



Emilia Dilke on Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to recovering the history of women's contributions to aesthetics by examining Emilia Dilke's writings on aesthetics from the mid-1860s to the early 1870s. Initially, Dilke took the historicist view that artworks are inescapably the products and expressions of their social and historical circumstances and that art is better, as art, the more it distils its time. Dilke also thought that in the modern world art had separated inexorably from morality and religion. On that basis she came to endorse aestheticism, arguing that art should be made for beauty's sake and not subordinated to moral purposes. However, this ultimately led to some tensions between her aestheticism and historicism. In the end she resolved these tensions by distinguishing between various kinds of value, or uses, that artworks can have. The best artworks have properly aesthetic value and transcend history, whereas the majority of artworks have only historical value as expressions of their eras. Overall, Dilke put forward a forceful defence of aestheticism and negotiated between aestheticism and historicism in a unique way. She deserves recognition as a significant female figure in the history of aesthetics.

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Emilia Dilke (1840–1904) was, by the time of her death, Britain’s pre-eminent authority on French art. She built her reputation with *The Renaissance of Art in France* (1879), *Claude Lorrain* (1884), *Art in the Modern State* (1888), and a four-volume book series on eighteenth-century French art (1899–1902).¹ Despite her high standing in her own time, Dilke, like many historical women intellectuals, was forgotten for nearly all of the twentieth century and misleadingly omitted from histories of thinking about art in Britain. Thankfully, recent scholars have done invaluable work restoring Dilke to the historical record. The restoration began with Betty Askwith’s 1969 biography and Colin Eisler’s 1981 article on Dilke as art historian.² Several key reinterpretations followed in the 1990s – a series of articles by Elizabeth Mansfield, an innovative critical biography by Kali Israel, and an account of Dilke’s journal contributions by Marysa Demoor.³ This has enabled further scholarship from the 2000s onwards, by Meaghan Clarke, Hilary Fraser, and John Paul Kanwit, locating Dilke within traditions of Victorian art history and criticism.⁴

One part of Dilke’s oeuvre still awaits recovery. Before she turned to art history, Dilke produced a substantial corpus of writing on aesthetics. Spanning the mid-1860s to the early 1870s, it includes numerous short essays and reviews and two major theoretical statements, ‘Art and Morality’ (1869) and ‘The Use of Looking at Pictures’ (1873). Dilke, then, was an aesthetician before she became an art historian. My aim here is to provide the first modern-day philosophical account of Dilke the aesthetician and unfold her distinctive position in aesthetics.

To anticipate, Dilke began in the 1860s as a historicist, seeing artworks as inescapably the products and expressions of their social and historical circumstances (see Section

1 See Mme Mark Pattison [Emilia Dilke], *The Renaissance of Art in France* (London: Kegan Paul, 1879); *Claude Lorrain* (Paris: Rouam, 1884); Emilia [Lady] Dilke, *Art in the Modern State* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888); *French Painters of the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1899); *French Architects and Sculptors of the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1900); *French Furniture and Decoration in the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1901), and *French Engravers and Draughtsmen of the XVIIIth Century* (London: Bell, 1902).

2 See Betty Askwith, *Lady Dilke: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), and Colin Eisler, ‘Lady Dilke (1840–1904): The Six Lives of an Art Historian’, in *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979*, ed. Claire Richter Sherman and Adele Holcomb (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 147–80.

3 See Elizabeth Mansfield, ‘Art, History and Authorship: The Critical Writings of Emilia Dilke’ (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1996); ‘Victorian Identity and the Historical Imaginary: Emilia Dilke’s *The Renaissance of Art in France*’, *Clio* 26 (1997): 167–88; ‘Articulating Authority: Emilia Dilke’s Early Essays and Reviews’, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31 (1998): 75–86; and ‘The Victorian *Grand Siècle*: Ideology as Art History’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28 (2000): 133–47; Kali Israel, *Names and Stories: Emilia Dilke and Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Marysa Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the ‘Athenaeum’* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 64–75. I should note that Israel’s complex, postmodern interpretive approach goes beyond straightforward biography.

4 See Meaghan Clarke, *Critical Voices: Women and Art Criticism in Britain 1880–1905* (London: Routledge, 2005); Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); ‘Writing Cosmopolis: The Cosmopolitan Aesthetics of Emilia Dilke and Vernon Lee’, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 28 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.844>; and ‘Dilke [née Strong; other married name Pattison], Emilia Francis, Lady Dilke’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/32825>; and John Paul Kanwit, *Victorian Art Criticism and the Woman Writer* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

II). This led her to reject aesthetic moralism, the then-popular view that art should serve moral purposes and be judged by moral criteria. She rejected that view on the grounds that art had become separated from morality and religion over the course of history, making aesthetic moralism inappropriate in the modern world. Dilke thus became a proponent of aestheticism, the view that art's primary purpose is to be beautiful and that art should be judged by aesthetic criteria, not moral, political, or religious ones. Dilke defended aestheticism in 'Art and Morality' (see Section III). But the way she did so created a tension, ultimately, with her historicism (Section IV). After wavering between her aestheticist and historicist commitments in the early 1870s, she resolved the tension in 'The Use of Looking at Pictures' by distinguishing between the best artworks, which have aesthetic value and transcend history, and the majority of lesser artworks, which have only historical value as expressions of their times (see Section V). The latter works must therefore be explained and understood historically. So, Dilke concluded, the right approach to most art is historical and explanatory; hence she turned aside from aesthetics to art history (see Section VI).

