

October 01, 2006

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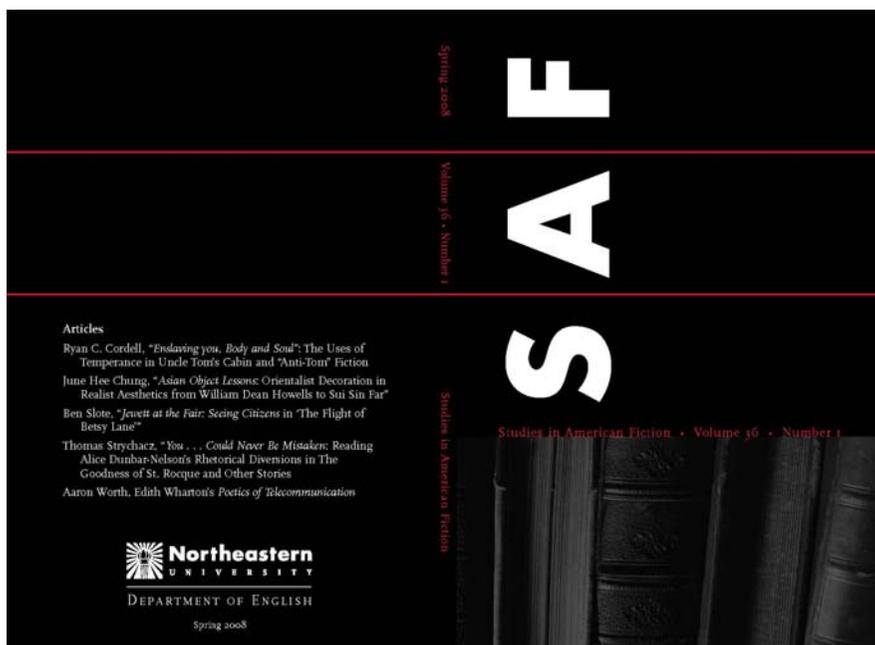
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### Recommended Citation

Gaskill, Nicholas M. "The light which, showing the way, forbids it': reconstructing aesthetics in *The Awakening*." *Studies in American Fiction* 34.2 (2006): 161-188. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10016582>

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*Studies in American Fiction* is a journal of articles and reviews on the prose fiction of the United States. Founded by James Nagel and later edited by Mary Loeffelholz, SAF was published by the Department of English, Northeastern University, from 1973 through 2008. *Studies in American Fiction* is indexed in the *MLA Bibliography* and the *American Humanities Index*.

## Studies in American Fiction

Volume 34

Autumn 2006

Number 2

Nicholas M. Gaskill, *"The Light Which, Showing the Way, Forbids It":  
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ISSN 0091-8083

**“THE LIGHT WHICH, SHOWING THE WAY,  
FORBIDS IT”:  
RECONSTRUCTING AESTHETICS IN *THE AWAKENING***

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Whether in the “moving” force of a Mozart opera or in the promise of a “spine-tingling” experience on the back of a paperback novel, we tend to couch our descriptions of aesthetic experience in physical terms. Sometimes, though, theoretical and critical discourse loses sight of the experiential force bound in these colloquial phrases, and, as a result, our aesthetic theories develop accounts of art detached from corporeal sensation. Recently, a number of critics have tried to correct this oversight, combining a basic appreciation for the intensity of art that comes with any serious phenomenological or radical empirical investigation with an attention to the institutional forces that, as a number of cultural materialist critiques have shown, shape both the grounds for and the perception of aesthetic experience. These thinkers have attempted to reinstate the aesthetic as a subject for critical and literary inquiry, positing in the subjective states made possible through engagements with art a source of social change through “post-identity or non-normative forms of collectivism.”<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilmore captures the project of these material aestheticists succinctly, suggesting that in returning to the aesthetic, critics must “[pay] particular attention to the confluence of political, economic, and cultural forces that enable certain manifestations of an experience imagined to transcend, suspend, or displace those very forces.”<sup>2</sup>

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* provides an exemplary case for working out aesthetic theories rooted in corporeal experience and articulated through and within a cultural context. Chopin’s sensitive prose expresses both the intense moment of reverie and the co-opting forces that contain such experiences by “making sense” of them. In this essay, I will draw from the work of a number of theorists who have investigated the subject of aesthetics, including Pierre Bourdieu, John Dewey, and Charles Altieri, to demonstrate the way in which Chopin dramatizes the complex interaction between the particular aesthetic experience and the nineteenth-century ideological structures that determined acceptable articulations of “art.” In examining these

issues, I treat cultural forces and individual, material experience not as two isolated or incommensurate explanations for art but rather as mutually constituting elements involved in the production and perception of aesthetic experiences. This essay challenges literary criticism to return to the aesthetic not as a set of formal properties guiding an encounter with an ideal realm but as a site for the phenomenological exploration of the dynamic relationship between art, affect, and cultural constructions.

I begin by analyzing Chopin's delineation of a cultural mindset—rendered especially visible in late nineteenth-century America and still central to cultural critiques of the aesthetic—that collapses art into bourgeois performances of class status. After charting this “economy of art,” I turn to the distinctions Chopin draws between artists and aesthetic experience and, using Dewey, suggest the challenges these differences pose to ideological accounts of art. I then look at how Chopin uses the particulars of Edna's aesthetic experience, characterized by immediacy, intensity, and corporeal pleasure, to posit a “reconstructive” aesthetic that pertains not only to art but also to the desires, projects, and subjectivities made available through aesthetic experience. Finally, I move from the action of the text to the experience of reading the novel, showing how Chopin creates a readership bound by affective solidarity and enabled, through the imaginative project of relating to Edna without fully subscribing to her position, to re-envision cultural structures. The end of the essay extends the implications of this argument beyond Chopin's novel to the realm of culturally-oriented literary criticism, offering an alternative to ideological critiques of the aesthetic and to theory too limited by cognitive biases.

### **An Economy of Art**

To begin, a statuette and a spoon. The statuette sits in the Pontellier residence on Esplanade Street, and the spoon serves as an illustration in Thorstein Veblen's declamation against American capitalism, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*: each offers a late nineteenth-century critique of aesthetic “taste” as a thinly-veiled performance of class status. First, in introducing the Pontelliers' New Orleans home, Chopin emphasizes Léonce's delight in surveying its “rich and tasteful” furnishings; she explains that Mr. Pontellier “derived genuine pleasure from contemplating a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain—no matter what—after he had bought it.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than locating the significance

of the statuette—or of art more generally—in its “artistic” merit or in the aesthetic satisfaction it affords, Léonce, we are told, “valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his” (578).

