KATE HEXT

Introduction
Pater, Now

Walter Pater was an essayist, novelist, critic, short story writer, and teacher. He approached each of these modes with the attitude of a quiet radical, as he gently helped to shape English literature, criticism, and ideas in the late nineteenth century. Pater's career began in a storm of opprobrium. In the climactic Conclusion to his first book, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), he declared, 'To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.'[1] The 'hard, gem-like flame' in question was desire and passion, and this hedonistic indictment represented a revolution in late nineteenth-century values, albeit one wrapped in a mellifluous metaphor and enclosed in a study that on the surface looked to be about Renaissance art. Amid an ensuing brouhaha, the Conclusion and its author attracted acolytes in Oxford, where Pater was a tutor. For they had captured an emerging zeitgeist and, thus, very soon gained cult status exerting an influence on writers including Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, E. M. Forster, and Virgina Woolf. Pater's reputation was to be defined by this forever, for good and bad.

The bad aspect is twofold: first, the moral backlash against Pater and the Conclusion has loomed large in his critical history and so, second, it can be difficult to get beyond it to understand his broader contribution to the history of ideas and literature. In his subsequent publications, he showed himself to be a singularly nuanced thinker, grappling with some of the core issues of his age: the form and capacities of fiction and non-fiction writing, the basis of self-identity and ethics in a secular world, and how it could be possible to imagine beyond the boundaries of normative heterosexuality. To some extent, as discussed later in the present volume, Pater was English literature's Friedrich Nietzsche. They are 'astonishingly similar figures', and Pater's ideas precipitated Nietzsche's impact in Great Britain after 1896, when his work was first translated.[2] At the same time, few Victorian writers are at once so modern in their perspective while being so dense and allusive in their writing as Pater. The difficulties of his work are one of the reasons that it can

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be challenging to read beyond the Conclusion to address the ideas and style of his wider oeuvre.

The current *Companion* offers ways to understand the full range of Pater's significance. Beyond its address to his work and life, it illustrates that attention to Pater expands our understanding of late-Victorian fiction and the essay form as they come to terms with post-Darwinian sensibility. In doing so, we suggest that Pater challenges how we think today about the relationships between autobiography and criticism, imagination and ideas, the written word and the visual image, and past or imagined lives and the present.

Before turning to the chapters collected here, it would help to consider who Pater was, what made him a misfit in late-Victorian literary studies, the unconventional dynamics between his writing and his contemporary world, and why his work matters today.

Pater in Context

While Pater was a modern, even visionary, thinker he was utterly defined by his historical and cultural moment in Victorian England. He was born in London, in 1839, and died in Oxford, in 1894. It was not a long life, but it was one lived across singularly eventful decades. Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837, and in the course of her reign the British Empire expanded to cover nearly a quarter of the globe, with the colonization of India in 1848 and Kenya from 1885. This was an age of growing social consciousness in Great Britain: a series of Parliamentary Acts slowly began to implement restrictions on factory labour, a system of education for all, and small key improvements in women's rights, while beginning to address the appalling living conditions of the urban population, which was expanding exponentially during Britain's Industrial Revolution. In 1885 the Criminal Law Amendment Act (also known as the Labouchere Amendment) legislated against male homosexuality in England for the first time. A decade later, in 1895, Oscar Wilde became its most high-profile convict. While imprisoned for two years, he was allowed one book per week, and Pater's *Renaissance* was one of his first choices.[3]

As a writer, Pater's attitude toward his period is not straightforward. One of his paradoxes is to epitomize late nineteenth-century sensibility while shying away from any direct response to his society or the vivid events that defined it. For, while the Victorian world was revolving on its axis into its modern state, Pater's writing conjures up a world in words set apart from the immediacies of empire, industry, gender, and sexuality. On typical form, for instance, he portrays Dionysus reborn in medieval France in his story 'Denys L'Auxerrois'; writes an extended impressionistic meditation on Leonardo