Why should we care? The answer is that the history of women's contributions to aesthetics is seriously under-studied. Introducing a *Hypatia* special issue on 'Women, Art, and Aesthetics', Peg Brand and Mary Devereaux noted that feminist aestheticians had barely looked at women in the history of aesthetics.⁵ But Brand and Devereaux themselves did not mention any pre-twentieth-century women aestheticians, and the scholarly situation has changed little since. Actually, many women wrote on aesthetics in nineteenth-century Britain (not to mention other times and places). They include Joanna Baillie, Anna Jameson, Frances Power Cobbe, and Vernon Lee, besides Dilke herself. By examining Dilke's work we can fill in part of this rich tradition. This is important both for historical accuracy and to make aesthetics more inclusive by recognizing women's contributions to it, present and past.

Let me briefly sketch Dilke's life and career to contextualize what follows.⁶ Born Emily Francis Strong but always called Francis, she grew up in Oxford in an artistically well-connected family, knowing the pre-Raphaelites (she rejected Holman Hunt's marriage offer) and John Ruskin, at whose encouragement she studied art from 1859 to 1861 at the National Art Training School in London. She then returned to Oxford and married the rector of Lincoln College, Mark Pattison, becoming Emily Francis Strong Pattison. The couple's unhappy marriage was widely regarded as the model for that of Dorothea and Casaubon in Eliot's *Middlemarch* – Mark Pattison did, in fact, write a book on the historical Casaubon.⁷ Francis Pattison (as Dilke then was) began publishing in the periodical press in the 1860s. According to her second husband, Sir Charles Dilke, 'The subjects upon which she wrote largely in her early days were in the main philosophical. [...] The dominant interest [in aesthetics] soon came to the front, [...] in a series of reviews of German books developing theories of aesthetics',⁸ and

5 Peg Brand and Mary Devereaux, 'Introduction: Feminism and Aesthetics', *Hypatia* 18 (2003): viii–xx.

6 On Dilke's life, see Askwith, *Lady Dilke*, and Israel, *Names and Stories*.

7 Eliot knew of Dilke's marital woes because they were good friends and corresponded regularly; Eliot described herself in one letter as Dilke's mother (*Madre*) (see Israel, *Names and Stories*, 299n41).

8 Charles Dilke, 'Memoir', in Emilia Dilke [Lady Dilke], *The Book of the Spiritual Life* (London: Murray, 1905), 28.

English and French books too. These 1860s pieces were in the *Saturday Review*, from which she progressed to publish in the prestigious *Westminster Review* from 1869 to 1873, and then from 1870 in *The Academy*, whose art editor she became in 1873.⁹ By then she was reviewing numerous art exhibitions as well as art books, making the turn to art history consolidated in her first book, *The Renaissance of Art in France*, in 1879. Also during the 1870s, she privately changed her first name to the more cosmopolitan and literary 'Emilia'. Following Mark Pattison's death in 1884 she married Charles Dilke in 1885, thereby becoming Lady Emilia Dilke – here, for simplicity, 'Dilke'. Alongside her work on French art, she became immersed in the movement to unionize women workers, serving as president of the Women's Trade Union League from 1886 to 1904. She now saw artworks as material products, contributing to the economy, and shaped by political arrangements; this naturally led her to recognize the importance of production and the political need for producers, including women producers, to secure better working conditions.¹⁰

That was where Dilke ended up; let us explore how she got there. I will move through the stages in her aesthetic thought chronologically, presenting her ideas clearly and reconstructing the reasoning behind her intellectual development. I shall quote her extensively, so that the philosophical character of her work can speak for itself.

II. DILKE'S HISTORICISM

Historicism was the dominant strand in Dilke's earliest essays in the *Saturday Review*, for which she began writing in 1863. It was a conservative and acerbic journal, but its strict policy of anonymity and strong corporate voice gave Dilke a safe space to develop her ideas.¹¹ We should bear in mind that anonymity was normal for prose articles in British periodicals until the mid-1860s, and in some cases later. This convention had enabling aspects for women, allowing them to publish without being censured.¹² Once signature became more normal, women often held on to anonymity as best they could, sometimes by using initials rather than given names or adopting pseudonyms. But in the 1860s Dilke could still take advantage of the convention of anonymity. She worked out her approach to art using her reviews of other art theorists, for reviews and essays were not sharply differentiated in nineteenth-century British periodicals, which employed a porous essay-review format.

In 'The Art-Idea' (1864), Dilke declared positivism the best approach to art. By contrast, James Jackson Jarves, whose book *The Art-Idea* she was critiquing, offered only 'fine speculations' and a 'philosophy that wants but one thing – bottom'.¹³ His theory had not faced 'the test of facts'. These statements exemplify what Charles

9 Mansfield, 'Articulating Authority', gives an excellent account of these early articles but foregrounds Dilke's authoritative persona within them more than their philosophical arguments.

10 On Dilke's later materialist and historicist approach, see Fraser, *Women Writing*, chap. 4, and 'Writing Cosmopolis'.

11 See Hugh Craig and Alexis Antonia, 'Six Authors and the Saturday Review: A Quantitative Approach to Style', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 48 (2015): 67–86.

12 See Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830–70* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

13 [Emilia Dilke], 'The Art-Idea', *Saturday Review*, 13 August 1864, 219.

Dilke described as ‘her invariable straightforwardness, often “brutality”, of intellect’.¹⁴ Against speculation, she recommended the ‘far more reasoned system of Comte’, which derives theory from facts.¹⁵ Dilke thus supported empiricism and positivism, and was somewhat sceptical about theory – a repeated refrain in her work.