In 1899, the same year as the publication of *The Awakening*, Thorstein Veblen theorized the “conspicuous consumption” of the “leisure class” in a relentless indictment of aristocratic behaviors and preferences. To illustrate his argument that conceptions of the beautiful derive from cultural preferences for the “conspicuously wasteful,” he asks his reader to consider two spoons, one of “hand-wrought silver” and the other “machine-made.” He explains that the former spoon gains a superior status by virtue of its being “a less effective contrivance for its ostensible purpose than the latter,” and he predicts that if “close inspection should show that the supposed hand-wrought spoon were in reality only a very clever imitation,” then the aesthetic enjoyment it affords “would immediately decline by some eighty or ninety per cent.” In short, the hand-made spoon becomes “beautiful” insofar as it is ill-suited to employment and inasmuch as, in being owned, it suggests the leisurely life of the owner. Veblen concludes his “case of the spoons” with language akin to that of Chopin’s description of Léonce and his statuette: “The superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful products is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty.”<sup>4</sup>

Léonce’s statuette and Veblen’s spoon each constitute an economic critique of aesthetic tastes that should be understood in the context of a culture increasingly conceiving of itself as striated into separate spheres, “high” and “low.” As demonstrated by scholars such as Lawrence W. Levine, Paul DiMaggio, and John Kasson, the decades following the Civil War saw the emergence of elite cultural institutions and the accompanying codes of conduct that worked to create the ordered space of “Culture” as distinct from the chaotic and heterogeneous mix of *fin-de-siècle* America.<sup>5</sup> Art museums, symphony orchestras, and opera houses all cast themselves as temples of high art that required money of those who would gain entrance and a “disciplined passivity” of those who remained.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, Kasson explains that the general trend of late-nineteenth century cultural developments “marked a move toward a more segmented, privatized society in which divisions of ‘taste’ and deportment masked and reinforced divisions of class.”<sup>7</sup> Though recent studies have reminded us that the boundaries of cultural spheres are never impermeable, the perception that such barriers existed and held exclusionary power clearly influenced commentators of the period and promoted the idea

that “art”—as distinguished from popular entertainment—belonged only to the purview of the upper classes.<sup>8</sup>

Both the institutional spaces and practices explored by the above scholars and the behaviors mocked by Veblen comprise part of the “structured” and “structuring” cultural logic that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms “habitus.”<sup>9</sup> In tracing the way that “taste” became a tool for distinguishing between, and hierarchizing, social classes, Bourdieu, in *Distinction* (1984) and *The Rules of Art* (1995), investigates the social relations and economic interests underlying idealist accounts of art. He analyzes the ways in which the naturalized assumptions and practices surrounding such versions of art affect interior life in the form of an “aesthetic disposition.” Updating Veblen, Bourdieu contrasts the “naïve exhibitionism of ‘conspicuous consumption’” with the more sophisticated distinguishing technology of “the pure gaze, . . . which sets the aesthete apart from the common herd by a radical difference which seems to be inscribed in ‘persons.’” “High culture” defines itself against the “lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment[s]” of “popular culture” by employing a “pure” or “aesthetic gaze” that enacts, more subtly than Veblen’s conspicuous consumption, a distance from economic necessity. Proficiency in the “appropriate” modes of interaction with “legitimate” cultural artifacts thus becomes a marker of class status, a form of “symbolic” or “cultural capital.” Because of the biases, distinctions, and sublimations involved in bourgeois taste, Bourdieu concludes that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social difference.”<sup>10</sup>

In *The Awakening*, Chopin maps the beliefs and practices that relegate art to an ethereal realm separate from material experience as a way of reifying socio-economic distinctions. In particular, she uses the conspicuous consumption of culture evidenced in Léonce Pontellier, Adèle Ratignolle, and Edna Pontellier to articulate an “economy of art,” understood as the dispositions, behaviors, and assumptions that define art in terms of class status. Moreover, her depiction of intellectuals, the prime subjects of the logic of this economy, both critiques the detachment and reserve that characterizes the aesthetic disposition and clarifies the novel’s rejection of the particular historic conception of art addressed by Veblen and Bourdieu.

When Edna’s father visits New Orleans, he asks Léonce Pontellier to assist him in purchasing a wedding present for his daughter Janet; the narration then extends the Colonel’s deference to a general statement about Léonce: “every one immediately connected with him al-

ways deferred to his taste in such matters" (598). Throughout the text, Chopin positions Léonce as one able to use the connections between aesthetic "taste" and matters of exchange to his advantage. Just as his statuette gains value by being owned, so too does his entire house broadcast his family's leisure class status: in addition to "[t]he softest carpets and rugs [that] covered the floors" and the "rich and tasteful draperies [that] hung at doors and windows," the house boasts "paintings, selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls" (578). Mingling the language of luxury, abundance, and taste, Chopin's description shows the relationship between economic and cultural capital that John Dewey observes in the behaviors of the *nouveau riche* gentleman, who "amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*" as "evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture" just as "his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world."<sup>11</sup> Léonce's adept handling of these symbolic affiliations manifests itself in the "sumptuous alterations" he contracts to prevent Edna's move to the pigeon house from compromising his "financial integrity" (629).

Even music, the privileged art medium in Chopin's text, functions according to the economy of art when made into an occasion for the performance of taste.<sup>12</sup> For instance, when planning for her extravagant dinner party, Edna includes music as one signifier among many for the lavishness of the event: "crystal, silver and gold . . . flowers, music, and champagne to swim in" (619). The "mandolins"—sufficiently removed to be an agreeable accompaniment—perform the same signifying function as the expensive china; each contributes to the "grand" nature of the party (623, 620). Likewise, Mr. and Mrs. Ratignolle regard music both as "a means of brightening the home and making it attractive," and, as revealed by Adèle's interest in maintaining her playing "on account of the children," as a way of investing the next generation with the cultural and educational resources needed to ensure the preservation of the family's class status (547). To these ends, the Ratignolles use their home as the site of *soirées musicales*, public performances of taste to which "it was considered a privilege to be invited" (583).

Léonce's excuse to Mme. Ratignolle for not attending one of these *soirées*, an event he deems "*bourgeois*," clarifies the extent to which music as "high art" in the novel retains the traces of ideological attempts to maintain class hierarchies through "culture." Always adroit in social situations, Léonce excuses himself by flattering Adèle's sense of class distinction, telling her that "the music dispensed at her *soirées* was too 'heavy,' too far beyond his untrained comprehension" (600). Chopin charges Léonce's pretext with subtle critique, first by pinpoint-

ing both the passive nature of the audience and the medicinal character of the music with the verb “dispensed” and second by specifying the need for “training.” Thus, she indicates a particular temperament fostered by the economy of art, one demanding familiarity with established educational and cultural conventions and characterized by passivity and detachment. Using Bourdieu’s terms, we might now understand these as the “pure gaze” and the “aesthetic disposition,” each of which “presupposes the distance from the world . . . which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, understanding and recognizing “legitimate” works of art involves capacities characteristic of bourgeois class interests that ignore material and economic realities.

Chopin captures the disposition of cold reserve that characterizes acceptable “high” class appreciation of art in her depiction of the “intellectuals,” Mrs. and Miss Highcamp, whose very surname signifies high culture. Even in the midst of a “contagion of excitement” at the horse races, Mrs. Highcamp maintains the “unaffected” and “indifferent” demeanor that characterizes her actions each time she appears in the text. Similarly, her daughter, first introduced in terms of her absence from the novel’s action due to a “Dante reading,” embodies the reserve of the aesthetic disposition. When addressed by her father, Miss Highcamp, rather than speaking, “held a geranium leaf up to her nose and said nothing, but looked knowing and noncommittal” (607). She makes of herself an artistic tableaux, something to be received and appreciated rather than engaged, and links “knowing” with a lack of commitment to the world. Chopin’s description here captures the codification of a distinction between the ideal realm of art and material existence in aesthetic theory that Bourdieu later attacks in his claim that the aristocracy of culture has presented “[d]etachment, disinterestedness, [and] indifference” as its values so frequently that “one ends up forgetting that they really mean disinvestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously.”<sup>14</sup> No wonder, then, that when Miss Highcamp plays the piano, she “apprehend[s] all of the composer’s coldness and none of his poetry,” all of the class signification and none of the aesthetic power (607).

