisoned instincts of fifteen centuries burst their bonds, the moment of revolt left its traces everywhere; in art and literature, as in life; and the necessary transition from old forms to new, which gradually took place in Italy, was in France peculiarly sudden and complete” (*Renaissance of Art* 2). Safely separated in time from nineteenth-century revolutions, Renaissance innovations earn Dilke’s approval.

However, in *The Renaissance of Art in France*, Dilke carefully limits access to the period. For Dilke, the art of the French Renaissance is in a most special way the expression of the desires not of a nation but of a class, the result of individual needs, individual taste, individual caprice at a period when the life of the few had become exceedingly rich and complex. It cannot, therefore, appeal to a wide public, and requires perhaps more than the art of any other time a knowledge of the conditions under which it was produced in order to arrive at an appreciation of its excellence. (1: 1)

On the one hand, Dilke suggests the need for a more democratic form of artistic culture than the very limited one found in the French Renaissance. At the same time, she seems to revel in the limited appeal of the period. As an art historian interested in the material conditions in which art was produced (similar to her predecessor Elizabeth Eastlake), Dilke highlights the need for her own expertise in explaining the culture of the French Renaissance. Yet she also expresses a more democratic enthusiasm for her subject: “There is something verging on the fantastic,” she writes of the architect Jean Bullant’s Château de Ecouen, “in this lavish use of pillar and pilaster.
The exuberant profusion of creeping ornament which overflows the bordering lines of every frieze . . . also heightens the impression of caprice" (84); the effect that Bullant achieved “is the apparent impress of a single purpose and a single mind” (86). Though ostensibly writing a factual art history, Dilke here and elsewhere demonstrates a Paterian interest in the impression an artwork might convey to an individual viewer.

In addition to her acceptance of impressionistic criticism, Dilke highlights the sensual aspects of the French artworks she discusses. As one example of the Renaissance’s enthusiasm for art, Dilke notes “the delight in the nude which instantly manifested itself” (18). This interest, Dilke admits, has “its coarser side” (19)—an aspect she illustrates with a story about a cardinal who “smuggled” a pornographic painting into his chamber, claiming it was a Madonna. Dilke admits that the *Légende du Cardinal de Guise* may not be true (as it was written by one of the cardinal’s enemies), yet she shares it nevertheless in order to engage her readers. Dilke balances such sensuality with the kind of dry, pedantic language that characterizes much twenty-first-century art criticism. She writes of one building, “The whole length is crowned by heavy machicolated battlements, so that the aspect of the exterior is severe, but the façade which looks upon the court is not wanting in elegance” (44). The distinct lack of an observing eye in such passages, in contrast to her description of Bullant’s Château, seems a response to what she characterized as Pater and Ruskin’s tendency to emphasize personal impressions of artworks. In dramatically juxtaposing such dry observations with sensual exuberance, Dilke demonstrates the twin aims of much impressionistic criticism: inviting readers to form their own impressions of artworks while also distancing them from works of art.

Pater and Dilke achieve these goals by both preserving historical incompleteness and interesting readers in historical mysteries. Pater’s “Luca della Robbia” opens with this general remark on Italian Renaissance sculptors: “One longs to penetrate into the lives of the men who have given expression to so much power and sweetness. But it is part of the reserve, the austere dignity and simplicity of their existence, that their histories are for the most part lost, or told but briefly” (49). This historical vision is necessarily and preferably incomplete, like the best art itself. In “Luca,” for example, Pater argues that the power of Michelangelo’s sculpture inheres in an “incompleteness, which suggests rather than realises actual form”—an incompleteness that “was in reality perfect finish” (53). Although Pater here discusses a Renaissance artwork, his emphasis on suggestive form aptly characterizes impressionist painting and seems to signal his approval of that modern style as based in a venerable tradition.
In deciding to write about well-known artists as well as more obscure ones, Pater aims to show that modern art history cannot fully illuminate even the most famous figures; impressionistic accounts are more important than what he calls “mere antiquarianism” (78). Unlike the incomplete accounts of Luca della Robbia and his workmen, much is known about Leonardo’s life from both Vasari and nineteenth-century scholars. But Pater has little respect for modern efforts to challenge Vasari’s dates, stories, and attributions:

