



# the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

## WALTER PATER (1839-1894)

Walter Horatio Pater was, along with A. C. Swinburne, Simeon Solomon, and Whistler, one of the controversial nineteenth-century English aesthetes. Like them he was much influenced by continental ideas and art, and like Swinburne he began publishing as a critic in the journals in the 1860s. Valuing the form and architectonics of art and life, and the aesthetic experience they allegedly offered above any moral or religious messages in his early work, Pater explicitly resisted Matthew Arnold's and John Ruskin's spiritual and political agendas. Pursuing his notion of the "aesthetic critic" (1873), Pater created a unique series of article-essays in the press from 1866, first on aesthetics and on modern English poets (Coleridge and William Morris), and then, from 1869, on Renaissance art, philosophy, and literature.

In 1873 he shaped a Macmillan book out of some of these. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, despite its title, deployed the last section of the Morris article as its Conclusion and spanned the twelfth century to the eighteenth. Notable for their artfully honed prose, its chapters, like a modern-day Vasari, conflated biography, history, and character to develop a genre that Pater later called "imaginary portraits" and "appreciations." Likewise in the 1880s he explicated the aesthetics of prose in "Style" (1888), an article indebted to his recent review of Flaubert. With *Studies* Pater attracted both admiration and revulsion, resulting in a gap of a dozen years before publication of his next book, an historical novel, *Marius the Epicurean*, an attempt to explain the hedonism for which *Studies* had been castigated. Like many of his projects after the fracas of 1873/4, *Marius* is set in the past and abroad. If a degree of authorial self-censorship is evident, notably Pater's critics do not prevail: the mainstream press accommodated his regular articles, and Macmillan remained his publisher.

Pater went on to write another (unfinished) historical novel, cultural and literary theory, criticism of English literature (collected in *Appreciations*), pieces on classical subjects culled from his university lectures, and a number of short stories, some of which were reprinted in *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). Apart from *Marius*, most of his work appeared first in the journals, and its characteristic unit/genre is the periodical article.

Dying young, and before the Wilde trials, Pater's publications for the most part appeared before the famous journals of the 1890s took root. Although he was expected to contribute to *The Yellow Book*, for example, he did not, as only one issue appeared before his death; and he figured significantly in *The Savoy* (1896) only posthumously, in Arthur Symons' tribute article. Similarly, he was a presiding spirit in *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* but apparently never a contributor. Moreover, Pater was a careful man, mindful of his reputation and his own writing plans. He contributed not to little magazines but to some of the erudite mainstream journals of the mid-nineteenth century, the quarterly *Westminster Review*, the monthly *Fortnightly Review* and, mainly for his fiction, *Macmillan's Magazine*, which serialised his second novel *Gaston de Latour* (1896).

Pater therefore, as an aesthete, was a forerunner and mentor of those whose careers flourished in the 1890s. In 1893 Symons counted Pater among the English Decadents in "The Decadent Movement in Literature," published in the November *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. This issue also included Pater's last defiantly risqué tale, "Apollo in Picardy." However, when Symons revised the article, expanding it into a book, he deleted the Pater section as well as the word "Decadent," updating to the newest form of the Pre-Raphaelite/aesthetic/decadent tradition. The title now read *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899).

Pater was born in the east end of London, the son of a doctor who died in 1841 while Walter was still a toddler. Leaving the insalubrious neighbourhood immediately, Maria Pater took her four children due north across London, settling first on the edge of the newly built Victoria Park in Hackney, and then in Enfield. In a family of generations of doctors, Walter was the first to attend university, for which he prepared in the King's School Canterbury, to which city the family moved for his education. He went on to Queen's College, Oxford where he read classics. By 1864 he

was a probationary non-clerical Fellow at Brasenose, the Oxford College which was to remain his lifelong base. In 1869 Pater moved out of College into a house in North Oxford where he lived with his two sisters. The younger of the two – Clara – became in 1879 a founder of Somerville Hall, and its classics tutor. In 1885 the family made London their base, with Clara and Walter living in term-time in their respective colleges. The family only briefly returned to Oxford lodgings before Pater's death.

Once the *Renaissance* essays were collected and attributed to Pater, they became the touchstone of his burgeoning reputation as an advocate of an exquisite hedonism articulated in its Preface and Conclusion, and identified forthwith as the byword of aestheticism: "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Conflating life and art as he does, Pater was parodied as Mr. Rose in W.H. Mallock's *roman a clef*, *The New Republic* in 1876, and removed the Conclusion from the second edition in 1877. Another equally renowned aspect of the first edition was its sinuous, gorgeous, and chiselled prose in, for example, its representation of Leonardo's image of La Gioconda: "The presence that thus so strangely rose beside the waters." W.B. Yeats perpetuated its fame in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1937: he published the passage as a prose poem. While Pater's style changed over his career, it was refined rather than transformed, and reflected his commitment to the possibilities of prose, including its capacity for ekphrasis.

Pater was a gay man in a University culture which was largely homosocial, and his writing unabashedly documents a tradition of male artists and themes. From his early articles in the 1860s and early 1870s on Winckelmann, Michelangelo, and Leonardo to his late short story "Apollo in Picardy" (1893), bachelors, male friendship, and the problem of how to live as a modern man of the "new culture" remain consistently in view.

Pater's mind and writing attracted a number of well-known authors and artists. If his immediate circle at various periods included well-known figures such as Solomon, Symons, Edmund Gosse, and Vernon Lee, the resonance of his work for Swinburne, Wilde (whom he taught), Yeats, John Addington Symonds, Henry James, George Moore, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and E. M. Forster is unmistakable. Many critics treat Pater as a proto-modernist whose preoccupations with form, style, and culture

fuelled modernism itself. At the same time, he is a man of the 1860s-1880s, in his implication in religion, the particulars of his struggles with gender, his conflation of visual art and literature, his take on the novel, his serial short fiction, and his consistent publication in the mainstream press. In these respects he is not as defined by the 1890s as he might have been, had he lived longer.

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