*Soirées*, statuettes, and spoons: throughout the novel, Chopin sketches the upper-class behaviors that push art into a class-determined sphere, naturalized through an institutionalized “tradition.” Viewed within the context of Veblen’s explicit critique, nuanced and updated by Bourdieu’s analysis, *The Awakening* foregrounds a particular cultural conception of art framed by the practices that initi-

ated and sustained it. The text exposes an economy of art that distinguishes “high” and “low” culture and, in the process, separates art from life, the artist from the entertainer, the intelligent audience from the bawdy crowd, and, effectively, the thinking mind from the feeling body.<sup>15</sup> Such divisions reduce aesthetic experience to a signifier of economic display, an imitation bust of Beethoven—appropriately “covered with a hood of dust”—placed on the mantle, proving one’s status as “cultured” (612).

### Artists and Experience

Though Chopin’s contempt for a cultural conception of art that obscures the material particularities of aesthetic experience relates to the indictments levied by Veblen and Bourdieu, the author of *The Awakening*, a book abundant in poetic force, could not dismiss the aesthetic in the wholesale fashion of these critics. Instead, she challenges us to develop an account of art based not on the detachment of the Highcamps or on Léonce’s conspicuous consumption but on the sensuous rapture stimulated in Edna by Mlle. Reisz’s music. Chopin’s treatment of Reisz precludes us, however, from locating the force of Edna’s aesthetic experience solely in the person of the pianist. Such an attribution would constitute an extension of the reifying logic of the economy of art that divides an event into a concrete product and an autonomous subject, precisely the itemizing impulse Chopin identifies as an obstacle to experiential theories of art.

Artists, Chopin makes plain, are by no means outside the reach of market forces.<sup>16</sup> Edna, for instance, characterizes her painterly pursuits in terms of economic gain, and at the height of her artistic activity sees “no one but a picture dealer,” who “negotiated with her for some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December” (641). On the other hand, Mlle. Reisz deals in gifts of a different sort: the “absolute gifts” of the artist, “which have not been acquired by one’s own effort” (594). By rendering specific forms of cultural knowledge as endowments bestowed upon an innately honored class, she participates in the mystification of the aesthetic disposition and its relation to distinguishing taste. However, critics have preferred to locate in Reisz a subversive presence, one who receives the author’s coy blessing in the composer she chooses to play (Frédéric Chopin) and the passion her playing produces in Edna.<sup>17</sup> Such readings, while they identify the affective impact Reisz’s music has on Edna, conflate the art *event* and the artist figure in ways that occlude

both Chopin's negative portrayal of the pianist and the unconventional aesthetic the novel develops.

Chopin's descriptions of Reisz emphasize the novel's distinction between art and the artist, the aesthetic experience and the "disagreeable little woman" (548). For example, the first scene in Reisz's New Orleans apartment contrasts the smooth, soft music with the disfigured body of the musician:

[Reisz] sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu. (594)

Similar descriptions of Reisz as deformed, "awkward," and "strikingly homely" follow her throughout the novel (548, 592). Her laugh "consist[s] of a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body," and during the second apartment scene she has a "stiff neck" that "compel[s] her to hold her head on one side" and gives her a "twisted face" (592, 612, 615). Understood within the context of a novel that values the corporeal experience of art, the fine textures of flesh, and the "sensuous embrace" of the sea, such characterizations compose a rather damning portrait of the pianist that precludes her from acting as a mouthpiece for Chopin's beliefs about art.<sup>18</sup> While Edna experiences the music in Reisz's apartment as warm and soft, the musician herself is dried up and "weazened," small and contorted (548).

Edna's thoughts and attitudes toward Reisz contribute to the novel's portrayal of the artist as an unlikable and antagonistic, even if powerful, character. During the final scene on Grand Isle, "Edna looked down at Mademoiselle Reisz," who had been pestering her about Robert's departure, "and wondered how she could have listened to her venom so long." She goes swimming simply to get away from the pianist and stays in the water for "a long time . . . half hoping that Mademoiselle Reisz would not wait for her" (577). Once back in New Orleans, Reisz withholds or deploys the affective energy made available in her music to manipulate Edna's feelings. She refuses to accommodate Edna's request to play for her father, and she focuses the complex and vague aesthetic emotions stirred in Edna into a monolithic and socially-intelligible love for Robert through the combination of her music, Robert's letters, and her gloss: "he loves you, poor fool" (614). Even in a passage often cited for the "liberating" power it posits in Reisz, Chopin dissociates the pianist and her music: "It was then, *in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her,*

that [Reisz], by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (611, emphasis mine). The "temperament," or "personality," of the artist, of which Reisz makes so much, has little to do with Edna's experience of the music, and Edna's final and lasting impression of the pianist, as captured in the final page of the novel, is of her contorted laugh and taunting sneer.

The event-based aesthetic demanded by Chopin's novel finds theoretical articulation in John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). Rejecting the "museum conception" of art, in which viewers passively appreciate a "sacralized" art object fashioned by a solitary "genius," Dewey situates the aesthetic as part of the interactive project of "doing and undergoing" taken up by a sensuous, striving, apprehending ("fully alive") organism within a stimulating environment (24). Within an aesthetic experience, rhythmic adjustments of relations conduct the unified efforts (corporeal, intellectual, affective) of the entire "live creature" towards the end of enlivening the present moment, which, in turn, assumes a consummatory whole permeated through with a distinctive quality. Dewey affirms the importance of the body and of affect in his treatment of art and revives a tendency in mid-nineteenth-century American critical discourse to treat the aesthetic as, in Paul Gilmore's words, "a certain kind of experience of or attitude toward the world" rather than as a set of formal requirements for the attainment of beauty.<sup>19</sup> Reinstated in Dewey's terms as "the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" rather than as the transcendent encounter with an ideal realm, the aesthetic receives a materialist treatment that detaches it from "legitimate" art objects and reveals the instrumental role it plays in our pursuits and projects (*Art as Experience*, 53).

Dewey directs the polemical element in his thought towards aesthetic theories based on distance, reserve, and contemplation, that is, towards the characteristics of the particular historical set of conceptions and practices explored above as the economy of art. In this way, he joins Veblen and Bourdieu in registering the "extensive and subtly pervasive" impact economic structures—and "the institutions and habits of life" associated with them—have on our ideas about art (*Art as Experience*, 11, 16). Yet rather than assume that the characteristics attributed to a nineteenth-century bourgeois understanding of culture exhaust the whole of aesthetics, Dewey, like Chopin, reconceives the terms of aesthetic theory, creating a space for theory outside of the dispositions and high/low separations Bourdieu assumes pervade all matters of art.<sup>20</sup> He calls for a reconstruction in aesthetics, which, like his proposed "reconstruction in philosophy," orients inquiry away

from futile searches for definitive answers to speculative questions and towards the enrichment of experience.<sup>21</sup> Thus, his approach avoids absolute claims for when or where or in response to what aesthetic experience can occur and focuses instead on the possibilities the aesthetic makes available for experience more generally.<sup>22</sup> Through the perspective provided by this method, we might avoid both overreaching claims about the ideological function of art and naïve conclusions about its transcendent power as we investigate the texture of aesthetic experience alongside the cultural conditions of its articulation and perception.