For others remain . . . the separation by technical criticism of what in his reputed works is really his, from what is only half his, or the work of his pupils. But a lover of strange souls may still analyse for himself the impression made on him by these works, and try to reach through it a definition of the chief elements in Leonardo’s genius. The legend, as corrected and enlarged by his [Vasari’s] critics, may now and then intervene to support the results of this analysis. (78)

Individual impressions of the artwork should remain primary, but Pater is not advocating a merely subjective appreciation of art. Rather, he wants viewers to analyze their impressions in the context of scholarship by Vasari and modern art historians. Vasari’s legends, suggests Pater, are particularly valuable in accessing Leonardo’s genius because they contain “the air of truth” (83) rather than simple facts. This sense of the truth protects the “mystery which at no point quite lifts from Leonardo’s life” (84). For Pater, such legends protect the sense of incompleteness that must surround events separated from us by time.

Dilke likewise celebrates historical mysteries. During one section of her Renaissance, she considers the early sixteenth-century construction of palaces and châteaux in Paris. “Paris,” she writes, “should be well within the range of modern curiosity. We expect to get easily at definite knowledge concerning its work and those to whom it was done” (67). But after three pages considering various dates and sources to establish the architect of buildings at Fontainebleau, Dilke remarks, “we are forced to acknowledge that often the utmost efforts of search will not even yield a name” (67). Dilke’s skepticism underscores the difficulty of her project and the necessity of the expert to approach historical reality.

Further, Dilke approves of others’ art criticism that preserves the mystery or incompleteness of the world’s best artworks. Thus, Dilke celebrates Pater’s Imaginary Portraits (1878): “Now the very incompleteness of these portraits . . . adds to the reality of their characterization as pictures of his
[Pater’s] own mind, and increases the interest with which we read in them moods of the inmost soul of one amongst ourselves” (qtd. in Seiler 166). As a work that seemingly makes no claims to be an objective account, *Imaginary Portraits* is for Dilke less threatening than Pater’s art-historical *Renaissance*. Yet Dilke also lauds the more purely impressionistic (and thus less historical) aspects of Pater’s *Renaissance*: “He can detect with singular subtlety the shades of tremulous variation which have been embodied in throbbing pulsations of colour, in doubtful turns of line, in veiled words” (640). Her 1870 review of Ruskin’s *Lectures on Art* uses strikingly similar terms: “His analysis of subtle qualities of colour, of line, his criticism and description of any work which he has made a subject of study, cannot be surpassed for justness and delicacy” (305–6). Their subtlety notwithstanding, Dilke realizes that the central goal of both Ruskin’s and Pater’s criticism is communicating with readers. Pater’s impressions are “matched . . . for us in words” (640) and “we at once share” (305–6) those of Ruskin. Despite their immediately sharable qualities, the impressions of both critics require what Dilke views as a desirable necessity for deciphering on the part of the reader.

**INCOMPLETENESS IN IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING**

Despite the limited audience for French impressionist painting in Britain before the turn of the century, Pater, Dilke, and Lee all seek to restrict popular access to these works by defending their inherent difficulty. French impressionism was threatening to British critics for several reasons. For one thing, the movement lacked for many commentators the connections with tradition that earlier painters supposedly respected. Though High Renaissance artists were celebrated as individual innovators, they were also praised for respecting prior artistic movements. Not only was impressionism viewed as a complete break with the past, but the association of the movement with France also exacerbated fears about its revolutionary connotations. The *Times* (London) critic of 1874 representatively wrote of French impressionism, “One seems to see in such work evidence of as wild a spirit of anarchy at work in French painting as in French politics” (qtd. in Flint, *Impressionists* 14). In her introduction to *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, Kate Flint writes, “Throughout the nineteenth century, to parallel artistic with political revolution signified a pronounced condemnation of sudden change, of any upheaval which threatened established
order” (14). French impressionism was seen as a passing fad, not a lasting or important development in painting (Flint 5).