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DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* in *The Renaissance*; and gives us a literary biographical portrait of a seventeenth-century writer in 'Thomas Browne'. Today his implicit assumption that readers of his works will have a range of highbrow knowledge spanning back to ancient Greece and extending to Italian Renaissance triptychs, and now-forgotten polymaths, may strike us as elitist. While this is not untrue, the more interesting truth is that such departures from reality speak of both Pater's ethos about what literature is and his strategy for living. First let's consider Pater's ethos. His departures from reality have the principle of 'art for its own sake' at their centre. At a time when the future of fiction and criticism were at issue as never before, Pater believed that these are *art forms* not justified by their use in the world or their mirroring of reality but valuable *for their own sake*. This was an ethos that took shape in Oxford and London, where Pater was at the centre of new ideas on literature: Matthew Arnold's 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864) and Henry James's 'The Art of Fiction' (1888) steered the discussion in literary circles. Meanwhile, in Oxford, heated ongoing discussions about rebalancing the university curriculum that had till then been almost exclusively focused on the classics curriculum raised the question of whether and how English literature should be studied in universities. In the middle of such discussions, Pater's line on fiction and criticism was radical; realism and social use were often the justification for imaginative writing in public discourse. Instead he proposed an impressionistic and imaginative mode of criticism, and a philosophical mode of fiction.

The second point on strategy is related to Pater's aestheticism. Folded into his jewelled prose style, classical civilization, art history, quasi-fictional portraits, and ekphrastic descriptions are the means by which Pater creates a critical and imaginative distance from the late nineteenth century. While they forsake realism, they refract contemporary issues through fantasised or reanimated historical places and characters. Pater's depiction of Dionysus, then, for example, animates this ancient Greek god of wine and song, into a fictional reflection on masculinity, sensuality, and the ends of pleasure. In this and other stories and essays, Pater seeks to enchant his reader and, in doing so, reflects on current issues while imagining that alternative values are possible.

The nature of Pater's Oxford career tells us both about the character of intellectual life in his period and the kind of academic he was within it. As an undergraduate, between 1858 and 1862, he studied *Literae Humaniores* (or 'Greats') at Queens College, Oxford, and in 1864 he became a fellow at another Oxford college, Brasenose. The city was socially parochial but this was an especially eventful period in its intellectual life, one in which the old certainties – Christian faith, Creation, tradition, and more – were cracking. While Pater tutored in classics his interests were broad: it was his knowledge

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of newly fashionable German philosophy that helped secure his academic appointment and his first publications were an essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and a review, which was to provide the basis for the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*, of poems by William Morris. In the long summer vacations, Pater travelled widely in France, Italy, and Germany, and in essays he refers to landscapes, art works, and authors few English readers would have known. He ventured beyond the arts too, arguing that 'the literary artist' must understand natural sciences and history in order to write well.[4] He was a polymath with wide-ranging enthusiasms and a cosmopolitan mind.

Just as Pater didn't believe that it was possible to restrict thought to a single disciplinary perspective, his writing was not restricted to either non-fiction or fiction. When he resigned his tutorial position in 1883, he began a singularly productive fiction-writing period. His second book was the novel, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), and it was followed by a collection of short fiction titled *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), then a collection of essays on literature, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889), and an essay collection based on his philosophy lectures, *Plato and Platonism* (1893). The range of these works indicates Pater's ambitions: they experiment across fiction and non-fiction, at times fusing and at other times mediating between the two. In a way then Pater was an intellectual butterfly. Or, to use a word that did not then exist, he was *interdisciplinary*. It sometimes makes him difficult to understand and estimate, for his ambitions as a writer – and his belief in reading and writing for its own sake – span beyond the scope of our usual categories and fall in between literary genres.

One of the risks is that Pater's writing lives on in its edited highlights: his ekphrastic description of the *Mona Lisa*, which was excerpted by W.B. Yeats to open the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936); Marius's epiphany in the eponymous novel; the Dionysian revelries in his 'imaginary portraiture'; and, of course, the Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. There is far more. Reading across Pater's works of fiction, art history, and the history of literature and ideas, as most of the essays in the current volume do, several core concerns emerge. Tracing these we see patterns that help us navigate his works via, say, how he fictionalizes figures from history and the classical world; the way he articulates sensuality; his dramatisation of alternative gendered identities, especially his defection from Victorian gentlemanliness; how eroticism is coded in his figurative language and homoerotic plots; the transition from youth to maturity in his most compelling characters; the fragility of the human body; and unnerving outbreaks of violence in the tranquil worlds he creates. Beyond this nexus of issues related to selfhood, Pater returns again and again to concerns such as the relationships between the arts, in his own

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word paintings and ekphrasis, and his conviction that '*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*';[5] he makes frequent statements on how philosophy could be practised in the modern world; he operates across broad-ranging intellectual contexts and imagines the landscapes of Europe as their stage; he dramatises dichotomies, such as Apollo and Dionysus, fact and fiction, and examines how they break down under analysis.