### A Reconstructive Aesthetic

Ideological readings of art, Paul Gilmore explains, “have tended, paradoxically, to eschew the material experience that aesthetic theories attempt to understand.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Adèle’s domestic tunes, Léonce’s statuette, and Reisz’s artistic “gifts” disregard the force of Edna’s particular aesthetic experiences in favor of the economic and cultural advantages of “taste.” However, Chopin’s presentation of her protagonist’s intense, bodily, and moving encounters with art, as captured in Edna’s experiences on August twenty-eighth, provide the groundwork for a *reconstructive* aesthetic, one that counters the dispositions of the economy of art and that prompts us to examine not only the experiences themselves but also the potentialities, values, and subjectivities they make possible.<sup>24</sup>

In the narrative events of August twenty-eighth, Chopin pairs Edna’s first intense experience of music with the “sweeping stroke[s]” of her initial swim in the novel’s clearest articulation of the “full-bodied” aesthetic experience not restricted to encounters with high art (551).<sup>25</sup> Her prose, mindful of the movements of Edna’s affective life, portrays the aesthetic experience not as the aloof posturing assumed by “high” culture but as a fully engaged process of “doing and undergoing” that combines attentive production with absorbed engagement. Though Edna remains in her chair during Reisz’s performance, still she is moved. As Dewey observes, “receptivity is not passivity”; the “taking in” of any real experience “involves a reconstruction which may be painful” (*Art as Experience*, 48). Such an active version of reception compliments Chopin’s dismissal of detachment and the “pure” gaze in favor of somatic descriptions of Edna’s aesthetic experience. Rather than seeing mental “pictures” in the music, as she had done with Mme. Ratignolle’s playing, Edna has “the very passions

themselves . . . aroused within her soul" (549). These passions are described as "swaying" and "lashing" Edna as the process of creative reception provokes "a keen tremor down [her] spinal column" and leaves her "trembl[ing]." "[S]he was choking," Chopin continues, "and the tears blinded her" (550).

Lest Edna's emotions seem inactive, Chopin connects them with the movements of her first swim. Just as Edna had heard music before and not been moved, so had she been in the water everyday at Grand Isle without being able to swim. Yet this night, in the sensuous embrace of the sea, Edna finds the balance of willing and letting-go that allows her to "[lift] her body to the surface of the water" (551). In the rhythms of the ocean, linked to the sounds that bombarded her soul "as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" only hours before, Edna learns to be moved by the currents and, correspondingly, by the "swaying" rhythms of passion captured in the metered, measured progression of music (549–50). The distinguishing qualities of swimming—the continual adjustment to one's environment characterized by a delicate balance of activity and rest, exertion and repose—thus become the lineaments of aesthetic experience and the components of Edna's active reception of music.

Similarly, Chopin's erotic descriptions of the ocean—captured in the refrains, "[t]he voice of the sea is seductive" and "[t]he touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace"—inflect Edna's movements in the "waves" of melody with the ecstatic energy of sexual activity (535, 549). The natural cadences of the world and of the body—including specifically sexual rhythms and their concomitant pleasures—figure prominently in discourses on the origin of music. Havelock Ellis, in the fourth volume of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1905), provides a contemporary (if exaggerated) illustration of this connection when he claims that "the majority of normal educated women are liable to experience some degree of definite sexual excitement from music."<sup>26</sup> Chopin inscribes the link between the erotic and the aesthetic in her choice of compositions and composers: Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, often used as the exemplar of music's erotic charge, and Frédéric Chopin's *Impromptus*, composed during his affair with novelist George Sand, each carried a sexual connotation in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Chopin draws upon the affiliation between music and the erotic to express the paradoxical way in which the aesthetic, like sex, uses the rhythmical movements of corporeal experience to produce an ecstasy imagined to move beyond the boundaries of the self.<sup>28</sup> The ecstatic yet embodied union of sexual experience and the interactions involved in the reconstructive aesthetic,

as explored in music and the “art of swimming,” require a process-driven notion of the self, one that challenges the integrity of the autonomous subject (573). In the ocean, a “feeling of exultation overtook” Edna as she sought “to lose herself” in the “unlimited” (551, 552). She finds that the “art” of swimming is that it is “nothing,” that it is a process by which to become nothing, “to lose” oneself in the immediate, consummatory moment of interaction. Likewise, the “tears” that “blinded” Edna during Mlle. Reisz’s performance figure the permeability of subjectivity. Through them, Mrs. Pontellier expands, leaks out into the world and breaks the liminal space of the body. The saline tears are also rip-like tears in the abstracted distinction between agent and environment, and Chopin makes clear her pun several chapters later when describing the intense experience (in which “[t]he present alone was significant”) of Robert’s departure: “the emotion . . . was troubling—tearing her. Her eyes were brimming with tears” (572).

Edna’s reveries on that August evening encapsulate the qualities of the aesthetic moments that constitute the force of the novel. By using recurring images and repeated phrases to relate the experiences of this night to similarly-structured experiences in the rest of the novel, Chopin intensifies the poetic resonance that each of these moments has for the reader as she progresses through the narrative.<sup>29</sup> Many of these leitmotifs highlight Edna’s adjustments to her environment and the sense of immediacy these bring. For example, from her sea-side chat with Adèle to her nap at *Chênrière* and her affair with Alcée, the pleasures of aesthetic experience often involve a “loosening,” figured either physically in the removal of clothing or mentally in the “loosen[ing]” of Edna’s “mantle of reserve” (535). Shedding restrictive clothing facilitates the adaptation to nature’s rhythms captured in the moments of “beneficent repose” and culminating in the “intoxicated” feelings that diminish the assertive self (554, 541). One must “loosen” oneself in order to “lose” oneself, for immediacy is not instantaneous. Rather, it involves the organization of energies within an experience and the employment of past occupations towards the enrichment of the present; it requires the “temper[ing]” of “being” and lessons in swimming before the “feeling of exultation” (549, 551).<sup>30</sup>

Just as immediacy requires effort, so too must corporeal sensation, to carry the intensity of the aesthetic, be wed with the meanings and values gathered in past experience and carried into the present through the mental operations of the “live creature.” Thus, for Chopin, sensation and intellection cannot be separated within the aesthetic, and sensory experience, as evidenced in Edna’s response to Adèle’s casual inquiry into her thoughts, plays an important role in conscious life: “I

was not really conscious of thinking anything," she explains, "but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts" (538). Working through the sensations of the summer day and following the ways in which her corporeal memory brought her wandering thoughts to a wandering "little girl walking through the grass," Edna suggests how the "unthinking" qualities of experience influence aspects of our lives generally considered the realm of reason and cognition. Furthermore, in anticipating Edna's first swim (the girl moves "as if swimming"), the scene delineates the aesthetic not as bare sense experience but as the fusion of sense and meaning in a process of rhythmic adjustment that enlivens the present moment (538).