The extent of this anxiety about impressionist painting is somewhat surprising because it was never as accessible or as broadly popular as many earlier genres. French impressionists were particularly slow to gain a foothold in Britain; the first exhibition of such works in 1870 was not a success (Flint, *Impressionists* 3). The Royal Academy Selection Committee rejected works by Monet and Pissarro in 1871; such paintings were usually exhibited at small private galleries. Ruskin’s ignorance of French impressionism at the time of the Whistler v. Ruskin trial in 1878 was typical of that displayed by other British critics. In the 1880s, even well-informed viewers knew little about French impressionism—a catalogue for an 1883 show in London thus sought explicitly to introduce the painters “to the English connoisseur”; the *Artist* opined that the same exhibition, “important as it is, is hardly one to attract the mass” (qtd. in Flint, *Impressionists* 6). This perception of elitism lasted through the end of the century. The *Saturday Review* of 1901 remarked that impressionism “to most people, [is] a mere phrase, utterly unintelligible, and consequently suggestive of high culture” (qtd. in Flint, *Impressionists* 14). There would thus seem little danger that the style would become too popular among Victorian audiences.

Nevertheless, the critics under discussion here praise art and art criticism that limits popular access to these works. In his 1893 review of George Moore’s *Modern Painting*, Pater notes that “we in England still know so little” about modern French painting. But even as he hopes for more widespread knowledge about these modern works, he praises Moore for recognizing that great art contains secrets: “beyond all that can be had of teachers—there is something there, something in every veritable work of art, of the incommunicable, of what is unique, and this is perhaps, the one thing really of value in art” (3). For Pater, even nonspecialists can appreciate this quality, but for those who “really know. . . . preference in art will be nothing less than conviction” (3). Moore, a critic with such conviction, conveys his enthusiasm for French painting through a style characterized by verbal “impressionism, to use that word, in the absence of any fitter one” (3). Pater’s review is thus less concerned with the art that Moore discusses than with the author’s style, which for Pater successfully preserves the aura of the art object by its preservation of the unknowable.

More concerned with actual modern artworks than Pater, Lee similarly finds that the best impressionist paintings can only be understood by those with a certain temperament. In “Imagination in Modern Art” (1897), Lee
compares modern and “old religious painters,” noting that the latter are more universally comprehended because they depict “scenes familiar to all men” (521). However, Lee prefers the more elitist complexity of modern painting, which requires the intervention of a specialist. Unlike older paintings, the work of an impressionist painter “is still very personal, very sporadic; and only those can understand it who have been initiated, so to speak, by the grace of their own constitution” (521). Lee’s Paterian need for a special disposition seems contradictory because in Renaissance Studies and Fancies, she emphasizes the role of individual perception. However, in “Imagination in Modern Art,” she clarifies this emphasis on subjectivity, arguing that some individuals are more able than others at unravelling complex artworks. Thus, even with the move toward allowing viewers to interpret art subjectively at the end of the century, critics still limit the democratization of taste.

Like Lee and Pater, Dilke finds that the best art is understood by the few rather than the many. But Dilke differs from those critics in her disapproval of most impressionist painting. One notable exception is Dilke’s fondness for some of Whistler’s paintings, despite his frequent association with the impressionists. In her 1872 review of the “Summer Exhibition of the Society of French Artists,” Dilke associates Whistler’s Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1, also called Portrait of the Artist’s Mother (1871; fig. 6) with “intellectual power,” which he achieves through suggestiveness and incompleteness (185). Whistler “voluntarily ren[ounces] any attempt to rouse pleasurable sensations by line, or form, or colour” in this portrait (Dilke, “Summer Exhibition” 185). Dilke’s preference for intellect over mere sensation is similar to her differentiation between high and low sentiment.