Given Dilke’s positivist sympathies, in 1865 she favourably reviewed the *Philosophy of Art*, by the French aesthetician Hippolyte Taine, whose blend of positivism and historicism influenced her considerably. For Taine, one understands an artwork by explaining it with reference to the artist’s whole oeuvre, in turn explained by his school, in turn explained by the ‘moral, social and [...] political condition of the world around’, a world in constant historical evolution.¹⁶ Thus, for Taine, artworks are ultimately products of the artist’s historical environment; to understand artworks we must explain how these external factors have produced and shaped them.

Dilke agrees: the business of aestheticians is to explain artworks by tracing the causes acting on them and working out the natural laws of art’s evolution. ‘No work of art, then, is [...] isolated. The starting-point of a true philosophy must necessarily be that of the *ensemble* which surrounds the work, and of which it forms a part.’ She also enthuses over Taine’s practical recommendations:

We find, in the principles here laid down, the clue to all true and healthy progress. Taking nature as the standard [...] in the depth and breadth of organic life – we shall no longer be subject to the complaint that art is dead, or remain enslaved to the [...] conventions of the past.

More specifically, good art must take its inspiration from the present day, for ‘the art of an age is the presentation [...] of its reality’. After all, art is invariably of its age anyway; artists should recognize and lean into this reality. For then the artist will depict individuals who embody the fundamental tendencies of the time, raising these individuals from mere individuals to representative types.¹⁷

In short, Dilke takes from Taine that artworks must be explained by the causal factors shaping them; that these causal factors are those of the historically evolving social environment, which must be analysed empirically; that good art distils the trends of its time in exemplary typical individuals; and that along this path nineteenth-century art can become both modern and vital. To clarify: by ‘good’ art Dilke means artistically good, not morally good; she distinguishes the artistic (and aesthetic) good from the morally good, as we will see.

In 1868 Dilke first introduces that central aestheticist strand of thought, in a critical review of Richard St John Tyrwhitt’s *Handbook of Pictorial Art*, which proposed that modern art should be didactic and educate people by depicting real historical events. Dilke objects that it only made sense for art to be instructive in eras when most people were illiterate. Nowadays, art should be left free to pursue properly aesthetic ends. Tyrwhitt’s strictures would impose

14 Charles Dilke, ‘Memoir’, 12.

15 [Dilke], ‘Art-Idea’, 219.

16 [Emilia Dilke], ‘Taine’s *Philosophy of Art*’, *Saturday Review*, 21 October 1865, 520.

17 Ibid.

an unnecessary and unreasonable tyranny. In the kingdom of art, imagination is not the handmaid, but the mistress, of the understanding; and work which is not done for its own sake, in which the chief place is claimed for the historical or the moral, [...] in which the contents form the weightiest part, loses its aesthetic character, and cannot possess those poetic elements which fire the fancy and rouse the emotions.¹⁸

Dilke's central objection to didacticism is that it is inappropriate for the modern world. Didactic works might have been good art in the Middle Ages, but they have no place today.

This leads into her essay 'Religious Art in the Nineteenth Century', also from 1868. She employs her Tainian conception of ideal types to solve the problem of what art should do in an age where it has parted from religion inexorably. Formerly, Dilke says, art and religion were 'knit compactly in unity of organic life'. But this unity is now lost: 'Religious art is now severed from the world's art'. Religionists look down on art, artists have scant use for religion, and both are now detached from worldly life. Yet we cannot go back: 'One reason why most religious art in the nineteenth century has been a failure is that it does not belong to the century.'¹⁹

Dilke proposes an alternative way for modern art to regain a serious and meaningful purpose. 'Painters wrongly suppose that religious art means a perpetual reproduction of Saints and Holy Families, whereas the subjects arising out of daily experience' would be more suitable. Artists should take everyday modern individuals and raise them into types exemplifying the age. This would yield a new 'ideal realism' – not mere naturalism, and not finding the supernatural in the natural, but finding the typical in the individual and so giving daily realities profound meaning.²⁰

In sum, Dilke opposes any subordination of art to education, religion, or morality on the grounds that art has necessarily separated from these other factors over history and that, instead of looking backwards, we should make art that is of its time and so pursues independent aesthetic goals. The motivation for Dilke's aestheticism, then, comes from her historicist view that art should reflect its era and that the modern era is one in which art has become independent from other aspects of social life.

III. DILKE'S AESTHETICISM

Dilke elaborated her version of aestheticism in the 1869 article 'Art and Morality', published in the heavyweight liberal journal the *Westminster Review*. It was anonymous, this being the journal's general policy, of which Dilke again took advantage. Ostensibly a review of two books by the French spiritualist-cum-eclectic Victor Laprade, Dilke uses her 16,000-word piece to make a sustained case for aestheticism – doing so, notably, four years before the text usually heralded as the manifesto of aestheticism

18 [Emilia Dilke], 'A Handbook of Pictorial Art', *Saturday Review*, 22 August 1868, 262.

19 [Emilia Dilke], 'Religious Art in the Nineteenth Century', *Saturday Review*, 12 September 1868, 361.

20 Ibid.

Dilke's complex argument divides into stages (she did not so divide it herself; I am doing so on her behalf).

*Critique of Laprade, moralism, and idealism.*²² Situating herself in the British empiricist and sensualist tradition, Dilke objects to Laprade's demand that art should provide 'moral instruction and moral advancement' (AM, p. 184). Dilke sounds caution about aesthetic theory altogether – there is too much theorizing around, to the detriment of art and our responses to it. But, despite her 'preference for artistic produce over artistic theory', she must theorize in order to combat the undesirable moralist theorizing of Laprade and the broader family of idealist theories to which his belongs (AM, p. 149). These theories distinguish ideal beauty from mere sensory reality by combining Plato, Descartes, and Reid (as the French eclectics did) to postulate an idea of moral beauty, perceived by God, of which physical beauty is merely the symbol. Dilke replies that, if real beauty is ideal and grasped by reason and not the senses, then it is so far removed from ordinary sensory beauty that it is not properly called 'beauty' at all; these theorists have simply replaced (sensory) beauty with (ideal) morality.