Referring to the night of her swim "at that mystic hour," Edna explains that a "thousand emotions [had] swept through" her and that she "didn't comprehend half of them" (553). In many regards, Edna spends the rest of the novel attempting to understand these emotions and the possibilities they make available. Chopin's narration, responsive to Edna's phenomenological experience in a way her character never could be, captures this confusion in the "certain light" that "[begins] to dawn dimly" in Edna: "the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (534). Edna is moved by her aesthetic experiences, and these moments allow her to see things from a different perspective. Chopin clarifies this colloquial metaphor in spatial terms: "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (535). Being moved entails being repositioned, and in being repositioned we gain a different perspective; we apprehend and thus, by Dewey's model of perception in which experience is produced through a "series of responsive acts," create the world in a new way (*Art and Experience*, 58). Therefore, Chopin writes of the "beginning" of a new "world" in Edna, and her images of renewed or clarified vision (her "different eyes") portray an actual reconstruction of relations rather than a metaphoric description of Edna's subjective experience.<sup>31</sup>

With a new world and new vision come new possibilities. In *The Particulars of Rapture*, Charles Altieri seeks to make sense of the alternative modes of being, the relations of the self to others and the world, made available through intense moments of being moved.<sup>32</sup> With regards to Edna and her "different eyes," then, we might benefit not only from identifying *what* she sees or *that* she sees but also from attending to how she *responds* to what she sees and thus to how her rejection or adoption of new possibilities points to the values they create. In doing so, we should team Altieri's claim that that values and

desires rendered in a work of art are immanent to the events in which they occur with Dewey's assertion that "the actual work of art" is not the physical product but rather "what the product does with and in experience" (*Art and Experience*, 9).<sup>33</sup> Through the ways in which the active *work* of art manifests itself in Edna's behavior, Chopin provides a ground for investigating both the novel possibilities made available in art and the complex interactions with cultural forces within and against which those possibilities come to be understood. She encourages us to move from the "dominantly" aesthetic experiences of August twenty-eighth, in which the factors that enliven experience impact Edna by being "lifted high above the threshold of perception," to Edna's pursuit of the aesthetic *quality* available in all experience and revealed in her encounters with art (*Art as Experience*, 63).

In pursuing the potentialities made manifest in her aesthetic experiences, Edna initiates occupations that satisfy her "fully-alive" being rather than those that cater to the interests of her class.<sup>34</sup> As Jane Thraikill observes, Mrs. Pontellier "willfully pursue[s] such rhythmical, embodied activities as breathing, rocking, swimming, singing, and sex," and these pursuits constitute a critique of "disembodied idealism . . . through the palpable materiality of the sensuous, living, breathing, reproductive human body."<sup>35</sup> One aspect of the utility of such endeavors consists in the soothing way in which metered movement and organization produce a parallel ordering of emotional confusion. For instance, after leaving the table following the news of Robert's departure, Edna (uncharacteristically) engages in a number of housecleaning tasks that assuage her emotional turmoil, and Chopin captures the calming effects of the action in rhythmic prose:

She gathered together stray garments that were hanging on the backs of chairs, and put each where it belonged in the closet or bureau drawer. She changed her gown for a more comfortable and commodious wrapper. She rearranged her hair, combing and brushing it with unusual energy. (570)

This rhythmic adjustment to and attuned interaction with the physical world satisfies Edna by furnishing her experience with form, understood not as the static property of objects but as an aspect of active engagement with the elements and energies of an event. As Dewey explains, such form, when aesthetic, "enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities" (*Art as Experience*, 110). These ordered and ordering engagements, like the "loosenings" mentioned above, lead to the feelings of "intoxication" and immediacy that characterize Edna's

engagements with love, music, the sea, and gambling. In each case, Edna pursues the aesthetic quality of experience, and this project shapes her desires, guides her endeavors, and characterizes her encounters with the world.

While “[s]ailing across the bay to the *Chênrière*” with Robert and others on the day after her first swim, “Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast”; the “chains,” which “had been loosening,” “had snapped the night before” and given her room to position herself in new ways (559). The scenes on *Chênrière Caminada* illustrate the dynamic between Edna’s sense of “freedom,” which she links to aesthetic experience, and the circumscriptions of cultural values. They show Edna working to recontextualize her relationship to the reifying logic of the economy of art according to the integrated vitality of aesthetic quality.

When Edna and Robert fantasize about finding hidden “treasures” during the boat ride to the *Chênrière*, the supposed spoils take on aesthetic rather than economic importance. “Pirate gold isn’t a thing to be hoarded or utilized,” Edna explains when considering what she would do with the money, “[i]t is something to squander and throw to the four winds, for the fun of seeing golden specks fly” (560). Here, money loses its value as a token of exchange and gains worth and meaning as the occasion for aesthetic experience, the provision of a spectacle. Thus, the future-oriented logic of investments—the deferral of satisfaction captured in Léonce’s “big deal in futures”—gives way to the immediacy of the present (579). Moreover, the reification of the subject/object distinction entailed in the act of exchange dissolves in the intense, shared moment: “We’d . . . scatter it together,” Robert adds (560). By expressing these aesthetic qualities in economic terms, Chopin reveals the ways in which a cultural logic sets the conditions for the articulation of an aesthetic experience, even as the concrete instantiations of this logic are, in turn, modified as the affective encounter reconstructs individual relations. Where Léonce’s statuette made capital out of art, Edna’s “pirate gold,” located within the imaginative space of storytelling, treats money as aesthetic display.

Likewise, while preparing for bed in Mme. Antoine’s home, Edna taps into the aesthetic quality of experience to counter the market-logic relationship she has with her body in the opening chapter. Rather than “survey[ing]” her hands “critically” in response to Léonce’s blatant objectification of her person (he “look[s] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property”), she “rub[s]” her arm, “observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh” (522, 562). Edna’s sensuous

repose finds erotic expression in Chopin's writing, which weds measured repetition with a delight in detail that conveys an affect opposed to economic appraisal:

Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed. . . . She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair. (562)

In this scene, Edna lives by her reconstructive aesthetic, reconstituting the objectified commodity as an occasion for "full-bodied" experience.

Appropriately, then, Edna awakens with a healthy hunger and eats "with relish" the brown loaf and the broiled fowl Robert prepares: her *taste* becomes sensuous and appetitive rather than "pure" and reserved (564). Chopin extends this pun throughout the novel, often setting Edna's delight in earthy cuisine against the tastes of other characters. For instance, Léonce's insatiable seasoning ("He tasted his soup and began to season it with pepper, salt, vinegar, mustard—everything within reach") indicates an ostentatious yet dull palate, while Mlle. Reisz's fondness for chocolates, which she "habitually ate" because "they contained much nutriment in small compass," reflects her unsociability, as their "sustaining quality" allows her to stay away from "Madame Lebrun's table" (579, 576). In addition, the "Highcamp dinner, though of excellent quality," leaves the sensuously attuned Edna hungry; such a repast, Chopin implies, feeds only the mind (607).

In tracing Edna's pursuit of the values "demanded" by her "impassioned, newly awakened being," we must not lose sight of the way she feels that these desires have "been denied" her (573). Indeed, Chopin's depiction of the strength and influence cultural forces have over the realization of such demands constitutes the real power of her work, and no criticism has brought these concerns to bear as astutely as that which focuses on Edna's struggle with patriarchal constructions of gender.<sup>36</sup> Such readings enable us to see the productive reception of Chopin's reconstructive aesthetic—disposing, as it does, of the gender-coded roles of active (masculine) artist and passive (feminine) audience—as reflecting the transgressive activity Edna displays in her sexual encounters and economic gains. Moreover, they incite us to examine the restrictive culture in which such activities occur and to ask how the possibilities and relations immanent to the aesthetic experience relate to the possibilities and relations embedded in the cul-

tural hegemony.