However, Dilke’s advocacy of intellectual sentiment is complicated by her own religious beliefs. As I discuss in chapter 3, earlier art critics’ views on art were often influenced by a fear of Catholic inspirations. Even as writers turned more firmly away from religion and toward aestheticism, the concerns of contemporary religious debates influenced their commentaries. Dilke’s review of Whistler’s mother begins with aesthetics but then quickly turns to approval of the painter’s Protestant vision: “At first sight in its voluntary renunciation of any attempt to rouse pleasurable sensations by line, or form, or colour, it brings up a vision of the typical Huguenot interior—protestantism in a Catholic country” (“Royal Academy” 185). Dilke’s The Renaissance of Art in France explains her regard for the Huguenots and thus reinforces her favorable assessment of Whistler’s Protestantism. For Dilke, the Huguenots held the potential in Renaissance France to reinvigorate the moral spirit of the country but were unfortunately suppressed by
the Catholics: “The most distinguished men in France, even in the world of arts and letters, stood not in the ranks of the cause which triumphed, but on the side of that which fell. . . . the collapse of the Renaissance and the victorious wars of the Catholic party sprang from some common cause” (Renaissance 29). This “common cause” that quelled the artistic advances of the Renaissance and allowed the Catholics to win was moral indifference. Thus, in comparing Whistler’s effect to French Huguenot interiors, Dilke suggests that his painting contains a higher moral value than other paintings at the 1872 Royal Academy exhibition because of his Protestant intellectualism.

Figure 6
Dilke finds that most impressionist painters sacrifice both intellectual and moral power in appealing to the sensations of viewers. Dilke asks rhetorically, “What is likely to be the effect on taste of the production in art of work which corresponds in style to the style of the sensation writers in literature?” (“Summer Exhibition” 204). Dilke means two different things by her use of the word “sensation.” First, she complains about paintings which appeal to the senses through a facile technique, a “well-calculated rough and ready handling, [which] forcibly accentuate[s] for us only our most obvious physical impressions” (204). Dilke here captures the lower connotation of “impression” as an “effect produced on the senses . . . in its purely receptive aspect” (OED, s.v. “impression”). As this definition indicates, impressionist art and literature, while providing a desirable suggestive picture of reality, could also encourage viewers to respond based on sense alone. Second, Dilke suggests that “vulgar” subjects (that is, lower-class people or social-climbing members of the middle class) are meant to shock viewers rather than appealing to their intellects:

One cannot but fear that this terrible effectiveness, so easy to understand, or, say rather, so impossible to misunderstand, which puts so forcibly to the eye the commonest, the most vulgar, the most salient facts, has from its very intelligibility a much to be dreaded seduction, and that it will to a great extent destroy any relish which may exist in the public for work of a more subtle quality. (“Summer Exhibition” 204)

Dilke here seems to be writing about pornography, not a high art form. That is, she believes that the easy seductiveness of impressionism will prevent readers from unraveling more complex works. Although we commonly think of impressionist painting as similar to Dilke’s conception of Pater’s Imaginary Portraits—as conveying fragmentary moods rather than objective reality—Dilke believed that the style was often too easily understood. For Dilke, not all impressions are incomplete enough; the best ones make readers do significant interpretive work. Her frequent return to visual pleasure in her own The Renaissance of Art in France and her sometimes favorable comments on Pater and Ruskin notwithstanding, Dilke is unwilling to accept this level of sensualism in a modern visual art form. Moreover, Dilke makes clear the political ramifications of this seductiveness. Although willing to accept a limited form of individualism associated with the French Renaissance, Dilke finds more recent impressionist innovation a sign of larger social instability: “Modern society is developing the individual at the expense of the family, and in every field of human labour
this is making itself felt” (“Summer Exhibition” 205). Dilke here rejects the late-Victorian emphasis on individual sense impressions in favor of a more organic view of society.

Many contemporary critics shared Dilke’s concern about the supposed “vulgarity” (“Summer Exhibition” 204) of impressionist paintings, deploring the representation of “low” subjects—including both the working classes and those of the middle class who seemed to have forgotten their station in life. The “Lady Correspondent” for the 1881 *Artist* faulted the impressionists’ “admiration for the ugly and the vulgar. . . . Can art descend lower? . . . This is ‘Realism’ so called; this is in art what M. Zola is in literature” (qtd. in Flint, *Impressionists* 42–43). Like Dilke, this reviewer suggests that some impressionist art approaches the degeneracy of supposedly vulgar realism. Defenders of French impressionism in Britain, notes Flint, tried to deflect these concerns by arguing that the style was in fact based in tradition and that the technique should be appreciated apart from the subject.