Pater, 'himself'

In his second novel, *Gaston de Latour* (1888), Pater writes, 'Beyond and above all the various interests upon which the philosopher's mind was ever afloat, there was one subject always in prominence – himself.'[6] Although Pater was not a philosopher in a conventional sense it is a singularly telling insight into his own priorities.

Pater's second paradox is that while the individual – self-identity, personality, psychology – is at the centre of his own writing, he himself is a mystery. The outline facts of his biography are not numerous. These belie a complex emotional and intellectual life of which there is little trace beyond his published works. His few surviving letters are friendly but unrevealing; there are no diaries and few accounts that disturb the impression of a genial but reserved interlocutor. He is, as Henry James wrote approvingly, 'the mask without the face'.[7] The chapters collected in the present volume circle around this inner life as it is glimpsed, suggested, and encoded through his essays and fiction. It would not be quite true to say that Pater hides in his writings. Rather, he uses the expansive, imaginative, unfinished forms of his essays and fiction to explore questions of ethics and aesthetics, understanding that intellectual thought cannot be disengaged from the imagination or the circumstances of lived experience. As he wrote to Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) he endeavoured to make 'intellectual theorems seem like the life's essence of the concrete, sensuous objects, from which they have been abstracted'.[8] And so, Pater's own life – hazy though its details often are – cannot be disengaged from understanding his writing. Reading his works – reading *him*? – challenges us to question how far we can read the author or writer in their texts, and to interrogate how far Pater defines a mode of personal address.

Pater believed that subjective emotions and life circumstances are integral to serious thinking. It would, therefore, in his view, be wishful thinking to be objective about ideas and literature. His main influences include Immanuel Kant, G.W. F. Hegel, David Hume, and Plato. As this range suggests, his was pick-and-mix philosophy of the kind no systematic philosopher would sanction. He could not abide the rigorously abstract forms of philosophical systems and instead explored ideas in the malleable form of the essay. The

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phrase *to essay* derives from Latin: it means *to try*. As a classicist, Pater would not forget it: his essays try out ideas in sincere attempts to define forms and styles that can give an imaginative, tangible form to abstract questions. They hold within their hesitating voice the possibility that their writer may be wrong, or that the balance of his thinking may alter in the future. They invite their readers to engage in the endeavour towards truths that are not final but know themselves to be conditional, provisional. Accordingly, Pater is, as several of the following chapters note, an author who constantly revised himself, making numerous alterations between periodical and book publication of the same works, as if in ceaseless dialogue with himself.

Pater's singularly personal writing endeavours toward, in his own words, 'transparency in language – the control of a style which did but obediently shift and shape itself to the mental motion, as a well-trained hand can follow on the tracing-paper the outline of a drawing below it'.[9] After all, he believed that nothing can be known except 'under conditions'.[10] In an essay on Charles Lamb (1878) he sets out his ethos based in empiricism, which is the philosophical position that ideas are developed from observations and experiences in the world:

> And, working ever close to the concrete, to the details, great or small, of actual things, books, persons, and with no part of them blurred to his vision by the intervention of mere abstract theories, he has reached an enduring moral effect also, in a sort of boundless sympathy.[11]

This is a writer reckoning with the modern world. In doing so, he expands the scope of our understanding of modern identity. For him, empirical observation of the modern world creates a sympathetic subject. He also aims to redefine literature: 'Oh!' he exclaims, 'for a literature set free, conterminous with the interests of life itself.'[12] His is a firm belief in the central importance of imaginative literature; one defined on very different terms to, say, Henry James or George Eliot. Still, one with ethics at its centre.

Pater Today

Pater's place in literary studies today is singular, complicated, and vital. His work does not map onto popular or canonical forms of Victorian fiction or criticism. It does not illustrate the critical and cultural current that adopted him, the decadent movement. Neither does Pater neatly reflect his period. These things make him and his works prone to misinterpretation, narrow interpretation, or outright omission. Yet, English literature and art history in the final quarter of the nineteenth century make no sense without Pater: the way in which he addressed difficult questions about the future of literature

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and philosophy, personal identity when religious faith, the value of fiction and style, subjectivity in criticism, and queer masculinity make him a deeply important and influential writer. With these issues, his works also raise questions that resonate today about the relationship between literature, criticism, and how we should live.