The “flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature” with which Edna observes Adèle’s *accouchement* marshals the images and phrases associated with August twenty-eight and the *Chênrière* to present the evolving and interactive relation between cultural contexts and aesthetic emotions (648). To begin, Chopin links the narrative moments through like imagery (the “golden serpent” of Adèle’s braided hair recalls the “gold snakes” Robert mentions in the “pirate gold” scene) and repeated key terms (“loosen,” “tearing”). Furthermore, when Edna leaves the Ratignolle residence, accompanied by Dr. Mandelet as she had previously been escorted by Robert, she walks “in an absent-minded way, as she had walked one night at Grand Isle, as if her thoughts had gone ahead of her and she was striving to overtake them” (649). These verbal similarities yoke antithetical scenes: at Grand Isle, Edna feels her senses invigorated; at Adèle’s, she recalls the “deadened sensation” of her own parturitions and needs “her senses” to be “kindled afresh” once she leaves (648, 650). The ecstasy of sex gives way to the pain of childbirth. These penultimate narrative moments demonstrate that, just as the “pirate gold” story might reconfigure the values of the economy of art, so too can those desires and potentialities become redefined through the cultural context within which they are articulated. The “arbitrary conditions” Mandelet sets against the “provision of Nature” bring out the cultural stakes involved in the scene and specify that Adèle and “Nature,” no less than Reisz’s music, can reconfigure that which Edna values in her experience: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!” (649).

Chopin’s novel dramatizes the scripting forces that influence the ways in which agents take on the possibilities revealed to them through their intense, affective experiences, both in the reflective representation of experience to the self and in the ideational component of the aesthetic that clothes sensory stimuli with meaning. Moved to recognize yet not to escape social structures, Edna mingles the values and desires realized through her aesthetic experience with the positions and relations that characterize the logic of the culture in which her experiences take form: in the naturalized gender roles promoted by Adèle, the autonomous artist-figure presented in Reisz and actively taken up by Edna, and the romantic narratives through which Mrs. Pontellier reduces her manifold desires into a love for Robert. She embraces the “way” made plain by the “light” within her through paths and positions contrary to her reconstructive aesthetic. The light, after all, dawns but “dimly” (534).

### “Glowing Words” and Generous Irony

In recent attempts to rethink the aesthetic, critics have focused on the democratic potential embedded in an aesthetic theory that, following Dewey, grounds the experience of art in the “possession of a sensorial body.” As both Paul Gilmore and Charles Altieri have suggested, the affective solidarity afforded by shared aesthetic experience, “located on the level of an individual body but imagined to connect that body with some universally accessible experience,” creates something akin to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.”<sup>37</sup> Unlike Anderson’s account of the nation, however, the “*imaginative* community” forged in the way agents actively take up the perspective of the other in their engagement with works of art possesses the potential to reconfigure the grounds of identification beyond those of immediate “economic or political interests.”<sup>38</sup> Recognizing that “[i]t is only through the individual, racial, gendered, nationalized body that the aesthetic can be experienced,” Gilmore nonetheless maintains that the “universally shared terrain” imagined in such an experience might provide the basis for a political program that moves beyond “the delimited ground of identity politics.” Readers should not mistake this dual emphasis on a “sense of shared humanity” located in the body and on the imaginative identifications made possible through art as a naïve return to an idealist aesthetic. Rather, critics have begun to supplement the epistemic models of theory with phenomenological accounts of affect that examine art’s “capacity to sharpen our awareness of the intricate ways we feel our attention and care becoming contoured to other experiences,” to foster what Altieri calls “involvedness.”<sup>39</sup>

Edna’s story of a woman and her lover illustrates the way in which Chopin’s text strives to create a ground for productive identifications through the affective state of involvedness and a reserved sympathy—what Altieri terms “generous irony”—for Edna and her emotional bind. Chopin stages the involvedness and the creation of an imaginative community pushing against cultural constructions in the storytelling around the Pontellier dinner table on the night that Dr. Mandelet makes his appearance to evaluate Edna’s upsetting behavior. After Léonce and the Colonel have shared reminiscences about their pasts, the doctor tells “the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (602). Clearly, Mandelet attempts to script Edna into a certain, naturalized (“old”) social role, believing that by identifying her type and giving away the conclusion

to her story he can, to adopt the phrase used when Robert spoils the ending of Edna's book in Catiche's café, "save her the trouble of wading through it" (644). Chopin specifies the equation between Dr. Mandelet's anecdote and the social scripts provided by the dominant culture by describing the tale as "one of the many little *human documents* which had been unfolded to him during his long career as a physician" (602, emphasis mine).

Tellingly, "[t]he story did not seem especially to impress Edna" (602). She recognizes it as one of "the codes" that render her "a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex," and, because she "can't seem to convince [herself]" of the aptness of this label, she has a story "of her own to tell" (616, 602). Edna's tale of a woman and her lover who lose their way while paddling a pirogue in the Baratarian Islands, never to be heard from again, impacts her audience in its aesthetic intensity: "every glowing word seemed real to those who listened" (602). Edna's fellow diners experience the story sensorily:

They could *feel* the hot breath of the Southern night; they could *hear* the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of the birds' wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could *see* the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown. (602, emphasis mine)

The listeners imaginatively take on the experience Edna presents, and, in the process, engage with the affects implicated in her narrative. The story sensitizes its auditors, providing them with a shared affective experience of involvedness that smears the ink on Mandelet's "human documents."

Mrs. Pontellier's dinner table tale draws upon her profound affective experiences at *Chênrière Caminada* in order to capture, transfer, and express aesthetically the values and relations embedded in those scenes to her audience. In a sense, the story both continues the imaginative project she and Robert began on their trip across the bay—when Robert suggests that he would "take [Edna] some night in the pirogue when the moon shines" to treasure hunt among the islands—and revises the course of their relationship, which, in effect, is ruptured following their return to Grand Isle (560). On the return voyage, Robert, in his "musical and true" voice, sings "a little song"—"[i]t began with 'Ah! *Si tu savais*'"—that functions as a package of corporeal memory encoding the sights, sounds, and sensations of that summer evening (567). When Edna sings the tune to herself later in the novel, it "move[s] her with recollections" that anticipate the tactile language

and syntactic style of her story: “She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could see the glint of the moon upon the bay, and could feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind” (587). As Thrailkill points out, Edna’s limited bilingualism—“[s]he understood French imperfectly unless directly addressed” (562–63)—indicates the non-cognitive manner in which she experiences the song, the way in which she enjoys the “sound of the words and their sensuous reception” rather than their literal meaning.<sup>40</sup> We might extend this analysis to the final *Chênrière* source for Edna’s prandial tale: the stories told by Mme. Antoine, who “could speak no English” (562). When Mme. Antoine, who had been “gathering legends of the Baratarians and the sea” all her life, tells a selection of stories to Robert and Edna, the listening pair “could hear the whispering voices of dead men and click of muffled gold.” Even after they leave, the images from the tales remain with them, as “phantom ships, speeding to cover” accompany them back to Grand Isle (565). As with the song Robert sings, Edna is captured by the affect of Antoine’s stories as much as by the story itself. Reversing the artistic practice of Miss Highcamp, who as a member of the “Folk Lore Society” represents the cooptation of the island legends by the aesthetic disposition, Mme. Antoine captures all of the “poetry” in her tales and none of the “coldness” (608, 607).