But reviewers remained fixated on the subjects of impressionist paintings. Much of Dilke’s worry about the vulgarity and understandability of these paintings centered on what she viewed as their common subjects. “The head and expression have an ordinary character,” she writes of Bouvier’s *Spring*, “they are those of the model unmodified, and the straightforward empty gaze disturbs the complete harmony of the impression” (“Summer Exhibition” 205). For Dilke, the figure lacks the absorptiveness—the unawareness of the spectator—that Michael Fried demonstrates was so important to nineteenth-century reviewers. In “The Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts” (1872), Dilke similarly worries about the subjects of paintings, and particularly those that engage the viewer. Dilke’s belittling of Millais’s *Hearts are Trumps* may be partially due to the subject: three card-playing, well-dressed women, one of whom looks directly at the viewer (fig. 7). Again demonstrating her awareness of the stereotype denigrating women’s judgment, Dilke seeks to dissociate herself from depictions of frivolous dress and activity.

Lower-class subjects also earn Dilke’s direct censure. Considering the “careless servant” of Fred Walker’s *Harbour of Refuge*, Dilke asks, “Why has Mr. Walker suffered us to look straight into those eyeless sockets?” (185). Though unable to look at the viewer, the servant is the focal point of the painting. In contrast to *Harbour of Refuge*, Dilke praises works that present higher subjects in subtle ways. Accordingly, James Tissot’s *Les Adieux*, a painting of an upper-class couple sorrowfully parting with a handshake, is “as polished and high-bred as a poem of the best society
Figure 7
should be” (185). Dilke’s comparison of the painting with poetry indicates that these engaged, upper-class subjects are suitable for the best art.

Wilde shared with Dilke a dislike of impressionist paintings depicting lower-class subjects, and particularly those rendered in a theatrical way. Reviewing the Grosvenor’s opening for the *Dublin University Magazine* while suspended from Oxford in 1877, Wilde shudders at Millais’s “picture of a seamstress, pale and vacant-looking, with eyes red from tears and long watchings in the night, hemming a shirt. It is meant to illustrate Hood’s familiar poem” (8). Though the woman is absorbed in her own suffering and not appealing directly to the viewer, she nevertheless seems to be making an emotional appeal. For Wilde, Millais has violated the stricture of maintaining distance between audience and picture that informed reviews of sentimental art in the 1840s. Even worse, notes Wilde, is that the painting hangs above another Millais representing the three daughters of the Duke of Westminster: “As we look on it, a terrible contrast strikes us between this miserable pauper-seamstress and the three beautiful daughters of the richest duke in the world, which breaks through any artistic reveries by its awful vividness” (8). As in other reviews of modern paintings, the technique—Millais’s realism—is less important than what is depicted. Thus, Wilde contrasts Tissot’s “over-dressed, common-looking people” with another artist’s “beautiful grouping of noble-looking men, its exquisite Venetian glass aglow with light and wine” (21). Wilde is attracted by both the class of men and the interior decorations contained in this painting, a view that elides with his favorable conception of the Grosvenor as a well-appointed space for leisurely, upper-class contemplation of art.

Wilde’s assessments of Whistler’s paintings at the 1877 Grosvenor are similarly informed by the class of the subjects depicted. Wilde remarks that the artist’s Nocturnes “are certainly worth looking at for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, for somewhat less than a quarter of a minute,” because their titles and color “smudges” convey little recognizable information (18). Like Ruskin, Wilde was bothered by the indistinctness of these paintings. But Wilde seems most attentive to class issues, as he explicitly notes the setting of *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* as the Cremorne Gardens, a well-known pleasure park frequented by prostitutes and other undesirables. Ruskin shared Wilde’s concern about this kind of vulgarity. Though he did not write directly about Whistler’s subjects, Ruskin objected to lower-class elements in other paintings. Directly after attacking Whistler in *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin remarks that Tissot’s paintings at the 1877 Grosvenor “are, unhappily, mere coloured photographs of vulgar society” (161). Scholars often uncertainly attribute
Ruskin’s attack on Whistler to a variety of causes, including his declining faith in the masses and to his ill health, but it seems equally likely that he was incorporating this late-Victorian fear of lower-class subjects. During the *Whistler vs. Ruskin* trial, Ruskin’s attorney Sir John Holker attempted to capitalize on *Nocturne in Black and Gold*’s subject by joking, “I do not know what the ladies would say to that, because it has a subject they would not understand—I hope they have never been to Cremorne—but men will know more about it” (qtd. in Merrill 167). As in his derogatory comments about Whistler’s paintings in general, Holker here references women’s supposed naïveté about low subjects in paintings, something that Dilke implicitly contradicts in her explicit rejection of the vulgar.