Sensualist account of beauty (AM, pp. 160–68). Dilke concedes that rejecting defective theories is easy, but one must put a better account in place. 'If we have satisfied ourselves that it is idle to identify that which we call beauty with a real transcendental perfection cognizable by reason, this is the place to indicate [...] what we in fact mean by the word' (AM, p. 160). She proposes 'to explain the nature and growth of the sentiment of beauty on a basis of sensation' (AM, p. 161).

Sensations subdivide into:

1. *Simple sensations* produced in the body by single colours, sounds, shapes, and so on. Some of these – certain colours, curved lines, musical notes – produce feelings of pleasure in us. 'That certain simple sensations [...] are attended by an organic pleasure, must be accepted as a primitive part of our nature' (AM, p. 162). These *simple pleasures* are independent of any further associations and meanings we may attach to the qualities being sensed.
2. *Compound or cognitive sense-impressions*, in which one sensed quality recalls others we associate with it, as when a sound suggests a waterfall or a smell suggests a rose. This is 'the stage when sensation acquires an intellectual character' (AM, p. 164). Some of these associations also produce pleasure, as with the smell that evokes the idea of an attractive rose. These are *associative pleasures* as distinct from simple pleasures (AM, p. 162).

21 This raises a question as to whether Pater was influenced by Dilke. They probably influenced one another towards aestheticism, for they knew one another well in 1860s Oxford. Dilke, then still married to Mark Pattison, who was rector of Lincoln College, hosted a 'salon at the Rector's lodgings, to which gravitated most of the liberal and rationalist element of the University. Pater was often a guest.' See Lawrence Evans, 'Introduction', in *Letters of Walter Pater* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), xxxiv. Charles Dilke also notes their longstanding friendly relations (Charles Dilke, 'Memoir', 29–31) – even after Dilke's unfavourable review of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which led him to rename it *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. See also Hilary Fraser, 'Walter Pater and Emilia Dilke', in *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism* 2 (2016): 21–30.

22 [Emilia Dilke], 'Art and Morality', *Westminster Review* 35 (1869): 149–60. Hereafter: AM.

The nucleus of beauty is in sensations agreeable to sight and hearing (either simply or associatively). Sight and hearing are fundamental here, not the other senses, because they are (1) *unexclusive*: sounds and sights are available to many people at the same time, whereas tastes and smells are more private; (2) *intellectual*: sight and hearing are the most cognitive senses, that is, richest in associations; (3) sources of *disinterested* pleasure: we find certain sounds and sights pleasing irrespective of their utility to us (one can find a raging torrent pleasing, while knowing one would be in danger if one fell in; AM, p. 165). The pleasures caused by the other senses only become 'artistic' when they are joined to pleasurable sights and sounds. For example, viewing a painting of a country scene may produce simple visual pleasures (from its colours and shapes), associative visual pleasures (in the scene depicted), and by extension associative olfactory or gustatory pleasures (if one associates the scene depicted with pleasing smells of fresh grass and tasty picnics). The pleasures of smell and taste can thus be made unexclusive, intellectual, and disinterested by being attached to pleasures of sight and sound, in which case the former pleasures too become aesthetic (AM, p. 166).

Additional qualities can also become 'ingredients of the Beautiful': harmony, utility, fitness (suitability of means to ends), power, and completeness (AM, p. 167). These qualities become beautiful either if we contemplate them in real-life events in a disinterested way or if they are present in fictional events within literary works; or, again, if they are associatively suggested to us by the look of real-life visible things or if they are present in depicted objects in pictures. Finally, novelty, variety, unity, and successful imitation are also components of beauty.

If Dilke's view of beauty begins to look rather crowded and disparate, we should remember that for her its basis is in the senses, as follows:

1. We naturally feel simple and associative pleasures in some qualities presented to our sight and hearing, and their pleasurableness makes these qualities beautiful;
2. When other pleasurable qualities (for example, smells) become attached to these pleasurable sensory and auditory qualities, they become beautiful too;
3. The above visual and auditory qualities are public and intellectual (rich in associations), and give disinterested pleasure;
4. When real or artistically depicted events or objects share in those three qualities, they become beautiful too.

Clearly all this could be scrutinized further, but let me follow Dilke, who immediately proceeds to the anti-moralist implications:

From an account of beauty such as the foregoing it is easy to deduce consequences subversive of [...] all theories that would make moral improvement the end of fine art. If the differential character of fine art is its power to produce a certain kind of pleasure, it will be guilty of foregoing this character if it aims at producing something else. On the great principle of the separation of functions, let moral and intellectual agencies be applied to further the ends of virtue, artistic agencies to further the ends of beauty. The relations of beauty to virtue are these: virtue is beautiful because it pleases; not, beauty pleases because it is virtuous. (AM, p. 167)

Art's progressive historical separation from religion and morality (AM, pp. 168–76). Dilke now says that her anti-moralist conclusion needs to be 'fortified by a reference

to the history of the fine arts, and to the part which the ethical or didactic element has actually played in them' (AM, p. 168). She concentrates on classical Greece and medieval Italy. Initially Greek crafts entirely served religion, both with temples and statues of the gods. But, to make worship appealing, craftspeople began to follow artistic motives: exploring combinations of colours, adding decoration, deploying contrasts of light and shade. This properly artistic element was explored more and more: 'the artistic motive, the love of beauty for beauty's sake' (AM, p. 172). Art thereby became art properly speaking, as distinct from handicraft (AM, pp. 168–69). For a time now art and religion co-operated, but eventually religion became subordinate, with artists merely using religious subjects as themes for art.