When Edna constructs her own story of the Baratarians, she combines her intense experience with Antoine’s captivating narrative style and the affective, sensory compactness of the corporeal memory associated with “Ah! *Si tu savais!*” The resulting narrative, couched in free indirect discourse and thereby invested with the poetic force of Chopin’s pen, prompts her listeners to take the images and affects of the narrative on as their own, just as *The Awakening* invites us to open ourselves to being moved by the protagonist’s story and the rhythms of Chopin’s prose. Lest the reader fail to note the conflation of Edna’s tale of two lovers disappearing into the sea and Chopin’s tale of one lover disappearing into the sea, the author foregrounds the layers of fiction involved in the scene. Not only is Edna’s story “pure invention,” but her claim about its origin in Mme. Antoine is “also . . . an invention,” as is, on yet another textual level, the story of Mrs. Pontellier (602).

While Edna invests her story with the same romantic sheen that she projects onto her relationship with Robert, Chopin asks her readers to make imaginative identifications without fully committing to Edna’s emotions.<sup>41</sup> In particular, she seeks to present the dispositions and affective stances that lead Edna and the other characters to make

the choices that they do without either becoming complicit in the logic of the hegemony or losing sight of the strength it carries. To this end, she allows the melodramatic manner in which Edna represents her desires and experiences to herself to shape the narrative voice, and, thus, she makes vivid the force such emotional conventions carry. As Edna's romantic expectancy increases, culminating in her fantasy of finding Robert asleep so that she could "awaken him with a kiss," the narration assumes her hopeful tone, just as it registers the shock of Robert's absence in short sentences tinged with negation: "Robert was not waiting for her in the little parlor. He was nowhere at hand. The house was empty" (651). Yet even as Chopin's free indirect discourse draws readers into the texture of Edna's affective life, it maintains a narrative distance that keeps a recognition of Edna's cultural embeddedness from becoming a complicity with or blindness to its logic. In other words, Chopin combines the perspective of irony with the intimacy afforded by sympathy and a nuanced attention to consciousness in order to bring her readers into an appreciation of Edna's emotions that does not inculcate them into the social matrix through which these emotions are expressed. Altieri calls this combination "generous irony," and he claims that it gives readers "the opportunity to find a site where they can share with the characters (and with other readers) the intimate texture of frustration that shapes their experiences of value."<sup>42</sup>

As shown in the final chapter, Chopin's generous irony separates the affects and dispositions made available in *The Awakening* from those associated with the fate of its protagonist. Edna's despondent return to Grand Isle and the agitated state that accompanies, if not prompts, her final swim become an occasion for Chopin to bring the novel's various images—from Adèle's rejoinder to Reisz's sneer, "the blue-grass meadow" to Robert's note, the "spurs of the cavalry officer" to the sensuous voice of the sea—into a dynamic, aesthetic relation. The rhythms that run throughout the novel overtake the linear progression of narrative, leaving the determinate "outcome" of the story in doubt even as the style reaches a satisfying consummation. The disjunction prevents us from reducing a richly ambiguous ending to a moral or ideological treatment that would err on the side of either condemnation or acclamation rather than remain in an open posture of generous irony from which Edna's end might be understood affectively and responded to in kind.

By turning from the action of *The Awakening* to the effects of its narration, we can see how the generous irony that Chopin's narration fosters in her readership promotes the perspective necessary for the

identifications and commitments available in an aesthetic grounded in embodied experience. In particular, the reserved sympathy that makes agents aware of their cultural embeddedness enables, by virtue of “moved” perspectives, modifications in social relations and affective stances towards the world that shift the dynamic upon which cultural formations depend. Within the context of a shared aesthetic experience, such as the mutual absorption in Edna’s “glowing words” by her listeners, this imaginative openness cultivates collective adjustments along the lines of new identifications. *The Awakening*, then, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, becomes “the new narrative that Mrs. Pontellier was unable to create”; it is the story Edna would have told at the dinner table, had she been able to construct it outside of romantic conventions.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, it is the story that we as readers share, and through our experiences of involvedness and affective solidarity, Chopin constructs an imaginative community set to envision a society that could be otherwise, a world in which Edna does not lose her strength at sea. Her novel, rich in its language and dense in its cumulative poetic force, reaches beyond the image of art as ideology and offers itself as a site for aesthetic experience as powerful as Edna’s, and the light this sparks seeks not only to “[show] the way” but also to expose its manner of “forbid[ding]” (534).

Attending to Chopin’s representation of Edna’s aesthetic experience in its corporeal particularities and to the way in which her novel figures the expression and appropriation of such experience through the available cultural scripts (e.g., specific historical conceptions of “wife” or “artist”) affords a theoretical perspective on both Chopin’s text and aesthetics precluded by ideological readings of literature. By refusing to allow a historical and class-biased understanding of taste to determine the limits of what art might be, this mode offers a way of thinking about aesthetics as implicated in, but not reducible to, ideology. Rather than stopping with the identification of the economy of art, as much cultural criticism of literature has done, we must follow Chopin in reconstructing aesthetics towards the enrichment of the experience of a “fully-alive” organism within a physical and cultural environment.

Moreover, treated not as institutionalized form or bourgeois tool but as a ground on which people feel their lives and perspectives changed, the aesthetic provides a space within which literary critics can explore affect’s role both in subjectivity and in the construction and modification of political institutions. In particular, by construing the aesthetic as a quality of activity to be judged according to the ex-

periences and identificatory stances it makes possible, we can see how our encounters with art both shape the values that determine the projects we take up and influence the manner in which we relate to others. Consequently, the aesthetic relates to the local, personal relationships constitutive of the broader social order. While continuing to keep in mind the top-down method by which these relationships are structured by ideology, our investigations into the affective space of the aesthetic might also allow us to think of the bottom-up way in which small adjustments translate into larger shifts; from there, we might begin to address the question of cultural change, so vexed for a cultural studies fixed on synchronic relations and static constructions.<sup>44</sup> In reorienting the relationship between cultural studies and aesthetics, we must return to the basic phenomenological insights afforded by clichéd expressions for a literary experience—from the “goose-flesh” effect of poetry to the “gripping” narrative of a novel—and, in recognizing the corporeal component of aesthetic experience, continue to parse through the implications of an aesthetic theory grounded not in the museum but in the shared, sensing, and responsive body.

### Notes

I would like to thank John McGowan, Eliza Richards, and Robert Cantwell for their careful readings of earlier versions of this essay. Also, and above all, I am indebted to Jane Thrailkill for providing helpful and encouraging feedback on this project at every stage of my writing process.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo, “A ‘Hive of Subtlety’: Aesthetics and the End(s) of Cultural Studies,” *American Literature* 76 (2004), 428.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilmore, “Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics,” *American Literature* 76 (2004), 470. Gilmore’s position should be understood as mediating between two trends within critical history: the cultural studies dismissal of aesthetic concerns and aesthetic experience as the subtle machinations of hegemonic power and the response from certain literary critics that the aesthetic offers unique forms of knowledge and experience not reducible to an ideological or political agenda. In calling for a return to aesthetics not as a refusal of cultural studies but as an extension of its aims and possibilities, Gilmore aligns himself with the innovative work of Isobel Armstrong, who attempts to “rethink the aesthetic” as a democratic and subversive space in *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), and that of Brian Massumi, whose *Parables for the Virtual* focuses on affects and movement as spaces for investigating the shortcomings of constructivist accounts of culture (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002). For the cultural studies critique of aesthetics, see Ian Hunter’s “Cultural Studies and Aesthetics” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A.

Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 347–66; Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), and the introduction to the special issue of *American Literature* by Castiglia and Castronovo. For the clearest presentation of a response from literary critics, see the collection *Aesthetics and Ideology*, especially the introductory essay by George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Kate Chopin, *Complete Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 578. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; New York: MLA, 2001), 93–94.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988); Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base of High Culture in America" in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> While such divisions are more easily policed (and documented) in the visual and performing arts and the public venues that housed them, the realm of print complicates clear narratives of cultural stratification. June Howard has shown the permeability of supposedly rigid distinctions between high and low literary culture in *Publishing the Family* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), which uses the example of a jointly-authored novel published serially in Harpar's Bazaar to re-evaluate the cultural moment of print culture in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Kasson, 216.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999) provides numerous examples of contemporary writers and reviewers registering a split between "highbrow" art and "lowbrow" entertainment (e.g., 11, 14, 29).

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Robert Nice (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 170. See also *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 105–11, 141–73, 285–89.

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 31, 7, 53, 7.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 10: 1934 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1987), 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>12</sup> For an account of the status of music and its relation to emotion and aesthetics in Chopin's text—viewed in the context of nineteenth-century debates about

music's "non-representational" form—see Jane F. Thrailkill's *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism*, "Chapter 4: Mindless Pleasures" (forthcoming, Harvard Univ. Press, 2007). See also Katherine Kearns's "The Nullification of Edna Pontellier," *American Literature* 63 (1991), 62–80, which uses Schopenhauer to reach different conclusions than those put forth by Thrailkill (79), and Bert Bender's "The Teeth of Desire: *The Awakening* and *The Descent of Man*," *American Literature* 63 (1991), 459–73, which reads the music in light of Chopin's engagement with Darwin (467).

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> For an account of how these binaries relate to one another and how the transcendental moves of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* occlude the social factors involved in the separation of art and "life" that has characterized modern aesthetic theories, see Bourdieu's "vulgar" critique of Kant in the postscript to *Distinction*.

<sup>16</sup> The ideology behind the notion of the "Romantic artist" has been thoroughly explored by a number of important materialist critiques. While Bourdieu cites the concurrent deskilling of the labor classes and the "hyper-skilling" of the upper-classes as the origin of "genius," Martha Woodmansee, in *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), focuses on the role of copyright legislation in the production of the modern artist. See also Howard and Eagleton.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth LeBlanc offers a representative reading: "Through her advice and friendship, but most of all through her artistry, Mademoiselle Reisz fosters in Edna a sense of the possibilities for joy and fulfillment outside the realm of male tradition and meaningless codes." "The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15 (1996), 303. For similar work, see Carolyn L. Mathews's "Fashioning the Hybrid Woman in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Mosaic* 35, no. 3 (2002), 140; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's "Progression and Regression in Edna Pontellier," in *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text, Biographical and Historical Contexts, and Criticism*, ed. Margo Culley (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 357–63; and Kathryn Lee Seidel's "Art as an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 46 (1993), 199–214.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Showalter, in "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," states the supposed connection between Reisz and Chopin clearly, claiming that the Mademoiselle's "voice in the novel seems to speak for the author's view of art and for the artist." *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), 46.

<sup>19</sup> Gilmore, 468.

<sup>20</sup> Winfried Fluck, in "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," provides a similar argument against the reductive logic upon which the recent dismissal of aesthetics

depends; see *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliot, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 80. For a more involved account of how Dewey's aesthetic could both extend and complicate Bourdieu's work, see Richard Shusterman's *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 194–95.

<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, Vol. 12: 1920 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Though the expressive forms of the “traditional” arts have proven productive in making possible experiences in which the characteristics of the aesthetic quality “are made manifest for their own sake” (Dewey, *Art and Experience*, 57), I hope to have shown that aesthetic experience is not limited to “legitimate art” (*Art and Experience*, 57). The aesthetic is a quality of experience which sometimes involves sanctioned works of art and, at other times, includes what might be considered popular art, entertainment, or any medium so formed as to become expressive.

<sup>23</sup> Gilmore, 470.

<sup>24</sup> The term “reconstructive,” as applied to the aesthetic Chopin develops, captures both the Deweyan project of reconstructing philosophical accounts of art according to the possibilities available in aesthetic experience and the process by which the affects and orientations that characterize the aesthetic reconstruct the cultural constructs in which we find ourselves.

<sup>25</sup> Thraikill, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. IV: *Sexual Selection in Man* (1905; Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1928), 131.

<sup>27</sup> For the connection between Wagner and the erotic, see Ellis (128) as well as “The Richard Wagner Cult” in Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 171–213. For Chopin's affair with Sand, see William G. Atwood's *The Lioness and the Little One: The Liason of George Sand and Frédéric Chopin* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> Gilmore (479–80) makes similar observations about the role of the erotic in the poetry of Walt Whitman, a writer with whom Chopin clearly engaged in the composition of *The Awakening*.

<sup>29</sup> For a similar reading of Chopin's “network of images, words, verbal refrains, and grammatical textures,” see Paula A. Treichler's “The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis,” in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), 250.

<sup>30</sup> William James's discussion of conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) provides a contemporary psychological account of how feelings of immediacy and religious intensity arise in its explanation of the way in which

unconscious mental activity bursts forth into experience as if fully-formed. William James, *Writings, 1902–1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 177–238.

<sup>31</sup> For examples of Edna's "new vision," see her walk around her house, "as if inspecting it for the first time," when Léonce and the children have left; the feeling that "a mist had been lifted from her eyes" in the "morning after" chapter; the way that she "[begins] to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life"; and the image of Edna as "some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" on the beach in the final chapter (604–5, 618, 629–30, 654).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetic of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Altieri's notion that works of art create desires that are "logically posterior" to the aesthetic experience asserts that art determines what we view as desires and what we value in the world rather than satisfying previously constructed or existing desires (78).

<sup>34</sup> For commentaries on the "global instrumental worth" of the aesthetic that produces these satisfactions, see Shusterman (9) and Giles Gunn's "The Pragmatics of the Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliot, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), which describes Dewey's view of art's purpose "as the continuous revaluation and augmentation of life itself" (63).

<sup>35</sup> Thraikill, 28.

<sup>36</sup> For illustrative work in this areas, see Showalter, Fox-Genovese, and LeBlanc, as well as Cynthia Griffin Wolff's "Un-Utterable Longing: The Discourse of Feminine Sexuality in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Studies in American Fiction* 24, (1996), 3–23, Patricia Yaeger's "A Language which Nobody Understood: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 3 (1987), 197–219, Harriet Kramer Linkin's "Call the Roller of Big Cigars': Smoking Out the Patriarchy in *The Awakening*," *Legacy* 11 (1994), 130–42, and Sandra Gilbert's "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire" in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2, *Sexchanges* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 83–122.

<sup>37</sup> Gilmore, 471. The essays by Gilmore and by Castiglia and Castronovo provide helpful summaries of the recent critical work done in this area.

<sup>38</sup> Altieri, 223 (emphasis mine); Gilmore, 472. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1988; rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Gilmore, 471, 472; Altieri, 194. Armstrong provides a strong version of this

notion, claiming that affective experiences related to art have the ability to reshape conceptual categories and, thus, to change the way that thinking happens.

<sup>401</sup> Thrailkill, 54–55.

<sup>41</sup> For a perceptive and helpful treatment of the romantic elements of the novel, see Yaeger.

<sup>42</sup> Altieri, 223. Altieri develops this notion with reference to the work of James Joyce and uses it to critique the views of Judith Butler and the social constructivists (220–30).

<sup>43</sup> Wolff, 393.

<sup>44</sup> See Massumi for a more involved critique of cultural studies along these lines.