Like most of his British contemporaries in the 1870s, Wilde favors clearly drawn paintings that convey appropriate feeling for a high subject. Thus, Wilde approves of Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle* (1872–73) because of the painting’s treatment of a dignified subject: “The general sympathetic treatment, show Mr. Whistler to be an artist of very great power when he likes” (19). For Wilde, this painting is sympathetic without being sensational. By contrast, Wilde complains about paintings at the Grosvenor that appeal to lower tastes through theatrical and indistinct effects. For example, Whistler’s Henry Irving “is so ridiculously like the original that one cannot help almost laughing when one sees it” (18). The painting, like its subject, exhibits the theatricality that nineteenth-century reviewers associated with lower-class entertainment—and thus flawed artistic conceptions. The indistinctness of the painting exacerbates Wilde’s fears about its low subject: “Out of black smudgy clouds comes looming the gaunt figure” (18). Wilde worries that viewers will not recognize the portrait of Irving for the lower-class subject that it is.

Similarly, Lee complains about paintings that merely repeat empty, conventional signs. She derides, for example, a number of paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that take the Annunciation of the Virgin as their subject: “In one by Cosimo Rossetti she [the Virgin] lifts both hands with shocked astonishment as the angel scuddles in; in the lovely one, . . . now given to Verocchio, she raises one hand with a vacant smile, as if she were exclaiming, ‘Dear me! there’s that angel again’” (*Renaissance Studies* 86). The gestures to which Lee objects are similar to the ones used in popular Victorian melodramas: they carry obvious meaning but are not emotionally realistic. Lee thus denigrates art that is too accessible to the general viewer. As an example of a higher artistic mode, Lee cites the Annunciation of Botticelli, which suggests much with few signs. Botticelli’s angel “lift[s] a hand which seems to beg patience, till the speech
the Madona bows gravely as one who is never astonished” (88)—in short what we might expect from a scene of this magnitude. The scene does not depend on easy religious identifications, nor is it meant to provide the more sensational qualities of shock or “astonishment.”

As Lee’s approval of Signorelli’s Madonna as appropriately dignified makes clear, Catholic artworks could be successful if interpreted aesthetically rather than religiously. In this sense, Lee’s approach was close to that taken earlier in the century by Jameson and Eastlake. But, notwithstanding her religiously motivated desire to focus on aesthetics, Lee exhibits an odd disregard for human emotions within paintings. Lee’s description of Signorelli’s Madonna makes sense on a religious level: the Madonna is a figure more sacred than human at this point in the story. Further, Lee believes that too much human emotion would ruin the gravity of the situation and place the emphasis on viewers of the painting. Yet in removing all human emotion and sentiment, Lee’s interpretation seems to separate the viewer entirely from the painting.

In contrast to Lee, Pater highlights human emotion in his essays on individual artists in the Renaissance. Pater’s conclusion, writes George Levine, “strangely and almost inhumanly equates deeply different kinds of sensations, ‘strange colours, . . . curious odours . . . the face of one’s friend,’ for example. The ‘hard, gem-like flame’ with which Pater wants us to burn is precisely not the engaged, sentimental, entirely human feeling with which one would think we normally engage the world” (25–26, emphasis mine). But, in his focus on the conclusion, Levine neglects the human feelings that Pater incorporates into his chapters. “First of all,” Pater notes of a drawing he assumes is by Leonardo (now attributed to one of Leonardo’s students),

there is much pathos in the reappearance, in the fuller curves of the face of the child, of the sharper, more chastened lines of the worn and older face, which leaves no doubt that the heads are those of a little child and its mother. A feeling for maternity is indeed always characteristic of Leonardo; and this feeling is further indicated here by the half-humorous pathos of the diminutive, rounded shoulders of the child. (90)