Italian Christian art followed an identical course. At first, paintings and sculptures exalted the saints, angels, Christ, and Mary. But in time 'the pleasure which such things are found to give becomes a motive of itself, and supplants the glory of God' (AM, p. 174). Artists became interested in colour itself, in sensory details; religious and artistic motives now co-existed and co-operated. But in time the artistic motives prevailed, and so – in the Renaissance – artists turned to secular subjects as well as religious ones, and reduced the religious subjects to pretexts for exploring sensory beauty.

Art's disaggregation from religion has been not mere change but *progress*:

We can trace a progressive evolution [in Italian art] entirely analogous to that traceable in the case of Greek art [...]. That which is depicted by mature art is not 'man as a moral being [...]' so much as man as a physical being – man in possession of bodily perfection [...]. The progress of art, in short, consists in its passage from the representation of spirit to the representation of body. (AM, pp. 175–77)

For its time this statement is astonishing. The best art does *not* realize spirit or the ideal but is that in which the sensory pleasures of the body have escaped the dominance of the idea.

This sensualist conclusion comes out of Dilke's positivism. Herbert Spencer, to whom she refers, maintained that everything undergoes evolution, defined as the 'change from an incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity'.²³ For Dilke, applied to art this means that over time art becomes heterogeneous from the religious and moral motives with which it was originally mixed incoherently. At first there was only religion and handicraft; then, in service of religion, artistic motives (the pursuit of sensory beauty) emerged; then these motives become a force in their own right; then artistic motives reduced religion to a mere pretext, whereby the domains of art and religion became separate.

Two clarifications. First, despite this stress on historical progress, Dilke's accounts of both beauty and art have an ahistorical aspect: what we find beautiful depends purely on the senses and is specifiable independently of history; and art's historical separation from religion is progressive because previously art was mixed with religious motives that are intrinsically heterogeneous from properly artistic ones. The separation has allowed art to become itself – to realize its essential nature as art. Second, although Dilke set out to trace what part the 'ethical or didactic element' played in art's historical development, she actually focuses on religion. This was because in Victorian

23 Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (1862; London: Watts, 1937), 325.

Britain religion and morality were commonly assumed to be virtually co-extensive. Consequently Dilke assumes that, in extricating itself from religion, art shakes off moral restrictions at the same time, so that 'the moment of art's culmination was precisely also the moment of its divorce from morality' (AM, p. 178).

The anti-moralist case concluded (AM, pp. 176–78). Dilke now ties in the further points that good artists are not necessarily good people, and great artistic epochs are not necessarily epochs of great public virtue. Ruskin says they are, 'but inexorable history says No' (AM, p. 177). Classical Greece and Renaissance Italy produced great art but also endless wars among city states and independent cities. Putting all this together, art and morals are 'mutually independent' (AM, p. 179):

We do not believe that art is in any way able, directly, either to make or to mar in the momentous work of moral instruction and moral advancement. Indirectly, she may perhaps contribute something, by filling men's lives with innocent and refined enjoyment [...]. Even thus much she cannot do until she is allowed to go her natural way in the unswerving search for beauty. (AM, p. 184)

Against decadence (AM, pp. 179–84). Dilke pre-emptively defends herself against the charge of immoralism, stressing that she does not support decadence, that is, the (supposed) French view – associated with George Sand, Honoré de Balzac, and Gustave Flaubert – that modern art should delve into selfishness, cruelty, lust, and vice. She concedes that some immoral subjects can be suitable for art if they are depicted in aesthetically pleasing ways (AM, pp. 167–68). But there are limits to this, and these limits are not moral but aesthetic. 'Extreme and exclusive bodily pains and pleasures' naturally arouse aversion and disgust (AM, p. 182). What is disgusting can never be aesthetically pleasing; it always arouses displeasure, like clashing colours or dissonant chords, and as such is ugly. Indecency is therefore inadmissible in art – but on aesthetic, not moral, grounds. Although we might see this as disappointing back-peddalling, Dilke is at least attempting to condemn immoral art without falling back upon aesthetic moralism.

Overall, Dilke has defended aestheticism forcefully. Yet the historicist views that initially motivated her aestheticism have been left largely behind. She no longer maintains that the best art distils its age and embodies the era's historical tendencies in ideal types. Now she rejects all appeal to ideal types – whether universal or historical ones – and holds that the best art pursues the purely artistic purpose of being beautiful, where beauty depends on the artwork's sensory qualities.

To be fair, Dilke still endeavours to combine aestheticism and historicism by claiming that art undergoes a progressive historical separation from other factors such as religion and morality. But this constitutes progress because art is always intrinsically separate from such factors – its purpose *qua* art is just to be beautiful – so that art becomes better the more that intrinsic separateness is realized historically. In contrast, Dilke's earlier historicist view was that art is never intrinsically separate from society or history but is only ever an expression of historical forces, where art is better the more overtly it channels these forces. On that view, medieval religious art qualifies as good because it channels the dominant religious ethos, and modern secular art qualifies as good because it expresses the modern separation of art from religion – because it *reflects* modern causal forces, not because it has *escaped* all extraneous influences.