Pater's critical reputation continued to be chequered after *The Renaissance*. He was never the kind of person to announce himself as an Important Thinker. Unsystematic as he chose to be, he was often overlooked or subjected to moralising tendencies. Since his early *succès de scandale*, his critical reception reads like an effort to illustrate his seriousness. Ruth C. Child's *The Aesthetic of Walter Pater* (1940) and Rene Welleck's 'Walter Pater's Literary Theory and Criticism' (1957) were among the first to pay serious, sustained attention to his interventions in literature and ideas.[13] Billie Andrew Inman's work in the mid-twentieth century uncovered the innumerable philosophical influences and allusions enfolded unreferenced within Pater's writings, showing just how deeply his work was engaged in critical dialogue with the history of ideas.[14] The advent of queer theory and gay studies from 1990 combined with new interest in Oscar Wilde following Richard Ellmann's biography (1987), to put the life back into Pater. Inman's discovery of evidence that Pater had been reprimanded by Benjamin Jowett for a flirtation with an undergraduate student,[15] alongside Richard Dellamora's *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (1990) and James Eli Adams's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995), showed that Pater's attention to sexual difference, sublimated desire, and queer styles of masculinity are integral not only to his characters and their lives but also to his philosophical position on pleasure.

Pater no longer requires rescuing from moral opprobrium. He is a writer who stands on the cusp of modernity, hesitatingly so. He is in many ways peculiar, not exemplifying the stories we usually like to tell about Victorian literary trends, personalities, or cultural movements. He shows us how literary reputations are ambivalently made by prevailing prejudices and priorities. While in some ways his quintessentially Victorian conservativism and shyness cannot be underestimated, his articulation of new conditions in modern thought make him a progenitor of core features of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and ideas. The chapters in the current volume suggest ways of appreciating Pater's contributions to literary criticism, philosophy, art history, and fiction-writing, in contexts that assist with understanding the range of his intertextual references and his contemporary culture. These are organised around three key aspects. The first three chapters focus on the place of Pater and his works in the intellectual and social

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contexts of Oxford and London. The next chapters turn to specific works and forms, close reading texts in the context of their publication histories and culture. The last three chapters address Pater's intellectual influences on modernism and new critical contexts.

Pater's belief in 'art for its own sake' and his creation of new literary forms in which to grapple with the multifarious questions modernity posed to self-identity are an abiding concern in these chapters. As they illustrate the integral relationship between Pater's biography, including its silences, and his peculiar mode of criticism they identify new dialogues with present criticism.

Notes

1. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Hilary Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 199.
2. Patrick Bridgwater, *Anglo-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s* (Oxford: Legenda, 1999), 11, 240–1. Nietzsche was first translated in 1896.
3. Sturgis, Matthew, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 591, 597.
4. Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (Evanson, Il: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 16.
5. Pater, *Renaissance*, 145.
6. Walter Pater, *Gaston de Latour*, vol 4, *Complete Works of Walter Pater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 92.
7. Henry James to Edmund Gosse, *13 December 1894, Letters, 1883–1895*, Leon Edel, ed., vol. 4 (London: Macmillan, 1980), 492.
8. Letter to Violet Paget, *4 June 1884, Letters of Walter Pater*, ed. Lawrence Evans (Clarendon Press, 1970), 54.
9. Pater, *Appreciations*, 206.
10. Pater, *Renaissance*, 180.
11. Pater, *Appreciations,* 109.
12. Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits* (New York: Allworth Press, 1997), 89.
13. René Wellek, 'Walter Pater's Literary Theory and Criticism', *Victorian Studies* 1, no. 1 (September 1957): 29–46.
14. For a fuller account of Pater's critical history, see Kate Hext, 'Recent Scholarship on Walter Pater: "Antithetical Scholar of Understanding's End"', *Literature Compass* 5 (2008): 407–423, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2008.00522.x
15. See Billie Andrew Inman, 'Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Hardinge', in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1991), 1–20.

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