Pater’s focus on “pathos” and “feeling” is clearly different from Lee’s approach to subjects within paintings. However, Pater qualifies such feeling by focusing on the forms—the lines and curves—of the figures as well
as on their “pathetic” qualities. As scholars such as Flint and Prettejohn have demonstrated, Pater’s attention to form is typical of professional Victorian criticism. Yet, as I have also argued throughout this book, formal analysis does not necessarily preclude serious consideration of emotional content. Writing toward the end of the century, Lee extends her earlier denial of much human emotion by advocating art that is purely decorative. In “Imagination in Modern Art” (1897), Lee complains that most viewers still find human emotion most compelling. She hopes that spectators will instead appreciate the natural patterns embodied for her in Whistler’s *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*: “Once painters have learned the necessary craft, and beholders have felt the emotion attaching to things not human, as much as they already feel the emotion of human things; shall we not see walls and ceilings covered with patterns like these . . . ?” (515). Lee here rejects what earlier reviews termed “nonaesthetic art” (Stoddart 210), or art that asks viewers to identify with suffering human subjects, in favor of interior decoration.

In his 1877 review of the Grosvenor Gallery (fig. 8), Wilde presages Lee’s value of decorative art. Wilde suggests that the interior of the Grosvenor provides an upper-class, well-decorated context for the art:

> There are only three rooms, so there is no fear of our getting that terrible weariness of mind and eye which comes on after the “Forced Marches” through ordinary picture galleries. . . . there are luxurious velvet couches, . . . and, in fine, everything in decoration that is lovely to look on, and in harmony with the surrounding works of art. (6)

Wilde’s 1890 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* supports this initial impression of the gallery. Advising the artist Basil Hallward about where to send his portrait of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton remarks, “You must certainly send it next year to the Grosvenor. The Academy is too large and too vulgar” (140–41). Though Wilde’s views on art certainly developed between his 1877 review of the Grosvenor and his 1890 novel, his earlier review seems to ally him with the elitist views of Lord Henry Wotton. By contrast, Ruskin worries that the interior decorations in the Grosvenor highlight commercialism over artistic merit. In *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin singles out the upholstery as “very grievously injurious to the best pictures it [the Grosvenor] contains, while its glitter as unjustly veils the vulgarity of the worst” (*Works* 29: 158). Ruskin indicates that viewers, focused on the Grosvenor’s furniture, would fail to observe that many of the paintings are depictions of low subjects. While Wilde too was bothered by some of these lower-
Figure 8
class subjects, he views the upper-class decorations in the Grosvenor as even more satisfying than much of the art.

On his return to the Grosvenor in 1879, Wilde does not entirely abandon considerations of subjects. Rather, he suggests that they have become more ideal, less like the horrible real life that he was forced to confront in the 1877 paintings of Millais. Thus, Edward Burne-Jones’s *Annunciation* depicts “a passionless, pale woman, with that mysterious sorrow whose meaning she was so soon to learn mirrored in her wan face” (24). The painting hints at a story about this well-known figure but lacks the theatricality that Wilde found so irritating in his 1877 review of Whistler’s Henry Irving. Overall, his 1879 review demonstrates an increased willingness to discuss art apart from its subject and a consequent appreciation of what he calls “modern” art. Unlike the “commonplace” Royal Academy, writes Wilde, “it is at the Grosvenor Gallery that we are enabled to see the highest development of the modern artistic spirit” (24). Even in light of this comment, Wilde’s about-face on Whistler’s work is remarkable:

Mr. Whistler, whose wonderful and eccentric genius is better appreciated in France than in England, sends a very wonderful picture entitled *The Golden Girl* . . .; nor have the philippics of the *Fors Clavigera* deterred him from exhibiting some more of his ‘arrangements in colour,’ one of which, called a *Harmony in Green and Gold*, I would especially mention as an extremely good example of what ships lying at anchor on a summer evening are from the ‘Impressionist point of view.’ (27)