IV. AESTHETICISM AND HISTORICISM IN TENSION

Dilke was not willing to abandon her earlier historicism, however. Its tension with her aestheticism broke out in her next essays. These essays were in the newly established liberal periodical *The Academy: A Monthly Record of Literature, Learning, Science, and Art*, for which she began reviewing in 1870. The journal had a policy of signature, which became more popular in British periodicals from the late 1860s onwards. But Dilke continued to mask her gender, signing her contributions ‘E. F. S. Pattison’.

In September 1870 she harshly reviewed the *Lectures on Art* by her erstwhile mentor John Ruskin. Though he is a perceptive observer of colour and line, his ‘moralizing zeal’ has led him into the ‘unsafe and dangerous ground’ of claiming that great art must either enforce religion, perfect our ethical state, or do us material service.²⁴ She protests:

Art itself is neither religious, nor irreligious; moral, nor immoral; useful, nor useless; if she is interpreted in any one of these senses by the beholder, is she to bear the blame? Not one of these qualities are essential to fine art, and as to perfecting the ethical state, that by means of art comes to pass, not by ‘direction of purpose’, but by her constant presence indirectly refining our perceptions.²⁵

Reiterating her arguments from ‘Art and Morality’, she affirms against Ruskin that there is no fixed correlation between good art and a just society: refined art and social corruption can go together, as in sixteenth-century Paris. Nor does artistic genius have to correlate with an artist having a morally good character.

But now consider Dilke’s surprisingly caustic review of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* by her fellow aestheticist and Renaissance enthusiast Pater. Writing anonymously in the *Westminster Review*, she charges:

The historical element is [...] wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book.

[...]

Instead of approaching his subject, whether in Art or Literature, by the true scientific method, through the life of the time of which it was an outcome, Mr Pater prefers in each instance to detach it wholly from its surroundings, to suspend it isolated before him, as if it were indeed a kind of air-plant independent of the ordinary sources of nourishment.²⁶

24 E. F. S. Pattison [Emilia Dilke], ‘General Literature and Art’, *Academy*, 10 September 1870, 305. My aim is not to evaluate Dilke’s critiques of Ruskin or Pater but to explain how they factored into her own philosophical development. Nonetheless, we should note that Ruskin did not reduce aesthetics to morality as unequivocally as Dilke makes out. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: Smith, 1849), for instance, he put forward a complex of aesthetic values – the seven ‘lamps’ of the title.

25 Dilke, ‘General Literature and Art’, 305.

26 [Emilia Dilke], ‘Art’, *Westminster Review* 43 (1873): 639, 640.

Consequently Pater misses the meaning of the art objects being studied. Dilke concedes that he is sensitive to aesthetic qualities and nuances (like Ruskin), yet Pater's studies are 'not history, nor are they [...] to be relied on for accurate statement of [...] matters of fact'.²⁷

This is a sudden revival of Dilke's earlier historicism. The right approach to art, she is saying *pace* Pater, is to start with observed facts regarding the artwork's context and connect these into the *ensemble* of conditions shaping the work. By locating artworks as causal outcomes of these wholes, we explain the works and thereby access their meanings. Causal explanation is the prerequisite of successful interpretation.

But this revived historicism pulls against Dilke's aestheticism. It conflicts with her view in 'Art and Morality' that the aesthetic qualities of artworks have a sensory basis and so can be appreciated independently of any historical explanations. It also conflicts with her critique of Ruskin, in which she claimed that art's aesthetic qualities do not correlate with its social conditions. By implication, those qualities have some independence of social conditions – precisely what Dilke now denies apropos of Pater. After all, if an artwork is the product of its time then *prima facie* one *would* expect social and ethical conditions to correlate with and be manifest in the qualities of artworks.²⁸ And Dilke later concedes that such correlations hold: 'All fertile movements [...] bear in their breasts the seed of renewed ethical impulse. The Renaissance is no exception; it had not only its artists, [...] it showed, like all great moments, the signs of spiritual life.'²⁹

In fact, between her essays on Ruskin and Pater, Dilke develops the seeds of a way of resolving the aestheticism/historicism tension, in an 1872 *Academy* review of a collection of essays on modern art by Hermann Grimm. The aesthetic relation to an artwork, she says here, is to its form; the poetic or literary relation is to its content. As regards the latter, only the best artworks have a universal content: they 'develop some simple strain of passion, eternal in human nature, which, as such, speaks straight to the heart of all time in spite of unaccustomed mode of manifestation'.³⁰ We can all relate to such works directly and immediately, responding to their universal human interest across differences of time and place. However, most works have only a time-bounded interest and appeal; a work of this kind

cannot have the full significance which attached to it in its own place and day. [...] It is impossible for us to thrill with the emotions which quickened the pulse of past life. [...] The crowning beauty of that which is handed down to us from the Past is fled. The surroundings are gone, the people are no more who girt about the master and his work – that work in which he shadowed forth his secret, which was one and the same as the secret of his people and his day.³¹

We must therefore mentally reconstruct the conditions surrounding these works to appreciate their significance. The meaning is not immediately accessible; disinterring it requires explanatory and historical work.

²⁷ Ibid., 640.

²⁸ Israel points out this tension as well (*Names and Stories*, 254).

²⁹ Dilke, *Renaissance of Art in France*, 29.

³⁰ E. F. S. Pattison [Emilia Dilke], 'Grimm's Select Essays', *Academy*, 1 April 1872, 124.

³¹ Ibid.

So where there is temporal or contextual distance between artwork and observer, and where the work is one of the large majority of lesser-quality artworks, historical reconstruction is necessary to fill in its content and understand it. This is not so with the best works, which still arise in historical circumstances, but transcend them and embody a content with universal appeal. Moreover, historical explanation is only ever needed to reconstruct content, not form; the properly aesthetic qualities of artworks are formal and can be directly apprehended with the senses and appreciated independently of history.

V. THE USES OF PICTURES

Dilke refines these distinctions in her last major essay on aesthetics, 'The Use of Looking at Pictures'. 'Matter-of-fact people sometimes ask what good is to be got by looking at pictures', she begins, mimetically adopting a matter-of-fact tone herself.³² Looking at pictures has many uses, she replies, including moral, scientific, and practical ones. But the principal uses are aesthetic. Looking at pictures is good aesthetically, in that it gratifies and educates our sensitivity to aesthetic qualities, principally beauty. 'The first thing, then, that a picture does for us is that it makes us see a certain good thing [that is, beauty], which without it we should see either not at all, or less wisely and less well' (ULP, p. 415). Beauty – subdivided into that of human beings, landscapes, and animals – is more readily seen in stationary pictures than in real life, where it may be hard to access, fleeting, defective, or mixed up with other features. By helping us to see beauty, pictures train our senses and capacity to see beauty in real life too.

It is the beauty which a seeing eye can trace in beast, bird, flower, and thing, that a picture shows us, and shows us better than anything else can show us. To interpret therefore this beauty is the main end of the art of painting, and the right enjoyment of this beauty is the main end of the act of picture-seeing. Such enjoyment is not the main good of life, but it is the good which we go to a picture to get. We call it the *aesthetic* good as contrasted with the moral or scientific or utilitarian good to be got from things. (ULP, p. 416)

'Now, what do we mean when we talk of beauty?' Dilke asks. It is a composite quality and its components are:

1. visible qualities of brightness and harmony of colour;
2. gracefulness of form (constituted by economy of means to end);
3. symmetry of parts;
4. marks of health, goodness, and intelligence.

'It will be clear from this that the conception of beauty is [...] of singular complexity, and that in the use of the term there is great danger of equivocation.' To disambiguate it, Dilke claims that landscapes can only ever be beautiful in respect (1); animals in (1), (2), and (3); and human beings in all four respects. A human form that satisfies all four components is perfectly beautiful, crossing over the 'line of ideal beauty'. A human form that satisfies only most of (1) to (4) is merely beautiful, passing the 'mean line

32 [Emilia Dilke], 'The Use of Looking at Pictures', *Westminster Review* 44 (1873): 415. Hereafter: ULP.

of beauty'. People whose beauty crosses at least the mean line will look pleasing to everyone – not only to some people, depending on contingent associations and personal feelings, but universally, 'satisfy[ing] the aesthetic sense of mankind'. As before, then, Dilke thinks that humanity has a natural propensity to take pleasure in certain qualities – those enumerated under (1) to (4) – which count as beautiful because they please us (ULP, p. 417).

So pictures' primary use is to present us with beauty. But things depicted can only pass the mean line of beauty if they are in repose, exhibiting 'a certain statuesque immobility'. This is because pictures should present beauty more clearly than in real life, isolated from contingent fluctuations. Thus to be beautiful pictures must also be *picturesque*, defined by statuesque immobility. The picturesque is aesthetically pleasing in itself (ULP, pp. 417–18). Thus, a second aesthetic purpose of pictures is to present us with, and gratify our sense for, the picturesque.

However, Dilke admits, many modern painters, especially the Dutch, depict people who fall short of the mean line of beauty or, as in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, portray dramatic, agitated scenes that fall short of being picturesque. 'We thus arrive at the large class of pictures which violate one or both of the aesthetic canons proposed, and we ask what good can be got by looking at them?' (ULP, p. 418) They may instead present us with *interesting* scenes and people, such as characters influenced by strong and conflicting motives. Such pictures have 'poetical value' – they reveal the human interest in subjects who are not beautiful and may even be ugly, arousing our sympathy for these individuals. The poetic is, for Dilke, only partly aesthetic. On the one hand, pictures that are merely poetic and not also beautiful or picturesque 'violate the aesthetic canons'; on the other hand, they show us 'the soul of beauty that may exist in things ugly'. All told, it seems that a work that has (only) poetic value has a degree of aesthetic value but less than one that is beautiful and/or picturesque (ULP, p. 419).

Yet most poetically interesting pictures have interest only for people of the same period as the pictures. For example, devotional pictures of saints held great poetic (sympathetic) interest for people in a religious age but retain little live interest today. This leads Dilke to draw a further distinction: the greatest poetic pictures have universal interest, depicting individuals who appeal to everyone's sympathies at all times. But most poetic pictures fall short of this and so lose their poetic interest over time. They retain a different use: the psychological and historical value of showing us how people in other times and places thought and felt. This is '*indirect*' rather than direct poetic value. In short, as times change, most poetic artworks migrate from having direct poetic use to having merely historical use. 'Hence the historical value of a work of art in some sort a value for all time and almost all minds, while its poetical value varies directly with its absolute or relative distance from the age which contemplates it' (ULP, p. 419). Is historical value a grade of aesthetic value? On the one hand, Dilke equates it with indirect poetic value, where poetic value is a (diminished) grade of aesthetic value, which suggests that historical value is a still more diminished grade of aesthetic value. On the other hand, Dilke says, over time the poetic value of most works becomes increasingly indirect until it evaporates altogether. Historical value, then, is such a low grade of aesthetic value that it marks the line where the value ceases to be aesthetic at all.

Having outlined these central 'uses' of pictures – (1) to be beautiful, (2) to be picturesque, (3) to hold (universal or direct) poetic interest, and (4) to have historical

interest – Dilke briefly canvasses some subordinate uses: (5) illustrative, (6) comic, (7) didactic or utilitarian (for example, scientific or commercial illustrations), and finally (8) mere displays of technical skill – the last being no use at all but worthless. Aside from (8), then, every picture ‘ought to offer us one of these things’ from (1) through (7) (ULP, p. 419).