Wilde indicates that this impressionist view is a very indistinct one—a quality he now values for its decorative qualities. There seems nothing at all objectionable in the painting. However, in his approval of *Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Gold Girl—Connie Gilchrist* (1876–77), Wilde demonstrates a newfound ability to appreciate even lower-class subjects, as Gilchrist was an artist’s model and stage performer. How could Wilde approve of this image while being so critical, only two years earlier, of Whistler’s Henry Irving portrait? For one thing, Gilchrist was a relatively new commodity at the time of Wilde’s 1879 review, having made her stage debut only two years earlier, and thus she fits his conception of a “modern artistic spirit” (24). In addition, while *The Gold Girl* is a successful likeness of Gilchrist, the painting is also decorative—something that Wilde suggests is missing in the “smudgy” Irving portrait. Wilde emphasizes the color harmony of *The Gold Girl*; it is, he says, a “life-size study in amber, yellow and browns” (27).
Further, Wilde’s approval of *The Gold Girl* suggests a source for Sybil Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian Gray first describes Sybil Vane to Lord Henry Wotton as possessing “a little flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of the rose” (50). Here, Dorian supports Lord Henry’s contention that “women are a decorative sex” (47). While Lee and Dilke reject this equation of women with decoration, Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* and art critical writings suggest his own approval. The narrator tells us that, upon returning to the theater, Dorian views the theatrical Sybil as marked by an “artificial manner” with an “absolutely false” voice, which “was wrong in colour” (80). Unlike Whistler’s Connie Gilchrist, Wilde’s later Sybil Vane is no longer absorbed in her performance. As a result, Sybil has ceased to be decorative, and she loses the love of Dorian as a result (and, it seems, Wilde as well). In his emphasis on aesthetic decoration, Wilde thus illustrates a partial shift away from the difficulty advocated by Ruskin and Dilke as the primary value of art. Yet, in his rejection of melodrama and mere sensation, Wilde similarly seeks to protect art from a too-easy understanding.

Though impressionism was increasingly accepted after the Victorian period, the movement has yet to shed its association with commercialism and easy consumption. A quick look in closing at a recent review of an American impressionist painter reveals that the same worries about the style’s seductively pleasing power have continued into the twenty-first century—even as some impressionist painters are now often ranked with Renaissance geniuses. To be sure, the painter reviewed, Childe Hassam, was no genius. But he was the subject of a 2004 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, something that raised the hackles of at least one major art critic. In his review, chief art critic of the *New York Times* Michael Kimmelman warns viewers about the kind of commercialized sentimentalism that also rankled Victorian critics: “Hassam’s most characteristic works remain [American] flags: heartfelt, iconic celebrations of civic expansion and nationalism” (3). Echoing Wilde’s 1877 review of Whistler’s Nocturnes, Kimmelman notes that most of Hassam’s paintings are “less fascinating the longer you look. Hassam could do almost anything technically in a variety of media. . . . Anything except what mattered most, which was offer up something beyond glitter and nostalgia” (2). That “something” for Kimmelman as well as for Dilke and other Victorian reviewers of impressionist paintings is an active engagement with viewers’ intellects.

Yet Kimmelman seems most annoyed about the decorative and commercial qualities of much impressionism, which “was the perfect style for
a while: quick to accomplish, visually snappy, handsome above the sofa and suited to endless variations on the same themes, satisfying buyers who wanted something just like, but not exactly the same as, what they saw at their friend’s home” (2). Kimmelman complains about Hassam’s too-easy accessibility, something exacerbated by the painter’s use of a supposedly facile style. The paintings both take no effort to understand and are in reach of those buyers who cannot afford a Degas or Monet. Hassam’s paintings were simply another decoration in the home for his buyers—a sure sign of their baseness. Kimmelman suggests that the Metropolitan Museum of Art is complicit with the art market that wants to sell his paintings—an insinuation similar to Ruskin’s critique of the 1877 Grosvenor. Only art critics, say the writers I examine here, can protect viewers from a style that can fool the majority with its commercialized sentimentalism.