Dilke thus categorizes the different ‘uses’ – valuable qualities and effects – of pictures and by extension artworks generally. Interestingly, she sees aesthetic kinds of value as being only some of the kinds of value art can have for us. That said, she ranks the aesthetic kinds most highly: the most valuable quality an artwork can have is beauty, followed by picturesqueness, then poetic interest, historical interest, and so on. These higher-value qualities are aesthetic, to diminishing degrees; historical value marks the point where the value passes out of being aesthetic.

Dilke remains an aestheticist: merely didactic works come low in her scale of value and the best works are the ones whose value is most aesthetic. She also remains an empiricist: beauty is a compound quality, composed from several sensory sources. But is Dilke still a historicist? In the 1860s she thought that the ideal artwork channels its time; now the ideal artwork transcends its time by possessing either aesthetic qualities that please universally or universal human interest. The more an artwork’s value is aesthetic, the more it stands out from history; the more historically bound it is, the more its value falls short of being aesthetic.

Yet Dilke remains a historicist in other respects. First, she believes that all artworks are products of their historical locations, so that even works that fall short aesthetically retain historical interest. Historicity is, as she says, a constant (ULP, p. 419). Second, most artworks have merely historical value, and must be located and explained historically so that we can sympathetically understand the thoughts and feelings they express. Historical explanation is the right approach for most artworks. Third, explaining artworks historically means looking empirically at their social, political, cultural, and geographical surroundings and tracing how these causal factors produced and shaped the artworks.

Thus Dilke found a way to combine aestheticism and historicism – by bifurcating them. The artworks with most aesthetic value transcend history and do so just insofar as they have aesthetic value. Conversely the artworks that require historical explanation have less or no aesthetic value; their value instead resides in their historical interest, such that they must be explained and understood historically.

VI. HISTORY AND AESTHETICS PART COMPANY

Having divided aesthetics from history, why did Dilke then gravitate to the historical side and concentrate on art-historical studies? Charles Dilke suggested that this was because Mark Pattison insisted she become a historical specialist, against her own aspirations to do large-scale philosophy of art.³³ Emilia Dilke portrayed matters differently, telling her niece that she resolved to ‘stick to [...] art generally, but made [her]self acquainted with philosophy as far as *bearing on* [her] “subject”’. ‘Some day I will show you my list of articles and work and explain how it all developed’, she

33 Charles Dilke, ‘Memoir’, 41.

added,³⁴ conveying that her art-historical turn was driven by her own theoretical commitments – indeed, in part, her *anti*-theoretical commitments.

Scepticism about theory was an abiding refrain in Dilke's thought. She repeatedly complained that speculation and excessive systematization compromise our ability both to observe facts and to appreciate artworks' sensory qualities (see, for example, AM, p. 149). For Dilke, we do not need theory to appreciate the beautiful, because it is built from sensory, perceptible qualities to which we are organically responsive. Nor do we need theory to appreciate the timeless human interest in great works. The more aesthetic value an artwork has, the less we need theory to appreciate it.

Accordingly Dilke saw no need to write books on artworks *qua* aesthetic objects. Where research and explanation were needed was for that majority of artworks that possess only historical interest. There, Dilke judged that she could perform useful service. She says so to open and motivate her *Renaissance of Art in France*:

The art of the French Renaissance depends for its charm on [the] motive by which it is animated. It is [...] the expression [...] of a period when the life of the few had become exceedingly rich and complex. It cannot, therefore, be appreciated by 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. Art is the speech of the people only its most abstract forms. When it presents, for example, a type of physical beauty unaffected by any moral agent – as in the Antinous – or when it renders a physical ideal in which is embodied a conception of moral beauty – as in the Niobe, or the Sistine Madonna, [...] – art is universally intelligible. It is a tongue which knows no accent. [...] The work of the French Renaissance scarcely, however, affords any instance of this [...]; but it is, on the other hand, rich in local colour, and contains [...] an abundant source of interest for those who read it in the signs of the time at which it was produced.³⁵

In other words, where art realizes sensory qualities of beauty or presents universal human interest, it transcends history, and everyone can relate to this kind of art immediately. But most art does not achieve this and remains historically bound, as with French Renaissance art. To appreciate such art, we need historical knowledge. Given Dilke's antecedent positivism and empiricism, that means empirical knowledge about the 'conditions under which [the art] was produced'. The correct explanatory route is from facts to meanings, not vice versa.

Dilke's art history books are not devoid of aesthetic insights, but the overarching project is to provide historical explanation through detailed, patient, documentary accounting of causal forces and sources. The aesthetic elements supplement the history. Dilke's transition from aesthetics to art history was thereby complete. She made that transition on philosophical grounds – but ironically her philosophical standpoint led her to abandon philosophy for art history.

Although Dilke concluded that she must leave aesthetics behind, we need not follow her, for her aesthetic theorizing retains interest in its own right. It includes a sustained

34 Letter from Dilke to Gertrude Tuckwell, n. d., MS Pattison 140, Pattison Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

35 Dilke, *Renaissance of Art in France*, 1–2.

defence of the aestheticist thesis that art's purpose is to be beautiful; an original attempt to combine historicism and aestheticism; an empiricist and sensualist account of beauty; a claim that art matures the more it separates from religion and morality and focuses on the body, not the spirit; and an original taxonomy of the 'uses' of pictures, distinguishing between aesthetic, poetic-literary, and historical value. On all these counts, Dilke deserves to be recognized as a significant female contributor to the history of aesthetics.

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